



# Measuring Young Children's Parasocial Relationships with a Popular Character

Marisa M. Putnam, Naomi R. Aguiar, & Sandra L. Calvert

Children's Digital Media Center

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



## Introduction

- Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-way, emotionally tinged relationships that children form with media characters
  - PSRs have been linked to early learning<sup>1</sup>
- Children's reports of PSRs with *favorite* characters consist of 3 dimensions, but only 1 had acceptable internal consistency<sup>2</sup>
  - Attachment & Friendship,  $\alpha = 0.72$**
  - Social Realism,  $\alpha = 0.64$
  - Humanlike Needs,  $\alpha = 0.51$
- Little known about children's relationships with *popular* characters who are not currently their favorite

## Research Questions (RQs):

- RQ<sub>1</sub>:** Using child report, how do children conceptualize relationships with popular non-favorite media characters?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>:** Do scores differ by children's sex?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>:** Are dimensions the same or different in children's reports about relationships with popular versus favorite characters?

## Method

- 395 children ( $M_{\text{age}} = 4.86$  yrs.; 205 boys & 190 girls) answered 10 questions about their relationship with a popular media character, Dora the Explorer, using a 5-point Likert smiley scale



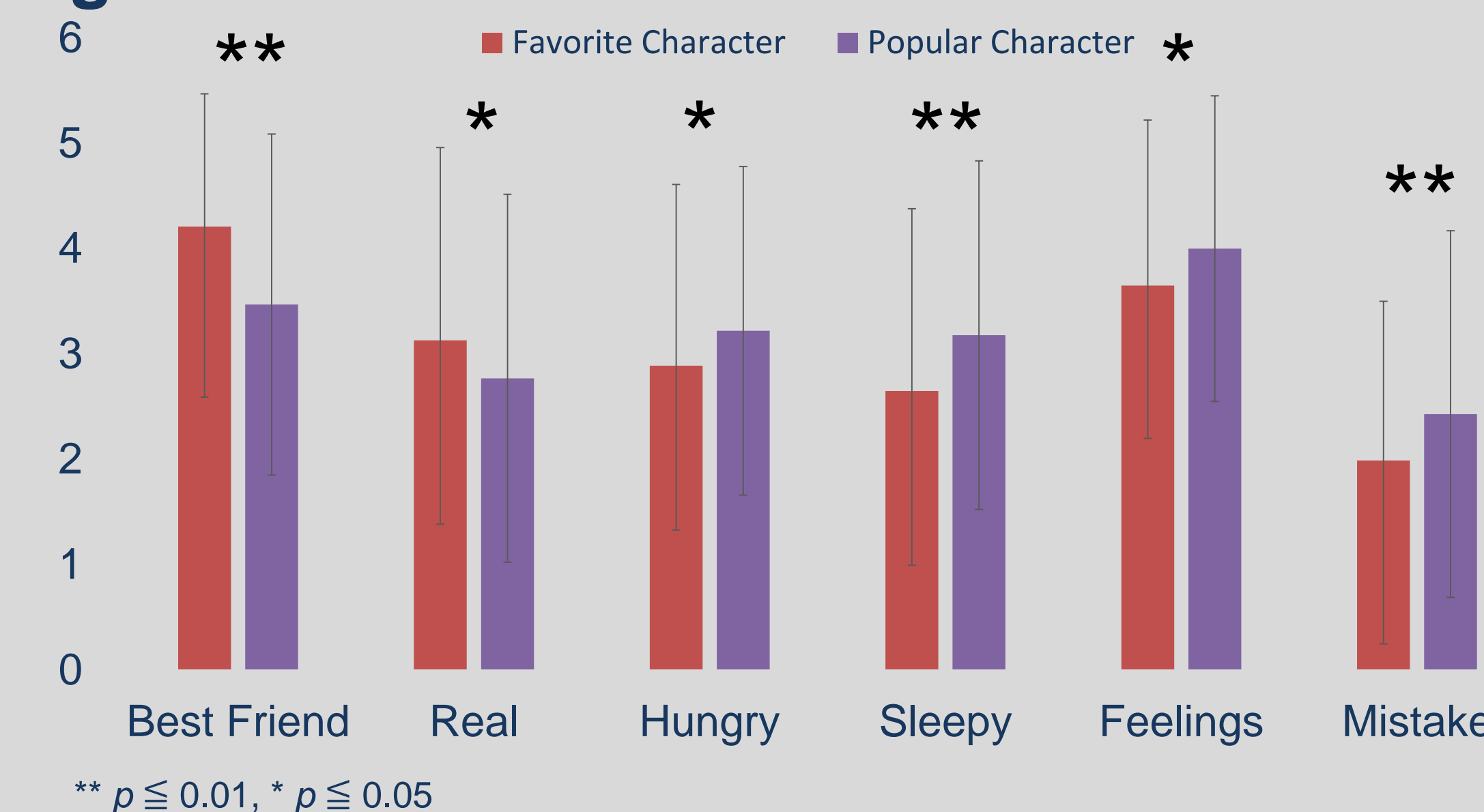
## Results

**Table 1:** Dimensions of children's relationship with Dora the Explorer

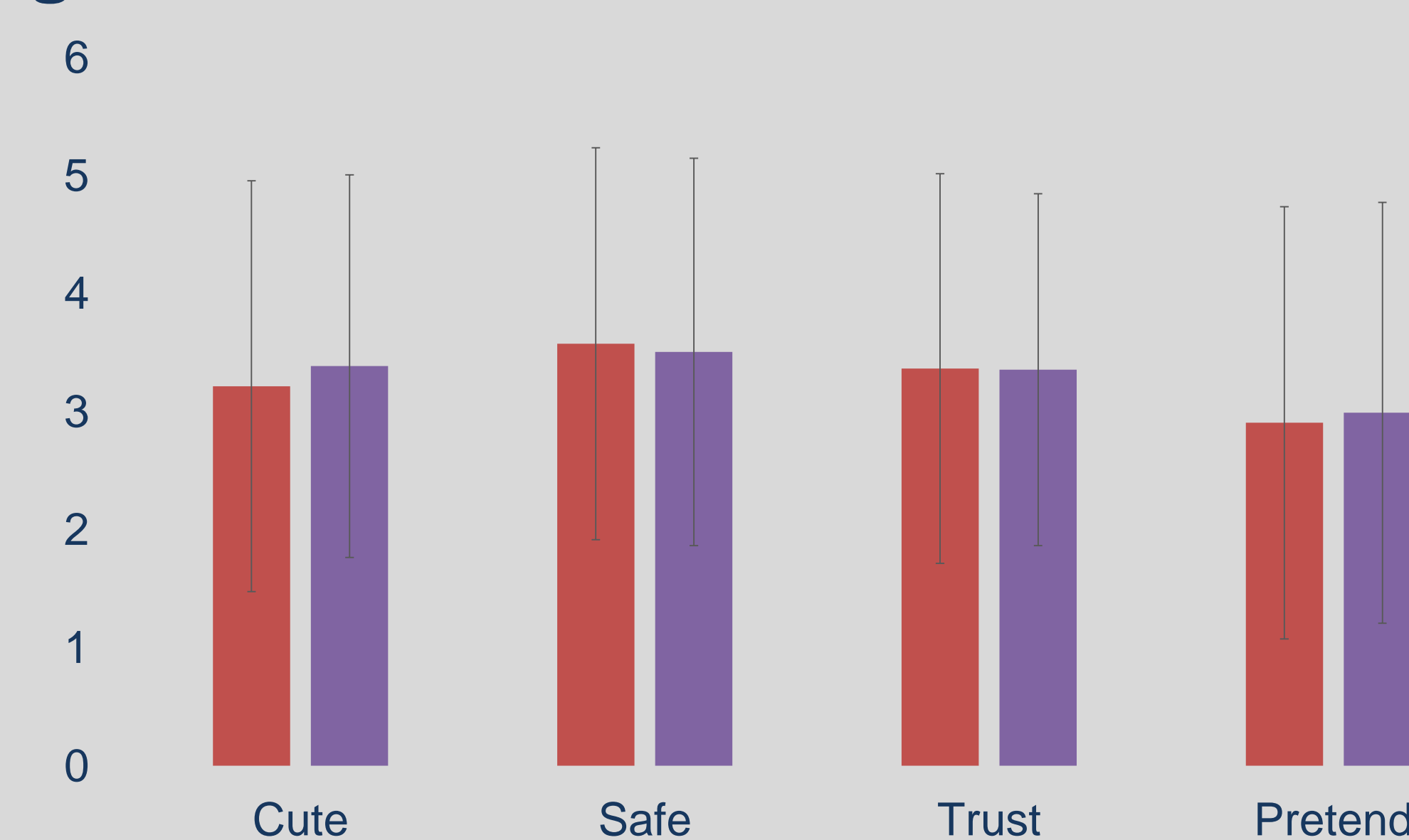
Factor	Eigen values	Sample items
<b>Attachment &amp; Friendship</b> $\alpha = 0.72$	<b>2.81</b>	<b>Child views character as a cute, safe, real, &amp; friend.</b>
Humanlike Needs $\alpha = 0.57$	1.34	Child believes character gets hungry, sleepy, & makes mistakes.
Psychological Qualities $\alpha = 0.52$	1.10	Child believes character has feelings and is trustworthy.

