



United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP)
“Vaccines: America’s Shot at Ending the COVID-19 Pandemic”
June 22, 2021

Testimony of
Jeanette Betancourt, Ed. D
Senior Vice President
U.S. Social Impact
Sesame Workshop

Introduction

Good morning Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and other distinguished members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

I am Jeanette Betancourt, Ed. D., Senior Vice President of U.S. Social Impact at Sesame Workshop. I wish to thank all of you for the opportunity to share Sesame Workshop’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in meeting the sudden and evolving needs of young children and, most recently, our focus on encouraging parents and caregivers to get vaccinated as an important part of the whole family’s well-being. If I can leave you with only one major takeaway, apart from the joy of sharing a few special moments with our *Sesame Street* Muppets, it is the importance of considering the child’s perspective and of recognizing what children and families have experienced over the past 18 months and how that has informed their decision-making process regarding vaccination.

Who We Are

Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit global organization with a mission to help children around the world grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. We do so through a wide range of media, formal education, and philanthropically funded social impact programs. Our iconic and beloved *Sesame Street* premiered at the height of the Civil Rights movement with the first racially integrated cast on children’s television, and it has remained a place where humans and Muppets of all shapes, sizes, and skin (or fur!) colors model diversity, equity, inclusion, and mutual respect and understanding. While our efforts are made on behalf of *all* children—and all children stand to benefit from them—our primary aim from the outset has been to improve outcomes and well-being among the most marginalized children and their families, who are so often impacted by the effects of poverty, trauma, and racial injustice.

Sesame Workshop’s U.S. Social Impact team develops philanthropically supported initiatives that address critical challenges impacting children, parents, and caregivers as well as the community providers who support them. Our initiatives are research-driven, proven, and innovative, especially the wide-ranging and ever-growing [*Sesame Street in Communities* \(SSIC\)](#),

which creates and delivers free bilingual resources in response to widespread issues such as: trauma, food insecurity, a parent’s incarceration, family homelessness, divorce, school readiness, health and well-being, and other important early childhood topics. These initiatives model parent and caregiver strategies that are vital to ensuring that every child— especially those most at risk—can succeed in school and in life. The success of our initiatives is rooted in our approach, which ties together curriculum, research, and accountability for achieving results. We are also extremely nimble, with the ability to respond immediately to crises or plan out for the longer term.

Our COVID-19 Response: Caring for Each Other

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted unprecedented disruption and uncertainty in the lives of young children and their families. We knew immediately that we had a responsibility to respond and that, having built a half-century’s worth of trust and dependability among parents, we were uniquely positioned to explain for children the many changes that were so dramatically altering family life, while offering responses to their questions and concerns. Sesame Workshop acted quickly. To help young children feel a sense of comfort, engage in playful learning away from school, and maintain a more hopeful outlook, we created our [Caring for Each Other \(CFEO\)](#) initiative and the *SSIC* [Health Emergencies](#) topic page and brought families clarity, comfort, and moments of joy through televised specials such as *Sesame Street: Elmo’s Playdate* and a series of CNN Town Halls.

Foreseeing the ongoing impact of constant change in children’s lives, we developed a phased approach to meeting the needs of families—as always, from the child’s perspective. We grouped our efforts into three stages, creating bilingual *CFEO* resources for each, aligned with the progression of change as the COVID-19 pandemic evolved.

- *For Now Normal*: Initially, families and their young children found themselves dealing with a complete halt to their everyday routines, the need to shelter-in-place, and facing questions about a deadly virus that did not have a child-friendly explanation. As families settled into a “for now normal,” *CFEO* offered ways to support children’s emotional ups and downs, including challenges such as missing friends, coping with sickness, and grieving the death of a loved one. As the urgent reliance upon essential workers became more prevalent, we offered special support, encouragement, and gratitude to frontline workers and their families while helping them explain to children why sometimes-lengthy separations were unavoidable.
- *Before But Different Normal*: This is our current stage. As children and families transition back to pre-pandemic routines, *CFEO* continues to provide resources across a broad variety of experiences, from understanding mask wearing (including resources for autistic children) and other safety precautions, to managing separation anxiety, building mindfulness and fortitude, and, for many, returning to school. As guidelines and mandates for in-school learning have shifted, parents and caregivers have had to prepare children for changes to school as they had known it, while staying flexible to handle fluctuations between in-school and at-home learning. Community providers, especially early childhood educators, have had to learn to connect with children while wearing PPE

and staying physically distant. They must also understand children's emotions during these constant changes, find new ways to nurture them, and maintain open lines of communication with parents/caregivers.

