

Henson puppetry goes digital for 'Sid'

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On a back lot, where Charlie Chaplin shot films and Hollywood legend has it that ghosts haunt the buildings surrounding a courtyard, a new show springs to life.

In a cavernous black space resembling an abandoned gymnasium, six large television monitors hang from the walls. Small boxes with red digital lights are mounted on the ceiling, and a young woman in a strange gizmo — it looks like a cross between a baseball catcher's gear and a high-tech robot — wanders about. A man looks into a monitor and makes faces.

Welcome to "Sid the Science Kid," PBS' newest weekday preschool show, launching at 8:30 a.m. Monday on WNED-TV. The show uses cutting-edge technology and puppets from the Jim Henson Company, whose late founder gave the world the Muppets and "Sesame Street" characters and is credited with reviving the ancient art of puppetry.

The Henson characters were based on an art form that had been around for centuries. The delightful "Sid" takes the awe-struck spirit of some of those characters and brings it to the 21st century.

"Sid" is unlike any other show because of its technology, a melding of live animation and digital puppetry. It all unfolds at the Henson studios. That abandoned gymnasium is a soundstage known as a motion-capture space; the red lights above are motion sensors; and all of the monitors allow actors and directors to keep tabs on what's happening.

In the pilot, Sid tells his mom he wants a "turbo robot

mega rocket ship." Mom says he can have one if he does more chores. She keeps track on a chart.

Charts are the science lesson of the day. When Sid asks about charts, Susie, the teacher, recognizes a lesson in the making.

The kids draw charts — nothing fancy — with crayons on paper. They chart their snacks and learn the word "data." A brief film shows real kids charting their snacks. And that's the beginning of a scientific journey for a 4-year-old.



Sid and his mom search for answers to his questions in the new PBS children's series, "Sid the Science Kid," premiering at 8:30 a.m. Monday on WNED-TV.

