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CHAPTER 12

Children's Parasocial Relationships

Sandra L. Calvert and Melissa N. Richards

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Children's media have historically been rooted in characters—from the early days of Captain Kangaroo and Howdy Doody to the contemporary era of Dora the Explorer and Elmo. Unlike any previous technological age, however, characters now travel across media platforms such as television, computers, and mobile technologies through programs, advertisements, games, and mobile apps. This transmedia experience is enhanced by a transenvironment experience that brings onscreen characters into homes through this multitude of screen media and branded toys, foods, and clothes. More than any other generation, our children live in a world that is populated with influential media characters from the earliest days of their lives.

Little is known, however, about the underlying reasons for why or how characters influence children's learning or interests. We argue here that parasocial relationships—one-sided, emotionally tinged friendships that develop between an audience member and a media character (Horton & Wohl, 1956)—are a key underlying reason for media characters' influence on children's developmental outcomes. More specifically, we propose that children perceive their favorite media characters as persons who become trusted friends, a perception that then influences the credibility that they give to the character's messages about a range of topics, including prosocial behaviors, STEM (i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and language learning, and food consumption. In this chapter, we examine what parasocial relationships are, how they influence children's learning and behavior, how they develop, and how to measure them.

Similarities between Children's Relationships with People and Media Characters

Children's worlds are densely populated with media characters from very early ages. Media characters are invited into children's homes through television and video programs, movies, online interactive programs at websites, video game play, and apps played on mobile media, such as tablets (e.g., iPads) and mobile phones (Common Sense Media, 2013). Children play with toys that are replicas of their favorite characters and wear clothing depicting their favorite characters (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Children also see these characters when they leave their homes, e.g., at a grocery store or fast food restaurant on food and beverage packaging. Through these transenvironment experiences that bridge the symbolic and actual worlds of children, media characters are accessible virtually everywhere children are.

Although media characters saturate children's transmedia environments, 0- to 8-year-old children's primary exposure to media characters is through screen media, in which they invest an average of 1 hour and 55 minutes per day (Common Sense Media, 2013). Learning from screens, however, can be considerably challenging for very young children. Research demonstrates that prior to age 3, very young children learn from live presentations better than from video ones, a phenomenon known as the video deficit (Anderson & Pempek, 2005; see also chapter 11).

Arguments have also been advanced that children's learning is superior from live rather than animated media characters, and that this pattern continues throughout the preschool years (Richert, Robb, & Smith, 2011). One reason that young children's learning from video is presumably better from live characters is due to the reality versus fantasy status of actual people versus animated characters (Richert et al., 2011). However, parents report that their preschool-aged children think that their *favorite* onscreen characters are *real*, can see and hear what they are saying, and experience life beyond the screen, even when that character is animated (Bond & Calvert, in press; Dorr, 1986). Similarly, Hawkins and Pingree (1981) found that young children believed that television characters lived in the television set and that these characters heard the child viewers talking to them.

Why do some young children think and act like their favorite media characters are real? Consider the qualities of face-to-face interpersonal relationships and those of parasocial relationships. Both social and parasocial companions have names, an important indicator of *personhood* (Calvert, 2002). Media characters are embodied; they have human-like features such as eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth, just like people do. Characters have a gender and often an ethnic background, both of which are important determinants of friendship patterns

with actual children (Graham & Cohen, 1997), and of character preferences (Calvert, Strong, Jacobs, & Conger, 2007). When depicted in programs, media characters, like real people, have friends, and some have families or pets (e.g., Emily's big, red animated dog named Clifford). Often characters have life stories that include experiences that are familiar to children, such as when the Taiwanese character DoDo jumps in puddles after it rains or invites his friends to his birthday party (Calvert, 2012). Media characters also experience the negotiations that are needed to find cooperative solutions with other media friends during the inevitable conflict situations that occur in close relationships.