- *Longer-Term Consequences*: Often there is a tendency to assume young children are resilient and that they can easily and/or quickly recover from (and even forget) challenging situations. Although children do possess a certain resiliency, recovery from the longer-term consequences of the pandemic will likely take time and consideration, due to the traumatic disruption of their established routines and sense of safety. In many marginalized communities, which have been the hardest hit, children are expressing stress, anxiety, and major effects on their mental health and well-being. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that parents, caregivers, and community providers have been deeply affected as well, and what they model will ultimately reflect upon young children.

Our approach has proven effective. During the first phase of our work, we executed a pre-and post-survey¹ with parents of young children after they used the *CFEO Health Emergencies* resources. Results indicated that parents who used the strategies (e.g., belly breathing) helped their child cope with the challenges and stress of COVID-19 more successfully than before exposure to the resources. Parents also rated themselves as significantly more confident in helping their children manage difficult emotions, feel physically safe, and have a greater sense of hope during sheltering-in-place, especially due to their children's connection to *Sesame Street* characters as they modeled behaviors. *"My son was so interested in the video and activities, and would be talking to the characters. I saw relief on his face as he saw his character friends discuss things I didn't realize he was worried about."*
-- Parent of four-year-old boy responding to the survey

COVID-19 Vaccination

Continuing *CFEO's* nimble response, we partnered with the Ad Council, COVID Collaborative, and CDC, and launched a series of public service announcements and resources in English and Spanish to guide parents and caregivers about the importance of COVID-19 vaccines. Featuring Elmo, Elmo's dad Louie, and the *Sesame Street* Muppets, the PSAs highlight that COVID-19 vaccines for adults are here and that getting vaccinated can help lead to sunnier days ahead.

- *I'll Be Seeing U: [I'll Be Seeing You Song](#)* (60sec). This take on Billie Holiday's "I'll Be Seeing You" is sung by the Letter U and shows what families miss and want to return to.
- *Healthy Family with Elmo and Louie: [Elmo's Daddy Gets Vaccinated](#)* (60sec). Here, Elmo's dad, Louie, responds to Elmo's curiosity and explains why he got vaccinated--so he can stay healthy and keep everyone safe.

An additional bilingual digital toolkit includes printable activities, posters, and FAQ that take children's perspectives and build on their curiosity, explaining why grownups are getting vaccinated, answering common questions in age-appropriate ways, and reminding children to

¹ *Sesame Street Health Emergencies: COVID-19 Parent Survey*. MediaKidz Research & Consulting. July 2020.

practice other healthy behaviors like handwashing. It also customizes messaging to different communities, i.e., Black/African American, Latinx, and Immigrant.

Our Learning and Recommendations

We continue to observe that young children are curious about the ongoing transition to recovery, however many are experiencing challenging feelings and/or are unsure how to express their concerns. Parents and caregivers are also struggling. Many are still managing their children's hybrid learning or transitioning back to school; coping with possible ongoing economic hardships; and/or are not considering self-care as a priority. Vaccination and other transitional practices are allowing our collective return to the "before but different normal," bringing greater hope for the future. Yet vaccine hesitancy remains pervasive and, as we approach the phase when young children will be afforded vaccination access, we recommend the following considerations:

- Acknowledge that, for the youngest children and their parents and caregivers, there will be confusion in messaging. Throughout the pandemic, the overall messaging was that young children were less vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 or experiencing ill effects.
- Vaccine hesitancy might be prompted by the fact that young children returned to in-person childcare settings (family, friend, and neighbor care; family childcare, or center-based) much earlier than other "students," and most are doing "fine" as perceived by parents or caregivers.
- Parents and caregivers are likely to be more hesitant of the longer-term effects of a new vaccine the younger their child is.
- There is a critical relationship between the mental health and overall well-being of parents and caregivers and their openness to considering what may seem to be challenging decisions. Many parents and caregivers are still experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, coping with loss, economic hardships, and/or feelings of isolation.
- Although young children, parents, and caregivers do rely on the health care community as a trusted source, many may have lost their connection to a consistent medical provider.

Next Steps

Sesame Workshop's *CFEO* will partner with the Ad Council, the COVID Collaborative, and the CDC (and possibly other partners) to create specific resources to encourage vaccination for our youngest citizens. We are in the process of determining the most effective messaging, but we know we will once again rely upon the power of our beloved *Sesame Street* Muppets and our long held trust with parents, caregivers, and providers to continue to make a difference in the well-being of our youngest citizens.