

Muppets Arrive In Belfast As Part Of New Children's Television Series, Sesame Tree

Contributed by Phil Toscano
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A new media project aimed at encouraging Northern Ireland children to explore and appreciate the world around them, and promoting respect and understanding, will debut on BBC Two Northern Ireland television on Saturday April 5th and Sunday 6th at 7.15 a.m. Sesame Tree is produced by SixteenSouth, part of the Inferno Group, a leading and award-winning creative television production and facilities house based in Belfast, in association with Sesame Workshop, the producers behind Sesame Street.

Aligned to the revised Northern Ireland Statutory Curriculum, the television series will present engaging educational messages through stories and characters. Sesame Tree will also serve as a valuable resource for children, parents and those working with children by:

- Presenting positive images to children of the self and others;
- Emphasizing a range of objectives including valuing diversity, developing problem solving skills, and becoming aware of our common humanity; and
- Helping the early childhood community in Northern Ireland achieve its strategic goals including personal and mutual understanding in the local and wider community.

"Sesame Workshop is proud to work with dedicated local partners like SixteenSouth, BBC Northern Ireland, Queen's University, and the project's funders to create relevant, inspiring content that can bridge gaps and make a positive impact," said Gary E. Knell, President and CEO of Sesame Workshop. "The images we share and the stories we tell have the potential to extend far beyond the television screen to become a valuable resource for children growing up today in Northern Ireland."

Colin Williams, Executive Producer said: "It has been an honor to produce Sesame Tree for our children of Northern Ireland, by the people of Northern Ireland," "Working with our friends at Sesame Workshop, and amazingly talented local writers, performers and production staff, the series is beautifully rich in local culture and completely current with teaching based on the new Northern Ireland Curriculum. The characters, stories, and whole concept is very innovative and really charming. We know the children of Northern Ireland will have as much fun watching the series as we had making it."

Peter Johnston, Controller BBC Northern Ireland said, "This is a very exciting new venture for BBC Northern Ireland. We are delighted to be part of what we know will be a very entertaining and engaging series for children linking in to the Northern Ireland Curriculum, enhanced by our new Sesame Tree website."

With the title song written by local singer songwriter Duke Special, and music by well-respected composer John Anderson, the 20 original 15-minute episodes are aimed at children aged 3 to 6 years. Each episode of Sesame Tree features Muppets Potto and Hilda on an adventure filled with laughter and learning. The duo will answer questions on many topics posed by children and introduce local live action films that will showcase the diversity of Northern Ireland.

The themes covered in the live action sequences will be presented through the eyes of a child. For example, in an episode about persistence, the live action film features young girls preparing for and practicing a difficult task—learning Irish Dancing. In an episode about overcoming fears and being prepared, the segment features the Boys Brigade gathering all the tools they need for a night walk.

In another episode, children from two schools work together to clean up a beach. A range of voices and faces will be featured, including children from Northern Ireland’s Polish, Chinese and African communities which add to the richness of Northern Ireland today. Back in the Tree, Potto contacts his “family,” allowing local viewers to see their Sesame Street friends like Bert, Ernie, Cookie Monster and Elmo, as well as live action films about children from all over the world.

In addition to the television series, a Sesame Tree website is being developed by BBC Northern Ireland Learning. Reflecting the colorful world of Potto and Hilda, the site www.bbc.co.uk/ni/schools/sesametree will offer clips from the show, as well as interactive discovery games for children promoting the development of thinking and decision-making skills.

The website caters to two distinct audiences:

Children’s Interactive Area for 3-6 year olds: Children are transported to an enchanted forest where they are introduced to the Sesame Tree, and the characters who live in it. The tree acts as a navigational aid offering a range of interactive resources inside and outside the tree. Through interactive games, video clips and print-out activity sheets, children are taken on exploratory learning journeys, reflecting specific requirements of the Northern Ireland’s Pre-School Curricular Guidance and the statutory Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum.

Grown-Ups’ Area for parents, caregivers and teachers: Content includes broadcast dates for the program, learning outcomes, and the online activities. Activity planners provide topics for pair/group discussion, together with suggestions on how to link online video and games to offline activity sheets. Each activity planner covers a particular curriculum learning theme. The site includes additional information about the Northern Ireland Curriculum and a Links section that suggests other useful children’s learning websites.

The Partnership Management Board of Northern Ireland, the statutory agency which coordinates professional development for teachers in Northern Ireland, and Early Years - the Organisation for Young Children (formerly known as NIPPA), a leading voluntary organisation which provides training and support to the voluntary community and private pre-school sector, will develop Sesame Tree-themed outreach materials to support the project, which they will distribute in preschools. The Curriculum Advisory and Support Service of the five Education and Library Boards will also develop and distribute outreach materials to P1 and P2 classrooms across Northern Ireland. The materials will be targeted at teachers and children, and will support the Pre-school Curricular Guidance and the statutory Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum, with particular emphasis on Mutual Respect in the Local and Wider Community.

Funding for Sesame Tree is provided by the International Fund for Ireland, which promotes integration and reconciliation throughout Northern Ireland and the Southern border counties; The American Ireland Fund, which serves as the project’s anchor sponsor; the Northern Ireland Fund for Reconciliation, which provides support for projects that promote reconciliation through community development and education; and Northern Ireland Screen, which aims to accelerate the development of a dynamic and sustainable screen industry in Northern Ireland.