

## **Children's Health-Focused Environmental Sensemaking in the United States**

### **May 2025**

#### **Introduction**

Sesame Workshop is the nonprofit media and educational organization behind *Sesame Street*, the pioneering television show that has been reaching and teaching children since 1969. Today, Sesame Workshop is an innovative force for change, with a mission to help kids everywhere grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. We're present in more than 150 countries, serving vulnerable children through a wide range of media, formal education, and philanthropically funded social impact programs, each grounded in rigorous research and tailored to the needs and cultures of the communities we serve. For more information, please visit [www.sesameworkshop.org](http://www.sesameworkshop.org).

Sesame Workshop is conducting research in the **United States** to explore how young children understand health-related aspects of climate change and how caregivers engage with them on the topic. Despite growing evidence of young children's vulnerability to climate-related harms, there is limited understanding of their perceptions or how media and caregiver interactions can support meaningful engagement and intergenerational learning.

Given the limited knowledge of how young children understand climate change, particularly the intersections of health and climate, this needs assessment is guided by the following research questions:

#### **Sense-making**

1. How do children and families make sense of their environments and the changes they experience?
2. How do children and families understand the links between individual, household, and community health and the environment?
3. What inputs shape children and families' understandings of health and the environment?
  - a. What is the role of media in constructing these understandings?

#### **Communication**

4. How do children and families talk about health and the environment?
5. What levers drive those conversations?
6. What are the barriers to sustaining those conversations?

#### **Engagement**

7. What are the barriers and levers to engaging families with health-focused climate change messaging across diverse distribution platforms and contexts?

This study and its research questions privilege sensemaking as a theoretical framework, addressing a critical gap in early childhood research around young children's meaning making of their lives. Conceptually, sensemaking provides an approach for understanding how individuals give meaning to events. Because sensemaking occurs due to a shock or break in routine, the study of sensemaking offers insight into the processes involved to understand how different meanings are assigned to the same event (Weick, 1995). Most research around children's sensemaking focuses on older children and adolescents. Rarely do researchers ask young children about their insights on their own lives (Sabol, Busby, & Hernandez, 2021), but research leveraging qualitative methods has demonstrated the ways in which young children are valuable informants about themselves and can report important and unique information not provided by adults or developmental assessments (Measelle, John, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005). Despite

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this, children's perceptions and sensemaking are rarely included in intervention and implementation science research. As such, there is a call for greater investment in research that seeks to better understand how children make meaning of the contexts of early childhood practices, programming, and policies (Sabol, Busby, & Hernandez, 2021).

### **The study design**

To conduct this study, we expect our research partner to employ a mixed methods study approach focused on a wide swath of informants. The final research design will be refined in coordination with Sesame Workshop colleagues in New York.

We would expect the proposed design to include:

- Play-based direct assessments with children to understand how they perceive environmental changes and relate them to their health.
  - It is recommended that for interviews with children, research instrumentation be grounded in children's understanding of daily routines. This approach is an adaptation of a body of research that uses family routine as a way of understanding family social ecology to identify developmental delays, particularly mental health outcomes (Weisner, Matheson, Coots, & Bernheimer, 2005).
- Parent and caregiver surveys and/or focus groups to understand parents' and caregivers' perceptions of the links between individual/household/community health and the environments, as well as their existing media diets, how parents navigate media content, who parents' trusted media messengers are, and what kinds of media they would like to see to promote climate change messaging.
- Using a relevant storybook in each geography, children will participate in a small group storytelling event.
  - It is recommended for this activity that a facilitator read the storybook, and children will be asked to reflect on the emotional, social, and physical effects of climate change, especially in relation to health, through guided engagement.
- Results workshops with a sub-sample of parent/caregiver research participants and indigenous and grassroots organizations to co-create key findings and recommendations<sup>1</sup>

We expect that the research design will include a small measurement pilot before full implementation.