Media characters play with each other onscreen as children play with one another, and they are also readily accessible to children as toys in their homes, making them potential playmates. Early childhood is a time in development characterized by imaginative activities and beliefs in imaginary friends and in mythological cultural icons, such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny (Calvert, 1999; Singer & Singer, 2005; Valkenburg & Calvert, 2012). Many parents encourage their children to believe that these beings, as well as certain media characters, are real. During play sessions, for instance, parents foster children's beliefs that these characters are "persons" by asking their child to show affection toward the character (e.g., by hugging or kissing them), and by encouraging their child to nurture the character by pretending to feed them and put them to sleep (Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2013; Gola, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2013). These behaviors are consistent with young children's characteristic style of animistic thinking in which children give human attributes to inanimate objects, such as bestowing life, consciousness, and will upon them (Piaget, Tomilson, & Tomilson, 2007).

Repeated exposure to a media character has been correlated with perceptions of realism. For instance, 5- and 7-year-old children who watched more educational children's programs or cartoons were more likely to perceive the characters in those programs as real (Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994). Now the main characters in children's programs often speak directly to children and simulate contingency by having a character ask questions and then pause for the child to respond, a practice that facilitates interaction with the onscreen character that is also similar to how children interact with their friends (Anderson, et al., 2000; Calvert, 2006; Calvert et al., 2007; Giles, 2002). Finally, just as in real friendships, children "break up" with media characters as their parasocial relationships wane over time. Children may outgrow the character, find a new character that is more appealing, or get bored with the character, much as they do with their off-screen friends (Bond & Calvert, 2013). Not surprisingly, the older children are, the more likely they are to have broken up with a favorite media character: only 0.1% of children under the age of 2, 37% of 2- to 5-year-old children, and 75% of 5- to 8-year-old children had broken up with a favorite media character, as reported by their parents (Bond & Calvert, 2013).

Characters also break up with child audiences. For instance, the live character Steve from the children's program *Blue's Clues* left the program to be replaced by the live character Joe. The way that children feel when they break up with a media character may depend largely on the strength of the relationship that they have with that character. For instance, research on parasocial breakups in young adults suggests that stronger parasocial relationships were positively associated with more distressed feelings when their favorite character's television show went off the air (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

The relationships that children develop with media characters, then, bear considerable similarity to children's off-screen social relationships (Giles, 2002). Rather than wonder why many young children think that their favorite characters are real, a better question may be to ask why young children would *not* think these characters are real and potentially worthy of their trust.

Influences of Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters

Given the parallels between the way that children bond in their interpersonal relationships with face-to-face others and with media characters, emerging questions to ask include how important these relationships are to children and whether they influence children's learning and behavior. Relationships with media characters certainly influence adults. Early research suggested that adult audiences bestowed considerable trust on newscasters that the audience selectively viewed (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). The term *parasocial interaction* was used to describe these relationships, as newscasters looked directly into the camera lens while speaking to the audience. The adult literature is now drawing a distinction between parasocial interactions, which can occur at one point in time, and a parasocial relationship, which involves cross-situational exposures to a character in which a deeper, ongoing relationship develops (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

In the children's literature, Krcmar (2010) drew a similar distinction between social meaningfulness and social contingency. When comparing toddlers' imitation of their onscreen mother (i.e., a socially meaningful other) to their imitation of an onscreen stranger (i.e., a socially irrelevant other), Krcmar (2010) found that toddlers imitated their mother more often than the stranger, thereby supporting the importance of social meaningfulness in early learning from screens. Consistent with these arguments, we found that viewing a video demonstration by a meaningful media character increased toddlers' seriation of objects (a STEM task), but observing an unknown media character did not (Lauricella, Gola, & Calvert, 2011).

