

DAILY NEWS

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NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

NYDailyNews.com

NOW PARENTING

Gettin' to know 'Mama' nature

Vanessa Williams voices animated series featuring wild kingdom cast

BY LISA CHASE

The nursery rhyme "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" is a great way to introduce your children to some barnyard animals, but what about the cheetah, the zebra and the many other wild kingdom members who don't quack, snort or moo?

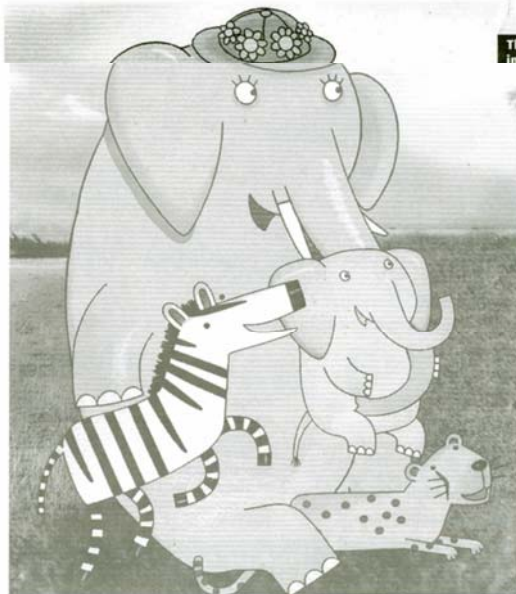
So PBS and National Geographic teamed up to create the animated series voiced by Vanessa Williams, "Mama Mirabelle's Home Movies," which premieres today at 7 a.m. on WJMN/Ch. 50 and tomorrow at 6:30 a.m. on WNET/Ch. 13.

"Mama the Elephant shows movies in which every episode is about different creatures that live in the water or on the savanna, and then her posse of little animals asks questions at the end," says Williams, a native New Yorker and mother of four. "I didn't even know how to pronounce some of the animals, so it was an educational process for me, too."

Here the "Ugly Betty" star elaborates on the series ... and the joys of parenting.



The "Ugly Betty" star (above) gives voice to Mama the Elephant (l.) of the African savanna in "Mama Mirabelle's Home Movies," a new series from PBS and National Geographic.



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Saturday, September 8, 2007

Q Tell me about Mama, the soulful elephant you voice in the series.

V It was a chance to do animation again and I loved the plans for the series. Plus I got a chance to do some singing with kids ... songs are sprinkled throughout each episode.

Q What will kids learn from the show?

V The show is situated in the African savanna, but kids will be seeing clips of National Geographic's footage of animals from all over the world. The series allows parents and kids to see the different ecosystems and how important a beetle is in the African savanna as well as a polar bear trying to survive. It's very cute and an entertaining way for kids to learn more about specific animals and the environment. They will also learn basic life lessons, such as respect — in terms of taking care of each other and what the Earth needs.

Q Have you been to Africa?

V I've been to Africa twice — South Africa and Kenya, and seeing African elephants in the wild was terrific!

Q How do these lessons correlate to the values parents are teaching their kids?

V It's completely topical because there's so much more attention on the Earth and how we can preserve it. It's right on-board

with the movement of people being considerate about their environment.

Q What do you feel are the three most important things parents should teach their kids?

V Respect for others, as well as for the environment, various cultures and different religions. The other two would be tolerance and preservation of the environment and traditions, across the board for all nationalities. We are all one on this planet and this theme is really coming to the forefront now, because we are realizing just how small the planet is.

Q What do you like to do with your family in New York?

V We see a lot of Broadway shows, but we also stay close to home and barbecue and hang out by the pool in the backyard.

Q What do you like most about being a parent?

V It's the most rewarding job that you can have that never ends. When you see them blossom each day and accomplish things such as reading a paper they've written, performing in a dance recital, and trying to achieve their black belt it's amazing. You watch them struggle and achieve and win and that is so beautiful.