Background

- Children form one-sided, emotionally tinged connections known as parasocial relationships with characters that are meaningful to them (Calvert & Harris, 2009).
- Children learn best from characters onscreen if they have a parasocial relationship with that character (Calvert, Richards & Kent, 2014).
- Trust may be one mechanism behind why children may learn better from characters with which they have a parasocial relationship.
- Children rely on meaningfulness of relationship when believing and trusting external sources of information (Corriveau & Harris, 2009).

The Current Study

- Translation of this study to media characters
- Since these teachers are credible to children, perhaps children learn better from characters like Elmo because they trust him and they are familiar with him.
- Touchscreen use increasing among children (Common Sense Media, 2012).
- Purpose: to investigate how children judge the source credibility of information presented by characters on touchscreens.

Methods

- Three experiments:
  - 32-month-old children (n = 40 for Experiment 1; n = 36 for Experiment 2)
  - 24-month-old children (n = 33 for Experiment 3)
- Children judged the credibility of information presented on a touchscreen device by a familiar (Elmo) or an unknown media character (DoDo).

Results

Experiment 1: Feedback about Character Accuracy for Familiar Fruits

- Toddlers placed credibility & their trust in accurate over familiar characters at only 32 months of age
- Not consistent with the previous findings of Corriveau and Harris who studied preschool teachers

Experiment 2: No Feedback about Character Accuracy for Familiar Fruits

- Same findings as in Experiment 1: 32-month old children chose accuracy over familiarity, even when the feedback from the app was removed.

Experiment 3: Feedback about Character Accuracy for Familiar Fruits

- 24 month-olds also chose accuracy rather than familiarity of character for unfamiliar fruits
- Different pattern for familiar fruits emerged (perhapes due to initial attachment to Elmo character during first familiar fruit trial).

Discussion

- Knowledge conveyed by popular characters, with whom children may have parasocial relationships, is discounted when familiar characters have been incorrect & unfamiliar characters are correct.
- Elmo’s credibility appeared to be questionable when he made errors about what children already knew to be true.
- Finding could be comforting to parents who believe their children are too attached to characters.
- Children perceive their relationship with these onscreen characters as horizontal—that is, as their friends—rather than as authoritative information sources that they would find in a vertical relationship with adults who are their teachers.

Conclusion

- Very young children make relatively sophisticated credibility decisions early in life.
- Interactive devices like tablets hold promise for assessing children’s beliefs about what media characters know, making tablets a gateway to a world of knowledge.

References


Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to all the teachers, preschools, and the CDMC team members who made this project possible. Support for this research was provided by NSF Grant #1251745 to Dr. Sandra L. Calvert.