



## local spotlight

### So Smart!

Television suitable for kids

By Katherine Ritz Hahn

The vast world of television programming includes shows to suit just about anyone, unless the audience is under the age of 3. That's what prompted husband and wife team Alexandra and Scott Tomek to start their own company producing educational media for children: So Smart! Productions (www.sosmart.com) of West Chester, Pa.

So Smart! began creating educational television programs and home videos for babies and toddlers in 1997. Alex had been working as an early childhood development researcher and discovered that the little ones were watching television, but there was a profound lack of programs appropriate for that age group.

With her vision and creativity and Scott's talents in multimedia production, the duo took age-appropriate visual entertainment and made it educational. The result: a series of DVDs and television programs for young minds that is different from anything else on the market.

So Smart! programs are unique from mainstream television in that they are set at a slower pace, avoid jumping from one subject matter to another and use simple language and gentle music, Scott says. Abrupt scene changes and jarring music often used by mainstream television can over-stimulate babies, and quick-moving, complex storylines are beyond their grasp.

Each So Smart! program also incorporates key aspects important for learning and comprehension of that age group that are generally missing from television and other children's videos, such as the use of bright, bold and simple shapes, and simple words.

What makes So Smart! videos different from any other kids' videos on the market is that instead of live-action segments, they use all original artwork that is animated and set in motion to choreography and music, explains Scott. Each DVD is designed for specific ages and developmental stages, with content specifically geared to emotionally and intellectually stimulate toddlers and babies.

One DVD called "First Words" is tailored to children ages 9 months through 3 years — ages when children have a penchant for learning new vocabulary from television programming. It presents kids with simple words used repeatedly in different contexts through simple stories and uses bright, bold colors that attract young children. Repetition is a key element that children need in order to master the information they're watching, Scott notes.

The DVDs go beyond just entertainment that kids can watch to include interactive features, from parent-guided storybooks to educational games that can be played with a TV remote control. All of the programs are also designed to involve parents in the child's learning process, allowing room for parents to ask their children questions about the stories as they are

watching. "We always tell parents that children learn best when parents are involved in the learning," says Scott.

More than a decade after Alex and Scott began producing programs for kids ages 3 months to 3 years, they found a similar need for programming for the 3- to 6-year-old age group. So, they branched out into programming for the older age bracket in a collection they call "King Otis and the Kingdom of Goode."

This relatively new collection, for the preschool set, consists of 30-minute mini-movies that teach values such as patience and sharing, through animated stories

and Broadway-style music.

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics discourages television watching for children under the age of 2 and suggests that other activities provide better verbal and emotional interaction between parents and young children, Alex and Scott believe there is a place for TV in a baby's day.

"Too much TV at any age can be bad, and the wrong type of TV can be bad," Scott agrees. But studies show that young children are naturally attracted to television, and researchers even use it to collect information from infants because they can't ask babies questions. Used on a limited basis with parental interaction, Scott and Alex believe TV can be a positive part of a child's development.

"As with any learning experience, children learn from things that interest them and hold their attention," says Scott. "If it relates to their age of development, they'll learn from that experience."

There are limits to the use of TV though, says Scott. So Smart! guidelines recommend just 10 to 15 minutes of television for kids as young as 3 months to a maximum of one hour for 3-year-olds, with no more than 30 minutes in one sitting. Accordingly, its programs are segmented in short chapters designed to help parents adhere to the guidelines. The producers do not recommend any television for children under 3 months old.

"This is one of many activities you should do in your day," Scott stresses. And to help parents come up with other things to do with their kids away from the screen, each DVD comes with a guidebook of activities that relate to the concepts on the DVDs. Additional developmental activities to do with babies and toddlers, from artwork to exercise, can be found on the company's Web site in the "Play and Learn" section

(www.sosmart.com/playandlearn.html). More information about So Smart! products, guidelines addressing babies and TV, and a sample of a SoSmart! video can also be found on the site.

So Smart!'s titles have won over 30 parenting and family awards, including Parents' Choice, Dove Foundation, National Association of Parenting Publications and Kids First!

Parents can purchase So Smart! DVDs on the company's Web site, from online retailers and at some larger retail stores. So Smart! programs are also available On Demand from many large cable television providers. Beginning in September, the company will be working with a distributor to bring its product to "big box" stores and specialty shops as well.

On September 22, So Smart! Productions will release the first six titles from a new DVD line, "Baby's First Word Stories," as well as nine DVDs and three CDs from the top-selling "Baby's Beginnings" and "King Otis and the Kingdom of Goode" series. Books, toys CDs and other "Baby's First Word Stories" branded products line are currently in development, and additional "Baby's First Word Stories" titles are slated for release in early 2010.

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