In a follow-up study, we were able to build a meaningful, parasocial relationship between toddlers and the unknown character through exposure to videos and to parent-child toy play with a puppet of the character. The familiarized character group subsequently performed better on a seriation task that was demonstrated by that character when compared to a no-exposure control group. By contrast, an unfamiliar character group who viewed the seriation demonstration did not perform any better than the no-exposure control group. Within the familiarized character condition, engaging in prosocial nurturant behaviors directed at a puppet version of the character during prior play sessions predicted toddlers' subsequent seriation scores. These emotionally tinged nurturing behaviors, such as putting the character down for a nap, demonstrated the early formation of children's parasocial relationships with a media character (Gola et al., 2013).

Interactive media also provide opportunities to create a parasocial relationship as a character responds contingently to what children do, as well as to who they are. When compared to a control group who did not receive an interactive toy, for example, toddlers learned a subsequent seriation task from a video presentation better when the toddlers had previously played over time with an interactive character who had been personalized to them (e.g., the character called the child by his or her name, was the same gender as the child, had the same favorite food); by contrast, toddlers did not learn better than the control group when they had played over time with an interactive character who was dissimilar to them (e.g., the character called the child a generic name, was not the same gender as the child, had a different favorite food from the child; Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2013). Similarly, contingent replies by meaningful characters can increase children's language skills. In particular, 3- to 7-year-old children who played a *Martha Speaks: Dog Party* app demonstrated vocabulary gains for targeted words, and literacy gains also emerged for children who played a *SuperWhy!* app (Chiong & Shuler, 2010). Interactivity may assist learning, in part, because the characters respond contingently to children and/or because children become very engaged with the characters and the content (Calvert, Strong, & Gallagher, 2005).

An additional function that media characters serve is to represent and to sell specific brands of foods, most of which have been documented to be low in nutrients and high in calories (Institute of Medicine, 2006). Consequently, the role that these characters play in the worldwide pediatric obesity crisis has been under considerable scrutiny (Institute of Medicine, 2006, 2012). Branded characters like McDonald's Ronald McDonald and General Mills's Trix Rabbit appear in numerous settings where children come into contact with them, such as television commercials, online marketing, grocery stores, and quick serve restaurants (Calvert, 2008). An evidentiary review of the extant literature on

marketing and obesity led Institute of Medicine committees in 2006 and 2012 to recommend changes in marketing practices directed at children. In particular, the IOM committees suggested that marketers use the power of media characters to "sell" healthy rather than unhealthy products to children because of children's unique relationships with these characters, such as placing their trust in them.

By 2 to 6 years of age, children already recognize branded characters and associate them with products (Lapierre, Vaala, & Linebarger, 2011). These positive feelings about characters—which represent a dimension of a parasocial relationship—also influence children's food preferences. For example, children who saw popular media characters on a cereal box liked the taste of the breakfast cereal more than children who saw a nearly identical cereal box without those media characters, an outcome which was attributed to classical conditioning (Lapierre et al., 2011; Roberto, Baik, Harris, & Brownell, 2010). Similarly, Kotler, Schiffman, and Hanson (2012) found that young children were more likely to select foods paired with a picture of familiar *Sesame Street* characters than to select foods with unfamiliar generic characters when the two foods were similar (e.g., two vegetables). However, the characters were not as influential if the food paired with the popular character did not taste as good (e.g., a vegetable versus a salty or sugary snack). Nor were Dutch children who saw the popular U.S. characters of Dora the Explorer or SpongeBob SquarePants on their food packages more likely to select that food for a snack than foods that had a picture of an unfamiliar animated character on them (DeDroog, Valkenburg, & Buijzen, 2011).

A limitation of the existing research is that these studies use familiarity and overall audience popularity as a way to index the power of the character to influence children's preferences, rather than measuring the children's parasocial relationship with specific characters. Indeed, the underlying reason that these characters may lead to positive feelings about brands, and hence be effective in influencing children's perceptions of taste, may be because children develop a personal relationship with specific media characters; that is, the strength of a parasocial relationship with a meaningful character may influence the character's relative persuasiveness, as was the case in children's learning of seriation tasks (Calvert et al., 2013; Gola et al., 2013).