- Attachment & Friendship with a popular character, as was true in the study of favorite characters, is the only factor that is sufficiently internally consistent<sup>2</sup>
  - Current study (Popular Character) includes how real the child thinks Dora is, rather than trust (Favorite Character)<sup>2</sup>
- Girls ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) reported higher Attachment & Friendship scores compared to boys ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(393) = -4.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = .45$

**Figure 1:** Mean Differences in Individual Items



**Figure 2 :** Mean Similarities in Individual Items



- Mean differences in individual items for a popular character reveal that children report lower friendship, lower realness, higher hunger, higher sleepiness, higher feelings, and higher feelings of sadness when Dora made mistakes compared to children's reports of favorite characters
- Mean similarities in individual items reveal that children's reports of Dora and a favorite character do not differ significantly on cuteness, safety, trust, or being pretend

## Discussion

- Attachment & friendship emerges as a factor in child relationships with *popular & favorite* characters
  - Trust is part of the factor with a favorite character, but realness emerges for a popular character
  - Friendship, safety & cuteness are consistent in both studies
  - Girls feel more attachment & friendship for Dora
- Item analyses of popular & favorite character relationships
  - Differences: Popular characters are lower on friendship & realness and higher on sleepiness, hunger, character feelings, & feeling sad for character when mistakes are made
  - Similarities: Popular and favorite characters are the same on cuteness, safety, trust, & being pretend

## Future Questions:

- Do relationships with popular characters have the same educational & emotional impact as a parasocial relationship with favorite characters?
- What qualities are essential for learning?
- What qualities & what level of those qualities are necessary for a strong emotionally tinged parasocial relationship?



## References

- Calvert, S.L., Richards, M.N. & Kent, C. (2014). Personalized interactive characters for toddlers' learning of seriation from a video presentation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 35(3), 148-155.
- Richards, M. N., & Calvert, S. L. (2017). Measuring young US children's parasocial relationships: Toward the creation of a child self-report survey. *Journal of Children and Media*, 11(2), 229-240.

## Acknowledgments

Presentation at the Cognitive Developmental Society Digital Media & Cognitive Development Pre-Conference Workshop on October 12, 2017. A very special thank you to the families and the CDMC researchers who made this project possible. Support for this research was provided by DRL Grant #125113 & BCS Grant #1251745 from the National Science Foundation to Dr. Sandra L. Calvert and Grant No. DGE-1444316 from the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program to Marisa Putnam. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.