SESAME WORKSHOP

Recommended Practices for Representing People with Disabilities in Media[1]

From hiring actors with disabilities for its US programming to creating Muppets with disabilities, such as Julia, who is on the autism spectrum, Sesame Workshop strives to have an inclusive cast of characters. The new character, **Ameera**, who will be featured in *Ahlan Simsim* and Play to Learn programming, will offer children another positive example of a character with a disability who is smart, capable, and fully-included in her social environment. (For a visual guide as to how Ameera will be depicted in Muppet and animated form, refer to pages 3 and 4). Ameera presents an opportunity for Sesame Workshop to challenge the stigma toward disability that is faced by many children in low-resource and crisis contexts. That said, it is worth identifying current best practices in media to ensure that Sesame Workshop continues to be at the forefront of disability-inclusive educational programming for young children with, and without, disabilities.

What Not to Do

While the percentage of people with disabilities portrayed in media programming has increased dramatically in recent years, they are still largely underrepresented compared to the actual US population (Applebaum, 2021). When people with disabilities are portrayed in the media, this representation is largely limited to Caucasian actors, excluding an entire segment of the disability community, that is, people of color and other minorities (RespectAbility, 2021). A Ford Foundation study on disability in the media found several common stereotypes of disability portrayed in mainstream media (Heumann, 2019):

- The "Super Crip"- a person who is a hero for being able to "overcome" a disability
- The Villain- "bad guys" portrayed with exaggerated physical disabilities
- The Victim- a person "suffering" from a disability
- The Innocent Fool- a person with an intellectual disability who is childlike (ex. Forrest Gump)

Characters with disabilities are also more likely than characters without disabilities to be depicted as needing to be rescued or as dying (Geena Davis Institute, 2020). Additionally, characters with disabilities are most often portrayed by actors who are *not* disabled (Applebaum, 2021).

RespectAbility, a disability rights organization in the US, offers the following suggestions for depicting people with disabilities in the media (2018):

- Include people with disabilities from the start of the content creation process to ensure storytelling is accurate. Importantly, people with disabilities should be included in the

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[1] This document is excerpted from the "Introductory Note to Supporting all Learners: Disability, Diversity & Inclusion" (2024), an internal guidance written for Sesame Workshop by Suzanne Zuidema and reviewed by technical advisors from Humanity & Inclusion.

formative research phase of a media project or program so that they have a voice in content creation

- Use actors with disabilities to portray characters with disabilities
- Avoid making characters heroes or villains based solely on the fact that they have a disability
- Avoid tokenism by including more than one character with a disability and by highlighting different personality characteristics, skills, capacities, strengths and weaknesses in each (Heumann, 2019)
- Represent a diverse range of people with disabilities by race, ethnic group, gender, age, etc. (RespectAbility, 2021)
- Use person-first language when referring to people with disabilities
- Use currently accepted terminology when referring to people with disabilities
- Put captions on all video media so it can be accessed by people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Make sure all online print media has screen reader adaptability so people with low vision can access the information

Guidelines for representing Ameera

These guidelines are shared with the education and production teams who work with Ameera. They are used to inform her positioning as a Muppet and animated character to ensure she is accurately represented on screen as she participates in all the action and fun along with the other characters.
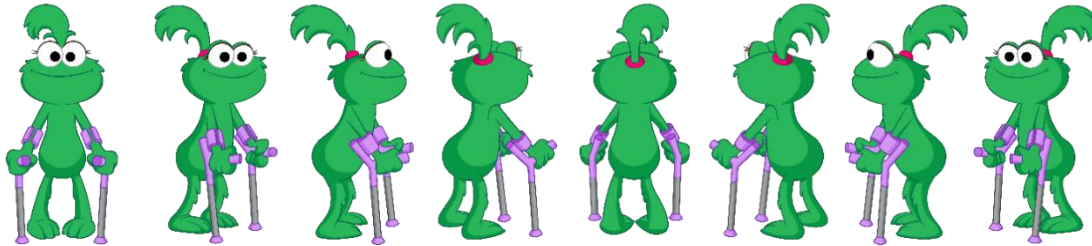
Ameera Standing - What Works

Ameera is bent slightly at the hips indicating she is leaning on her crutches for support

Ameera's crutches are in front of her foot position, not equal with it

Ameera's arm cuffs are below her elbows

Ameera's arms are completely inside her arm cuffs

Ameera's hands are angled inward at an approximate 45-degree angle from her body

Ameera's feet are angled just slightly inward

Ameera Sitting - What Works

Ameera's body angles (hips, knees, ankles) are close to a 90-degree angle

Ameera's back is leaning on her backrest with the backrest just below shoulder blade height

Ameera's head is not touching the backrest of the chair

Ameera's arms are on the armrests (when appropriate)

Ameera's feet are resting on the footrests

Ameera's seat cushion is parallel to the ground

The top of large back wheels on Ameera's wheelchair are below the height of the arm rests