Measuring Children's Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters

Even though meaningful onscreen characters and people are influencing children's early learning, we have few measures for assessing the strength of parasocial relationships (Hoffner, 2008). What exactly is a parasocial relationship

in childhood? At what point is the indicator of a parasocial relationship more than mere familiarity with the character? Nurturing the character is a behavioral approach for operationalizing an emotionally tinged, parasocial relationship with a media character (Calvert et al., 2013; Gola et al., 2013). Another approach is to investigate children's favorite characters, an approach that has been used to tap into the construct of parasocial relationships among grade school children (Hoffner, 1996) and, we believe, would likely be an appropriate method with even younger children.

Using a parent survey consisting of Likert scale items to describe their 6-month to 8-year-old children's parasocial relationships with characters (which were called "favorite characters" in the survey), Bond and Calvert (in press) found that parents (n = 146) reported three major components of children's parasocial relationships. These are *character personification* (e.g., the child trusts the character, treats the character as a friend, thinks the character has thoughts and emotions); *attachment* (e.g., the character makes the child feel safe; the character's voice soothes the child); and *social realism* (e.g., the child thinks the character is real). These three factors accounted for 58.89% of the variance in parents' descriptions of their children's parasocial relationships with favorite media characters (see Figure 12.1).

Many parents encourage their children to treat characters as if they have thoughts and intentions (i.e., that the characters have minds), which is an essential part of *character personification* (Bond & Calvert, in press). As friends and playmates, characters also offer children opportunities to practice social skills that are part of the vertical relationships (parent-to-child or teacher-to-child) in which initial social skills are acquired, as well as horizontal relationships (peer-to-peer) in which children refine those social skills by practicing them with their friends (Hartup, 1989). For instance, children can engage in vertical prosocial caretaking behaviors with toy versions of characters (e.g., feeding them), practicing the same kinds of actions that their parents do with them (Calvert et al., 2013; Gola et al., 2013). Children can also play with toy versions of a character on an equal basis as a friend in a horizontal relationship (e.g., pretend play).
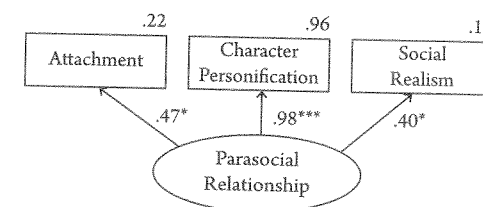

Figure 12.1 Components of Children's Parasocial Relationships with Favorite Media Characters.

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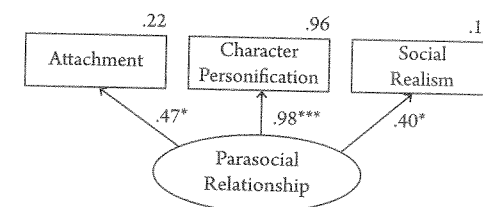

Figure 12.1 Components of Children's Parasocial Relationships with Favorite Media Characters.

As children come to think of characters as *persons*, they may also begin to trust them as friends. When Corriveau and Harris (2009) exposed 3- to 5-year-old children to a video featuring a familiar or unfamiliar teacher who was accurate or inaccurate in labeling words that the children knew, the teacher's accuracy made little difference for 3-year-olds who continued to trust her when she labeled objects that were unfamiliar to them. The 5-year-olds showed even stronger preferences for the familiar teacher if she had been accurate in labeling familiar objects. The authors argued that children's trust in the familiar over the unfamiliar teacher, particularly at the youngest ages, is based on their prior positive emotional feelings experienced during repeated interactions with their teachers. We argue that very young children may come to trust familiar media characters more so than unfamiliar characters because of their extensive, personal experience with them.

