



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

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March 17, 2006

Mr. Matthew Melmed
Executive Director, Zero to Three
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Dear Mr. Melmed:

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We are writing to express our great sadness that Zero to Three has engaged in a partnership with Sesame Workshop to produce the *Sesame Beginnings* DVDs for children as young as six months. We frequently promote your organization as a wonderful resource for parents and caregivers. We believe however, that your partnership in the creation of *Sesame Beginnings* DVDs is exploitive of both babies and parents and severely damages your credibility as an advocate for the health and well-being of young children.

By partnering with Sesame Workshop, Zero to Three furthers the media industry's efforts to insinuate screens into the lives of our youngest, most vulnerable children. According to the *Sesame Beginnings*' website, "The *Sesame Beginnings* brand features all-new baby versions of the *Sesame Street* characters parents know and love, along with new designs and packaging. *Sesame Beginnings* provides an opportunity for parents of infants to introduce the beloved *Sesame Street* characters to their children from the very beginning."¹ There is no getting around the fact that a central purpose of *Sesame Beginnings* is to sell products and promote the Sesame Brand. Public health organizations should not be in the business of branding babies.

Zero to Three's stated rationale for partnering with *Sesame Beginnings* is that babies are watching television and videos anyway so it is important to ensure that the content they watch is developmentally appropriate. In addition, Zero to Three says that the DVDs will promote healthy interaction between parents and their children through co-viewing of the *Sesame Beginning* DVDs. Zero to Three also touts *Sesame Beginnings* as a "research-based" line of DVDs. There are, however, significant problems with each of these claims.

Healthy Interaction?

The stated objective of *Sesame Beginnings* is to promote learning through healthy interaction between parents and children. Such a goal is laudable and the tips provided for parents in the first two *Sesame Beginnings* DVDs are excellent. Surely, however, there is a way to educate parents without luring babies to screens, encouraging their devotion to TV characters who have been licensed to promote hundreds of other products, including sugary fruit snacks, vacation



¹ <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/sesamebeginnings/mini/about.php>

resorts, and electronic toys like the Tickle Me Elmo series that diminish rather than encourage opportunities for creative play.

Sesame Beginnings is designed to encourage parents and children to watch together. Yet there will be many parents who will just plop babies in front of *Sesame Beginnings* alone. In any case, when it comes to babies, there is no evidence that co-viewing promotes positive interaction. In fact, according to a recent study in *Pediatrics*², co-viewing -- like viewing alone -- is correlated with babies spending less time with their parents engaged in activities other than watching television. Television viewing with or without parents is also correlated with less time spent engaged in the creative play that is so central to Zero to Three's message.

Developmentally Appropriate?

You encourage parents to choose media that is "developmentally appropriate" and claim that *Sesame Beginnings* itself is developmentally appropriate for children under two.³ Yet there is no evidence that the programs actually are developmentally appropriate for their target audience. In fact, at this point so little is known about babies and television that "developmentally appropriate screen media for babies" is an oxymoron. What *is* known is that for every hour of television watched, babies would be better off actively engaged in the world.

Babies Are Already Watching

The fact that 68% of children under two are already spending about two hours per day⁴ engaged with screen media is not a good rationale for public health organizations to make media programs targeted to babies. That parents have successfully been sold a deceptive bill of goods by media companies does not justify the public health community making it easier for parents to foist screen media on babies. Since many toddlers drink soda,⁵ should we justify that as well? Should we encourage them to drink soft drinks that are slightly less sugary than other soda or should we try to educate all parents about proper nutrition for young children?

It is also naïve or disingenuous to think that parents will simply substitute *Sesame Beginnings* for other video offerings and that the introduction of this new product line will not increase screen time for babies. Parents whose babies currently watch other videos are likely to show *Sesame Beginnings* to their children in addition to their current fare. And parents who do not currently let their babies watch screen media may change their minds after learning that Sesame Workshop and Zero to Three are promoting baby videos. The involvement of an organization as respected as Zero to Three makes it that much easier for parents to rationalize putting babies in front of screens. It is also disingenuous to claim that *Sesame Beginnings* is not being marketed as educational. Because of *Sesame Street's* reputation, any product that Sesame Workshop produces is likely to be perceived by parents as educational.

Zero to Three believes that parents should make their own decisions about how much television their babies should watch. The problem is that most parents do not have access to enough information to make

² Vandewater, E.A., Bickham, D.S. & Lee, J.H. (2006, February). Time well spent? Relating television use to children's free-time activities. *Pediatrics*, 117.2.

³ Statement from Zero to Three on Partnership with Sesame Workshop on *Sesame Beginnings* DVDs. Available at <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/aboutus/pressroom/presskits/sbpress/zero.php>

⁴ Rideout, V., Vandewater, E. & Wartella, A. (2003). *Zero to six: Electronic media in the lives of infants, toddler and preschoolers*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.

⁵ Jacobsen, M.F. (2005). *Liquid candy: How soft drinks are harming American's health*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest.

an informed choice. Marketing for baby media and its alleged benefits is ubiquitous; it can be found in parents' magazines, on television, on the Internet, and in toy stores. Yet only 6% of American parents know that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under two, and 7% believe that the recommendation is that babies should only watch educational videos.⁶ Children and families would be better served if Zero to Three used its considerable resources to educate parents about the AAP's recommendations rather than introducing a new line of baby videos into an already crowded marketplace.

