



LITTLE ONE BOOKS

BOOKS, MUSIC & VIDEO *Chosen with Care*

So Smart! Television to Bring Families Together

It was 1996 and graduate student Alexandra Tornek had been studying how media was used in child development. Mothers, she noticed, were incorporating more and more television into their children's lives – but it was generally employed as a tool for entertainment, with viewers of all ages remaining more or less passive. Alex, an artist as well as a scientist, envisioned a future where media would not only be tailored to the viewer's age, but would also invite participation and create stronger parent/child bonds.

Together with her husband, Scott, the Torneks developed the first of many award-winning So Smart! videos in 1997. Each DVD in the So Smart! series takes into account the young viewer's development, employing a slower pace, using bright colors and easy-to-track images along with soothing classical music. Transitions from scene to scene forego confusing jump cuts and sudden shifts in camera angles. These combined methods are not only more appropriate for children's visual and intellectual development, they've also reinvented the way adults think about television.

Scott writes and directs the majority of shorts while Alex illustrates, writes, and develops the overall concepts. "Interaction is key," explains Scott. "In creating So Smart! we imagined young children and parents reading books together — we added music and moving visuals. When little ones see a roller skating Traci the Triangle transform into a range of mountains, then morph into the points of a dinosaur's back, and shift shape back into Traci the Triangle, they make the connection between what they see on television and the shapes we see all around us. They're eager to share this discovery with their parents who in turn can point out more triangles both in and out of the house. Television can be beneficial if you can bridge what you've seen onscreen to the real world."

The Tornek's real world consists of a family of their own, and they've made So Smart! a family affair. Their ten-year-old son Matthew and five-year-old daughter Kaely have both participated in So Smart! productions. "Matthew has spent time in the voiceover booth where he portrayed a kid elephant in the King Otis *Difference* DVD," explains Scott, "while Kaely's voice is heard in the opening and end credits of each *First Word Stories* DVD." The Tornek's floppy-eared dog Henry, is also in on the act. The website describes his position as Head of Security.

Although their first title – Sights & Sounds — was produced two years prior to the birth of their first child, Alex's exhaustive studies in the field of early childhood research gave her the necessary confidence to develop programs that young children could engage with.

Now as parents the Torneks have even more insight. “As parents we have a sensitivity to the ages we’ve seen our children pass through, and our children are our allies in what we create,” says Scott.

So far So Smart! has created three series suitable for various age groups. *Baby’s Beginnings*, designed for children ages six months and up, introduces letters, shapes, and colors at an easy to follow pace. *First Word Stories* designed for children ages one and up, presents a cast of four central characters — Larry, Edward, Dee Dee and Iggy – along with simple words in conjunction with themes that toddlers would naturally encounter over the course of their day. The Tornek’s preschool DVD series, *King Otis and the Kingdom of Goode*, is designed for children ages three and up. It imparts some of life’s most important lessons, such as sharing, patience and respect, through stories and the clever use of original Broadway styled tunes.

“When we released the first So Smart! program we knew children of different ages would engage differently — but we didn’t know to what extent,” says Scott. “We now understand how broad the appeal is. Teachers may use it as the basis for a preschool activity. Older children might end up using it as a counting tool. To illustrate how unique So Smart! is, place an eight year old in front of a typical preschool show for a few minutes, something that is completely below their learning level, and then a So Smart! production. You’ll quickly see that the latter invites much more input.”

And having a say about what’s onscreen is what So Smart! is all about. In the 1950’s television was seen as a social event – families gathered around the set much as they had gathered around the radio, and before that the piano. In recent years, however, the television has come to be known as a tool that fosters passivity and destroys familial communication.

The Torneks want to change that. So strongly do they believe in the process of child parent interaction during media viewing that they dispense their advice on how to get the most out of the viewing experience in writing at the beginning of each program, or in the form of an Activity Guide which is included in each DVD of their new series. “We wanted to make sure that parents knew the best way to get the most benefit out of their media experience.”

The Tornek’s not only have a knack for sensing where the gaps are in child development products, but also for coming up with concrete solutions. In the past they’ve produced books, music and CD’s. Their future looks shiny bright: They’ve recently developed a line of hard and soft toys that are currently in the design process. In 1997 So Smart! boldly set out to go where no other brand had gone before, turning television into a tool for communication between children and caregivers, yet making it seem the simplest of feats. “When we first started out there were no videos or television programs relevant to this age group, and we thought that providing the right approach could truly make a difference to families, so we went ahead and developed one.”

—Suzanne

