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The 'unique' ABC show catering to the neurodiverse



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When pre-schoolers are plonked in front of ABC Kids' new factual series *Fizzy and Suds*, they might not know it, but they'll be watching a new form of early childhood entertainment.

Designed to tap into the divergent thinking that comes naturally to most in this age group, and particularly to the neurodiverse, the show features two bubbles whose inquisitive minds go off on all sorts of tangents. An episode about dogs will deliver information about vets and the jobs canines can do, before spinning off into stop-motion sequences in which hot-dog sausages run around barking.



Fizzy and Suds are bubbles whose inquisitive minds go off on all sorts of tangents.

A presentation about boats will switch from the engine room to toy ferries with fairy wings floating in a bathtub. Fizzy, the older bubble sibling, can be heard “vocal stimming”, repeating the ends of words to self-soothe.

“We have a unique perspective through Fizzy and Suds,” explains writer and director Genevieve Clay-Smith. “There isn’t another factual segmented show that takes this neurodiverse perspective and really gets into the concept of Extreme and Intense Interests [EIIs], which a lot of children have.

“Divergent thinking is prevalent in all children, and we lose that as we get older, as we start to think inside boxes and get moulded into society. Divergent thinking is when we can make interesting connections between images or noises or shapes, and link them to something else entirely.

“A child may see a train from an overpass and it might remind them of a caterpillar, and they might say, ‘Ooh, a caterpillar!’, and an adult will go, ‘What are you talking about? It’s a train.’”



Fizzy and Suds' writer and director Genevieve Clay-Smith.

Since her student short film *Be My Brother* won best film at Tropfest 2009, launching the career of Gerard O'Dwyer, one of Australia's most prolific actors with Down syndrome, Clay-Smith has been passionate about inclusivity in filmmaking. Her non-profit production company, Bus Stop Films, mentors people with disabilities, many of whom are then employed through her commercial company, Taste Creative.

Following a speech she gave at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival kids' conference, Clay-Smith was invited to produce two segments for *Sesame Street*. So when she was approached by the ABC to bring *Fizzy and Suds* to life, she naturally insisted on disability representation. Along with some children who appear in live-action scenes, crew members – including the cinematographer and director's attachment, and some designers – live with visible or invisible disability.

"I'm always looking for opportunities to support people who are neurodiverse, and people with disability in general, with their career progression," says Clay-Smith. "Inclusive filmmaking doesn't slow us down. It doesn't compromise on quality, and it isn't hard to do. You actually end up with a beautiful product that's quite meaningful."

When *Fizzy and Suds* (the latter, younger bubble is voiced by Clay-Smith's two-year-old twin daughters), aren't following their divergent "thought bubbles" or "tiny little acid trips", they are taking a break with "sensory montages". Each episode introduces its main subject this way, with textures and sounds to spark interest, carefully curated for a neurodiverse audience.

“We had a very clear brief to our sound designer to ensure we were creating sounds that were appealing to children who might be sensitive to sensory overload – not having clashing or overlapping sounds, or sounds at a certain pitch and tone,” says Clay-Smith. “The entire show is designed to be pleasurable and enjoyable for neurodiverse children.”

Nominated for three awards at the Prix Jeunesse international children’s television festival in Munich in May, *Fizzy and Suds* is intended as educational entertainment for the whole family.

“I just really want kids and their adult to sit together and enjoy it,” says Clay-Smith.

“There are things that adults are going to love about it, too. When I was filming, there was stuff I learnt that I didn’t know. And bringing family together is such a joyful idea, whether they are neurodiverse or not. This is something that everybody can enjoy.”

***Fizzy and Suds* begins on March 11 at 8.10am on ABC Kids.**

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Bridget McManus is a television writer and critic for Green Guide. She was deputy editor of Green Guide from 2006 to 2010 and now also writes features and interviews for Life & Style in The Saturday Age and M magazine in The Sunday Age.