Research

Sesame Beginnings is touted as a "research-based line of DVDs."⁷ We have grave concerns, however, about the research that Sesame Workshop is doing on this project. It is irresponsible to release these DVDs before that research is complete. That the research is being conducted by one of the primary content consultants for this project is certainly a conflict of interest.

Zero to Three's excellent tip sheet for parents, "Electronic Media: TV, Videos, Computers, and More," states, "There is still very little known about the effects of television and other media for children under two."⁸ In addition to the study cited earlier, what research there is finds that, for babies, television viewing is associated negatively with cognitive⁹ and language development¹⁰ and regular sleep patterns.¹¹

A review of the literature by Daniel Anderson and Tiffany Pempek, published last year in the *American Behavioral Scientist*, declared that America is in the midst of a "vast uncontrolled experiment on our infants and toddlers growing up in homes saturated with electronic media."¹² The authors call for more research and state, "evidence thus far indicates that the AAP recommendation is well taken."¹³ Given the vulnerability of babies, it is irresponsible for a public health organization to encourage their media use until research conclusively demonstrates that it is not harmful.

Your tip sheet also states, "Television and some other media can be habit-forming."¹⁴ For older children, television viewing is associated with obesity,¹⁵ bullying,¹⁶ and poor academic performance.¹⁷ Given your concerns that screen media may be habit forming it's hard to understand why you would actively

⁶ Rideout, V. (2004). *Parents, Media, and Public Policy*. Menlo Park: Kaiser Family Foundation, p. 10.

⁷ Statement from Zero to Three on Partnership with Sesame Workshop on *Sesame Beginnings* DVDs.

⁸ <http://www.zerotothree.org/tips/electronicmedia.html>

⁹ Zimmerman, F. & Christakis, D. (2005). Children's television viewing and cognitive outcomes: A longitudinal analysis of national data. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 159(7):619-625.

¹⁰ Linebarger, D L. & Walker, D. (2005). Infants' and toddlers' television viewing and language outcomes. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48: 624-645.

¹¹ Thompson, D.A. & Christakis, D. (2005). The association between television viewing and irregular sleep schedules among children less than 3 years of age. *Pediatrics*, 116: 851-856.

¹² Anderson, D. & Pempek, T. (2005). Television and very young children. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(5):519.

¹³ Ibid, p. 505.

¹⁴ <http://www.zerotothree.org/tips/electronicmedia.html>

¹⁵ Dennison M., et al (2002, June). Television viewing and television in bedroom associated with overweight risk among low-income preschool children. *Pediatrics*, 109:1028-1035; Crespo, C. J. et al (2001, March 15). Television watching, energy intake, and obesity in US children. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 155: 360-365.

¹⁶ Zimmerman, F., et al. (2005). Early cognitive stimulation, emotional support, and television watching as predictors of subsequent bullying among grade school children. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 159(4): 384-8.

¹⁷ Zimmerman, F. & Christakis, D. (2005).

encourage parents to start their babies on a life-time of television viewing. Certainly the babies aren't clamoring to view it.

It is not surprising that Sesame Workshop is making media for babies. In spite of their stellar reputation, in recent years Sesame Workshop has promoted their brand at the expense of children's well-being. In addition to promoting toys, they have partnered with McDonalds, and licensed their characters to sell sugary cereals and fruit-flavored snacks. They are currently partnering with Verizon to allow content to be downloaded on cell phones for parents to hand to babies for soothing during travel.¹⁸

Competition for young viewers among media companies is so fierce that, from a strictly financial perspective, it makes sense to introduce the Sesame brand to children as early as possible. Sesame Workshop is in direct competition with other media companies, such as Disney, which is using its popular Baby Einstein series as a feeder for the Little Einstein television series. What doesn't make sense is that Zero to Three - an organization whose first allegiance is to the well-being of children and not the bottom line - would risk its reputation and the well-being of babies to join Sesame Workshop in their branding efforts.

Because parents need help coping with the escalating baby media industry and the bewildering assortment of products available, it is essential that public health organizations have no vested interest in parents' purchases. Your participation in *Sesame Beginnings* damages Zero to Three's ability to provide parents with objective advice about young children and screen media. You will certainly not be seen as objective about the value of *Sesame Beginnings*. In fact, because of your involvement in producing baby videos, and your interest in this particular brand of baby video, any recommendations you make to parents about screen media and babies are now suspect.

We ask that you end your partnership with *Sesame Beginnings*. We urge you to honor your mission "to support the healthy development and well-being of infants, toddlers and their families" and stop marketing branded DVDs for babies. Give parents the information they really need to make informed choices about media. Join with us to publicize the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations that children under two see no screen media at all. The health of children and the integrity of your organization are at stake.

Sincerely,

Alvin F. Poussaint, MD

Susan Linn, EdD

On behalf of the CCFC Steering Committee:

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Joe Kelly, Dads and Daughters
Velma LaPoint, PhD, Howard University
Diane Levin, PhD, Wheelock College
Jane Levine, EdD, Kids Can Make a Difference
Karen Lewis, TV Turn-off Network

¹⁸ Carvajal, D. (2005, April 18). A way to calm fussy baby: 'Sesame Street' by Cellphone. *International Herald-Tribune*. p. 10C.

cc: Board of Directors and Life Members:

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