

PUPPETS FOR PEACE



A bold new television production shows children in the Middle East positive images of themselves and their neighbours.

The Government of Canada is encouraging the use of television as a tool to promote a culture of peace in a region steeped in conflict. Through its Human Security Program, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade is providing funding for a new educational television series that will help create a climate of tolerance and understanding among Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian children.

The new series, called Sesame Stories, is the work of the world-famous Sesame Workshop, creators of "Sesame Street." Produced with Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian partners, the series consists of 26 episodes for each of the three regions in which it will be broadcast—Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, and Jordan.

Aimed at children aged four to seven, Sesame Stories was created to encourage mutual respect and understanding. Using a combination of an animated story and live-action film, each episode presents a core theme such as empathy, accepting differences and resolving conflicts peacefully. The stories explore and explain cultures, letting children gain an understanding both of themselves and of others. By presenting positive images of all children in the region, the series will help children feel more tolerant and respectful of the diversity both within and outside their societies. It will also provide children with alternatives to violence, making them feel more optimistic and hopeful about their futures.

"Sesame Stories will deliver hope to millions of children every day," says Gary E. Knell, President and CEO of Sesame Workshop. "Through the involvement of our partners—HOP TV in Tel Aviv, Al Quds University in Ramallah and Jordan Pioneers in Amman—we will continue to work toward creating a culture of peace."

The new production builds on previous success. For the past eight years, Sesame Workshop has been co-producing a children's educational television program with Israeli and Palestinian partners. That series premiered in 1998 and was viewed by

thousands of Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli and Palestinian children. The series has helped Palestinian and Israeli children learn more about their own and others' languages and culture. This in turn has helped to break cultural stereotypes.

The Canadian funding will be used to develop educational materials and a community outreach program that will help reinforce and extend the goals of the series beyond the television viewing experience. Designed for use in a variety of educational settings, including the home, these materials will include "tolerance kits," teachers' guides, home videos, posters and storybooks.

Sesame Stories premiered in Israel in September, and broadcasts in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza followed in October. The show's producers are hopeful that it will contribute to a better future in the Middle East, and are looking forward to more projects in the region.

"Providing relevant media content to the Middle East is a long-term commitment for Sesame Workshop and our partners," says Knell. "We've only just begun." ♦

