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Sesame Family Newsletter

January 3, 2008

Making Sense of Time

by Jordan Brown

Understanding the idea of "a minute" can take kids months.

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"JUST FIVE MORE MINUTES, DADDY!"

What?! Another year just past? But, but...that can't be! I had so many goals, so many dreams...I was going to run a marathon... I was going to learn to speak Spanish... I was going to... (sigh) ... OK, time to face reality! Short of my 6-year-old son Finn actually inventing his timemachine, last year is history. My pining for a few more minutes of 2007 reminds me of something worthwhile I actually did accomplish last year --- helping my children get a better handle on the tricky concept of time.



[HOW LONG IS A MINUTE?](#)

Last summer, getting my daughter Olivia (then 2 years old) to leave the playground or a playdate was usually a struggle for us both... Our frustrating routine often went like this:

"Okay, time to go!" I tell Olivia for the third or fourth time.

"Nope!" my overtired daughter replies, defiantly running in the other direction.

"Come on!" I plead. "We HAVE to say bye-bye to your friends now."

"NO! We're staying! I'm not tired," cries Olivia. When I finally pick her up, kicking and screaming, she inevitably throws in something endearing like, "You're a bad Daddy!"

I'm happy to report that this kind of battle of wills happens much less these days. Why? Because I made a concerted effort to help Olivia understand how long a minute is... and helped her use this knowledge to feel more in control of her daily routines.

Now, when it is time for Olivia to leave an activity she's intensely enjoying, I get her attention, then exaggeratedly look at my watch. "I think it's time to play the Five Minute Game."

"Okay," Olivia says, with a smile. "Youngest player starts. That's ME!" Then she gives me a mock-stern look and says, "Just FIVE more minutes, Daddy!" as she proudly holds up all the fingers of her right hand.

Then, sixty seconds later, I get my daughter's attention and say, "My turn! I hold up my hand and say, "Just FOUR more minutes, Olivia!" She smiles and goes back to playing.

When three minutes have passed, I get Olivia's attention and say, "Your turn!" and she informs me how much time we have left. I help her hold up three fingers.

We continue until we get to the final minute (which -- not accidentally -- I make sure Olivia is "in charge of.") She tells me, "Sorry, Daddy, time to go!" If I sense a little humor is needed, I might playfully protest, "Can't we have just one more minute!?" Olivia shakes her head "no," and I reluctantly say, "Okkaayyy!" And off we go.

By helping Olivia master what a minute "feels like," I not only boost her intellectual growth and give her a sense of control in a fun way, but also give us a common language to discuss the day's comings and goings.

Telly teaches your child the value of time.

[IT'S ABOUT TIME](#)

Helping a 3-year-old understand time can be tricky.

HOW OLD IS OLIVIA?

Helping Olivia (now 3) get a grasp of "a minute" took considerably more than a minute -- but it was a doable task. Same goes for the concept of "a day." From Olivia's point of view, days are easy to understand because they have clear parameters -- you wake up, eat breakfast, exhaust your parents, eat lunch, exhaust your parents, eat dinner, exhaust your parents some more, listen to a bedtime story, then go to sleep. But helping her comprehend longer spans of time, is much more challenging. During playtime, Olivia might use words like "week," "month," or "year" with us -- or her dolls -- but I know her understanding is murky. Even her older brother Finn is more comfortable with small units of time than the almost incomprehensible idea of "years." This point was driven home to me recently when Finn burst into the kitchen with some amazing news for his sister.



"Guess what, Olivia?" Finn announced, carrying a piece of paper with some numbers on it. "You are 99 million seconds old!"

Olivia responded, "No, Finn. I'm 3 years old. And you're 6!"

"Nah-uh!" Finn says, looking at his paper. "You're 99 million seconds old. And I'll have you know: I am 218 million seconds old! I'm more than double your age!"

(Behind-the-scenes detail: While Finn is quite talented at math, their ages in seconds came from a handy web site that quickly converts years into smaller chunks of time. Interested? Search "calculation duration" on a web search engine.)

THE TOOLS OF TIME: CLOCKS AND CALENDARS

Last week, my wife Ellen and I were updating a wall calendar in our kitchen, while our kids were playing nearby on the floor with blocks. She asked me, "When are Finn's school breaks in January and February?"

We were shocked when Ellen's question prompted Olivia to sing a catchy little calendar song that mentions all twelve months. "Wow,



that was great, honey! Where did you learn that?" I asked. "In school," she replied with a smile.

After talking with Olivia's preschool teacher, I learned that they sing this song every day, accompanied by a series of hand movements. Obviously, there's a big difference between knowing the names of the months or days of the week, and really understanding these chunks of time.

As Olivia gets older, we'll continue to help her learn about time using clocks and calendars. Right now, wristwatches are more of a fashion accessory to our daughter than a gadget for telling time. But she understands their purpose. She will be playing intently with Sean and Carla, her twin dolls, then suddenly stop to look at her toy watch and say, "Oh, no! It's 8 o'clock. We're going to be late!"

Calendars, as many parents discover, are terrific tools for "counting down" to some important event, such as a birthday, or a visit from a special relative. When most preschoolers hear "Uncle Allen is coming for dinner in seven days!" it goes in one ear and out the other. But show them the calendar and let them put a big "X" through each day at bedtime as they count the days -- and then the meaning starts to sink in.

THINKING: TWO TO FIVE

By a child's third birthday, her capacity for abstract thought has increased.

SUNRISE, SUNSET?

When helping Olivia get dressed on a chilly winter morning, in layer upon layer, the minutes creep along. But there are other times when I am reminded that time can be much more fleeting. You've probably heard older parents tell you how time passes quickly. "Enjoy them now! The years will fly by. One minute, they're learning to crawl; the next, they're getting married and having children of their own." Hearing this, I start to get a little misty-eyed, as my head fills with the strains of that tear-jerker from *Fiddler on the Roof*, "Sunrise, Sunset." I look at 3-year-old Olivia showing off some cute new ballet move she learned, then... BAM!... I can imagine her giving me a hug before heading off to college. I hear Finn telling a stranger about an elaborate "Leprechaun Trap" he's building at home, then -- SNAP! -- I envision him as an adult, working as a scientist for NASA.

Wishing you a wonderful new year filled with marvelous minutes and sensational seconds.

Jordan D. Brown
Sesame Workshop

WEEKLY TRIVIA

Which Sesame characters are named after the sounds they make?

- A. The Bleepers
- B. The Honkers
- C. The Snappers
- D. The Clappers

Honk! Honk! If you said 'B', you're right!

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP



Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit educational organization making a meaningful difference in children's lives around the world. Founded in 1968, the Workshop changed television forever with the legendary *Sesame Street*. Today, the Workshop continues to innovate on behalf of children in 120 countries, using its proprietary research methodology to ensure its programs and products are engaging and enriching. Sesame Workshop is behind award-winning programs like *Dragon Tales* and *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat*, *Pinky Dinky Doo* and ground breaking multimedia productions in South Africa, Egypt and Russia. As a nonprofit, Sesame Workshop puts the proceeds it receives from sales of *Sesame Street*, *Dragon Tales* and *Sagwa* products right back into its educational projects for children around the world. Find the Workshop online at www.sesameworkshop.org.

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