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Exclusive: Building Words One Friend at a Time

An interview with WordWorld creator Don Moody

The Smart Television Alliance had the opportunity to interview a children's media industry leader who has set a new standard of quality for children's television. Don Moody set out to improve children's pre-literacy skills and by doing so he has helped create one of the most important new television shows for kids

"Having kids is easy, parenting is hard" admits Don Moody, creator and producer of WordWorld, the Emmy award-winning children's television program. SmartNews recently had the opportunity to speak with the genius behind this innovative show that is quickly growing into a worldwide phenomenon.



Like most parents, Don Moody is concerned about what kids watch on TV ranging from inappropriate content to violence to "put-downs" by one television character of another, especially once the dial is flipped from PBS. Even as an industry insider, he readily admits that every once in a while he pulls the TV power cord and pretends it's broken to protect his two children. Luckily for Don, his work is making television content better for children and parents alike.

So what is WordWorld?

WordWorld empowers kids by making the abstract concepts of literacy tangible to them; the connection between letters, words and meaning is crystallized before their eyes. WordWorld is a vibrant, word-rich place where kids play with and build words, which then come alive and become WordFriends.

If you have not heard of WordWorld, it's a program we heartily recommend. We are not alone. The show aimed at preschoolers was recently cited for its significant positive impact on improving pre-literacy skills in a groundbreaking study by the U.S. Department of Education. The Parents' Choice Foundation gives WordWorld its coveted recommendation as well.

While many educational kids' shows focus on literacy, WordWorld is different. Instead of just showing words on TV, WordWorld brings words to life: picture a three-dimensional animated dog shaped out of the letters "D-O-G" and you get the idea. If words just appear on the screen, children's eyes follow the action of the characters. They tend not to focus on what is written. Research documenting this trend helped inspire the program's creation and its focus on words as the characters themselves. "There is a large gap between children recognizing letters and learning to read" according to Moody. "By bringing words to life, children see both the physical object and how letters come together to form the word."

After learning that his wife was pregnant with their first child, parenting became an obsession for Moody. Realizing that becoming a dad also offered the opportunity to redirect his career trajectory, he focused on aligning his professional life with the life he sought for his new family at home.

Moody comes from a successful career in advertising. This might explain how naturally big and outside the box ideas seem to emerge so easily. The concept of working to promote literacy is the perfect union of both his personal and professional life according to Don. When his children grew up, he wanted them to be proud of the work that he was doing to make the world a better place. Selling widgets would not be enough.

While maybe biting off a lot—especially as a parent with young kids—Moody is a true-believer in the cause of championing global literacy. “What problem could I solve,” he asked himself, “literacy could lead to peace in the world!”

Having a dream and making it a reality are two very separate things. It took more than two years of research before the concept of WordWorld took shape.

We asked Moody what tips he offers other parents about children’s TV. “The real thing is to engage a child and not let TV-time become a way of getting a break.” He is a strong advocate of co-viewing television shows and talking with children about what they are seeing. If parents and caregivers treated watching television like reading a book to a young child, “we would have a healthier, smarter, and more loved society” said Moody.

On Winning an Emmy

It goes without saying Moody was exalted to win the most prestigious award in television. He admits it was a timeless and numbing moment of euphoria. Unbeknownst to him, his daughter took the trophy to school for show-and-tell. The dents and scratches make it all the more endearing.

WordWorld has brought Don closer to his children. “My kids think I’m cool!”

So do we.

Mark your calendars because the second season of WordWorld premieres on PBS Kids on February 13th, just in time for Valentine’s Day.

Bonus Parenting Tip: Inspire your kids!

When Don Moody’s daughter came home from school, he would ask her what happened that day. Rather than just listen, he started to write down what she was saying. This made her appreciate what she was saying was important. Together, they would record the highlights of the day. After awhile, she wanted to write words herself. Now Don let’s her use his computer to write whole sentences. “You just need not care too much about your keyboard. It gets very sticky!”