### **Sample**

We request that the children who participate in this study be 3-8-year-olds. Participating adults should be the child's primary caregiver. We expect proposals to include a stratified sampling plan that captures this diversity of each country (inclusive of race, SES, and urbanity), though the sampling plan should prioritize urban and rural families in climate-vulnerable regions across the United States.

### **Timing**

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<sup>1</sup> SW will be responsible for facilitating a remote results workshop to co-create global findings and recommendations that bring together the US-specific findings along with parallel work in Brazil and the United Kingdom.

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Final deliverables are expected by January 2026. Proposals should include a plan for data collection starting in August 2025.

### Proposal Components

Proposals shall include a provision for delivery of the following elements:

1. **Research Design:** Proposals shall outline the design of this research activity:
  - Description of proposed measurement tools
  - Sampling plan, including approach to sampling diversity and recruitment strategies
  - Data collection plan, including a description of quality control measures for data collection; a description of how researchers are trained and ways in which researchers will ensure that they adhere to the ethical standards of research set forth by the Society for Research on Child Development (<http://www.srcd.org/about-us/ethical-standards-research>).
  - IRB approval is required for this work. The research team can use SW's external IRB, Salus IRB, or their own IRB provider.
  - Data analysis plan that outlines how data will be analyzed to draw conclusions about the project's impact
  - Timeline
2. **Budget:** A detailed budget for the project shall be submitted with the research proposal.
3. **Key personnel:** CVs or biographic summaries of key personnel.
4. **Past evaluations and references:**
  - A 1-2-page description of similar or comparable studies in which the agency has engaged in the past, or similar work sample
  - Contact information for at least 2 previous clients for references

### Deliverables

Researchers will deliver the following for the evaluation:

1. **Presentation of draft findings at results workshop:** The research team will present, in English, a summary of findings in-person to a sub-sample of study respondents and indigenous and grassroots organizations to co-create key findings and recommendations. If English is not the recommended language for the workshop, that can be discussed with the Sesame Workshop New York team.
2. **Draft report:** Researchers will submit a report, via Word Doc and in English, of draft findings.
3. **Final report:** The researcher will submit, via Word Doc and in English, a final version of the report of the findings to Sesame Workshop, incorporating edits from review of draft report. The report must include an Executive Summary.
4. **Presentation of findings:** The research team will present a summary of findings, in English, remotely to a group of internal and external stakeholders.
5. **Data, original instruments, videos, IRB approval document, consent forms, data, and other material:** Researchers will be required to submit an electronic version of data (in SPSS or SPSS-compatible format), as well as original instruments, and any videos made of children during the research sessions. Instruments will be in the local language (if applicable) and English. Quantitative data will be submitted in English and qualitative data should be submitted in the original language and an English translation. These items will become the property of Sesame Workshop.

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**Budget:**

The research proposal should not exceed a total budget of **USD152,242**.

**Evaluation Criteria**

Proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Experience in conducting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative research and knowledge of media research methodologies
- Experience conducting educational research with young children and families
- Experience conducting research on social norms
- Experience conducting research with diverse populations and in diverse geographies across the United States, including indigenous and/or grassroots organizations
- Capacity to engage with children and families in a culturally sensitive and participatory way
- A demonstrated capacity to work in a range of settings and to deliver products in a timely fashion under tight and strict monitoring, management, and deadlines
- The ability to produce high-quality reports
- Feasibility of study within budget and time parameters
- Appropriateness of research design
- Capacity to execute proposed study

**How to submit proposals**

Submit proposals on or before **July 14, 2025**, via email to Kim Foulds: [kim.foulds@sesame.org](mailto:kim.foulds@sesame.org).

Please note the following in the email subject heading: **Proposal for children's sensemaking of the environment (US)**

**Deliverable timeline:**

<b>Deliverable</b>	<b>Due date</b>
Final research design	15 August 2025
Results workshops	12-16 January 2026
Draft report	23 January 2026
Final report	6 February 2026

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