Attachment, a motivational-behavioral control system that is preferentially responsive to a small number of caregivers (Bowlby, 1969), may be a key component of parasocial relationships, because the warmth and predictability of characters may result in the child feeling secure (Bond & Calvert, in press). Media characters are highly predictable over time because they are scripted (Calvert, 2012). Television and computer programs (and now apps) are experienced repeatedly, allowing children to predict what will come next, and children may develop emotional relationships with some of these characters. Because characters are readily available across multiple platforms, children can seek out security in these characters in a variety of settings. For example, a child who identifies Dora from the animated television program *Dora the Explorer* as her favorite character may see Dora on television at home, interact with her on a mobile device while waiting in line with parents at the grocery store, or play with her as a plush toy at the doctor's office. Characters in the form of plush toys can provide contact comfort for young children, just as teddy bears have traditionally been used in Western cultures: children may cuddle up and sleep with them each night or hold on to them as they wait at the doctor's office.

Finally, *social realism*—that the child thought the character was real—emerged as a component of parasocial relationships (Bond & Calvert, in press). This finding puts us at odds with those who argue that preschool-aged children know that media characters are imaginary, and hence, that these characters should have less influence than real people (Richert et al., 2011). Rather, our findings are consistent with those indicating that 5- and 7-year-old children believe that their favorite characters are real (Wright et al., 1994): parents in our study of 6-month to 8-year-old children reported no age differences in the belief that the characters were real (Bond & Calvert, in press). In fact, preoperational thought continues until age 7 on average

(Piaget et al., 2007), so children may still believe that their favorite characters are real as they spend considerable time viewing and interacting with these preferred "persons."

The Development of Children's Parasocial Relationships

At what point in development do parasocial relationships emerge? What role do environmental factors play in this development? To answer these questions, Bond and Calvert (in press) also asked parents Likert-type questions to test a model of early parasocial relationship development between their children and their favorite media characters. This model is depicted in Figure 12.2.

Our model suggests an integral role for parents in the development of their children's parasocial relationships. Specifically, parents who encourage their children to treat a media character "as if" that character is a friend who has thoughts, emotions, feelings, needs, and wants are most likely to have children who develop a parasocial relationship with that character. Another significant effect is found for children's play with a toy media character and the development of a parasocial relationship with that character. That is, children who play with toy versions of their favorite media character are more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with that media character. Repeated exposure to a media character across platforms was mediated by parasocial interaction, that is, the frequency with which the child tried to interact with onscreen characters while using media devices. Parasocial interaction then directly predicted parasocial relationship development. Toy play and parental mediation can also go through parasocial interaction en route to influencing the development of a parasocial relationship, though they can also take a direct route, bypassing the
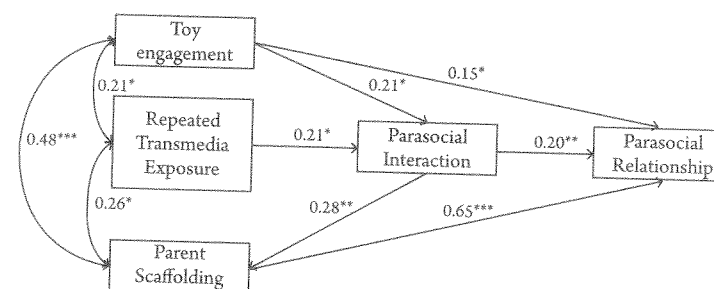

Figure 12.2 The Development of Children's Parasocial Relationships with Favorite Media Characters.

parasocial interaction. Put another way, a direct route means that engagement with a toy media character per se can lead to the development of a parasocial relationship with that character. Overall, then, we found that environmental influences outside of media screens play an extremely important role in the development of parasocial relationships with characters who have their origins onscreen.

Future Research Directions

The emerging literature on children's parasocial relationships with media characters provides a glimpse of the promise that they hold for children's developmental outcomes. A key future research direction involves the development of more accurate, concise, and valid measures of parasocial relationships that young children, rather than their parents, can complete. Measures need to move away from current practices of overall audience trends to more specific examinations of favorite characters as well as behavioral measures, such as personalization scores during play with toy representations of media characters. This type of delineation would add to our understanding of how specific characters influence children's learning in everyday settings where they choose exposure, rather than as a captive audience in experimental media studies.

Another goal is to separate and then link parasocial relationships (which involve the deep-rooted meaningfulness of a child for a character) from parasocial interactions (circumstances in which characters talk to and interact with children and children reply to them). Are children, for instance, more likely to form parasocial relationships with characters who talk to them versus those who do not? If one looks at practices of young children's television programs, it appears that this belief is the popular consensus of broadcasters, because many characters in young children's programming now pause and interact with the audience (Calvert, 2006).

Additionally, an examination of the links among parasocial relationships and role models is needed. In vertical relationships, friends sometimes serve as models that can guide another's behaviors through a desire or wish to be like them. Friendships can also be horizontal relationships, where the two individuals typically have equal power. The link between the kinds of processes that occur in children's vertical and horizontal relationships with media characters should be studied to uncover the important implications for how and how well media characters can serve as children's early teachers.

Research is needed about how characters and parental scaffolding of parasocial relationships seamlessly unify children's multiplatform digital world. More investigation is needed to elucidate how children easily switch platforms and environments with the help of media characters. In addition, understanding the role that parents play in their child's formation of parasocial relationships with these media characters will likely enhance our understanding of the foundations and widespread nature of parasocial relationships.

Finally, not all parasocial relationships may lead to desirable outcomes. For instance, relationships with media characters that market unhealthy foods may be a driving force of the obesity crisis (Institute of Medicine, 2006, 2012), or even of antisocial behavior if children choose a villain as a favorite character. Research is needed to determine which children are most likely to form parasocial relationships with characters that may have adverse effects on their development, and how those relationships can be terminated in favor of healthier ones.

Conclusion

Parasocial relationships have enormous potential to influence children's developmental outcomes, including prosocial behaviors, STEM learning, language acquisition, and consumption of specific foods. A challenge for this line of research involves measurement: an actual parasocial relationship with a media character needs to be separated from proxies like familiarity and the overall audience popularity of a media character. Adults and children alike know many people quite well who they do not like or trust, and the same can be said for their feelings about media characters. Behavioral measures, such as those that tap into the personal relationships that children form with media characters, are one such option.

What can be said with certainty is that media characters permeate the worlds of children, and that children's relationships with characters are often treated just as their relationships with real children. As scholars and educators, we should seize this moment and optimize the opportunities that children's parasocial relationships with media characters afford for early constructive social, cognitive, and physical developmental outcomes.

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CHAPTER 13

Behind the Scenes

WORKING WITH HOLLYWOOD TO MAKE POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

Marisa Nightingale

Introduction

There is ample research to demonstrate that media influence teens in a variety of ways, ranging from attitudes to intent to action. According to Brown (2003),

> The notion that popular media can be used to positively educate audiences in regards to health issues is becoming more widely accepted as a growing body of evidence suggests that attitudes and behaviors can be positively affected by the mass media. The entertainment-education strategy (E-E) relies on embedding educational messages in popular entertainment content in hopes of increasing knowledge, raising awareness, affecting attitudes in a positive way, and encouraging audiences to make responsible health decisions in their own lives. Television is particularly effective in its ability to educate audiences because it can include characters audiences relate to as they struggle with similar real-life issues. Research suggests that audiences are less likely to be skeptical of health messages or resist them when they are skillfully embedded in their favorite TV shows and experienced by characters the audience identifies with.

What follows is an exploration of what happens when social science research findings are applied in Hollywood—in real time, and in an industry that changes rapidly. Can Hollywood be a force for good in efforts to prevent teen pregnancy? What kinds of obstacles do we run into as we try to integrate prevention messages into popular entertainment media that young people and their parents