



Children's Parasocial Breakups with Media Characters

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Introduction

- Children and adults form emotionally-tinged, one-sided relationships with media characters, known as **parasocial relationships (PSRs)**.
(Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002)
- Both adults and children end their relationships with their favorite characters, a process known as **parasocial breakup**.
(Bond & Calvert, 2014; Cohen, 2003)
- Relatively little is known about how or why children end these early relationships with their favorite media characters.

Methods

Original Survey (Jan 2012)

- Parents (n=147) completed an online survey about their 6-month- to 8-year-old children's favorite characters.
- Parents were asked whether their child had a favorite character and/or if their child had lost interest in a previous favorite
 - If so, parents answered questions about that child's relationship with those characters.

Follow-Up (Jan 2015)

- Parents were re-contacted 3 years later about the same child (now 3- to 11-years-old).
- Participating parents (n = 105) answered questions about current & prior favorite characters
 - 57 parents reported that their child had stopped liking a previously important character.
 - 27 parents reported their child no longer had a current favorite character.

Character Coding

All characters that parents reported as current or previous favorites were analyzed by trained adult coders (all Cronbach's α s > 0.75) on:

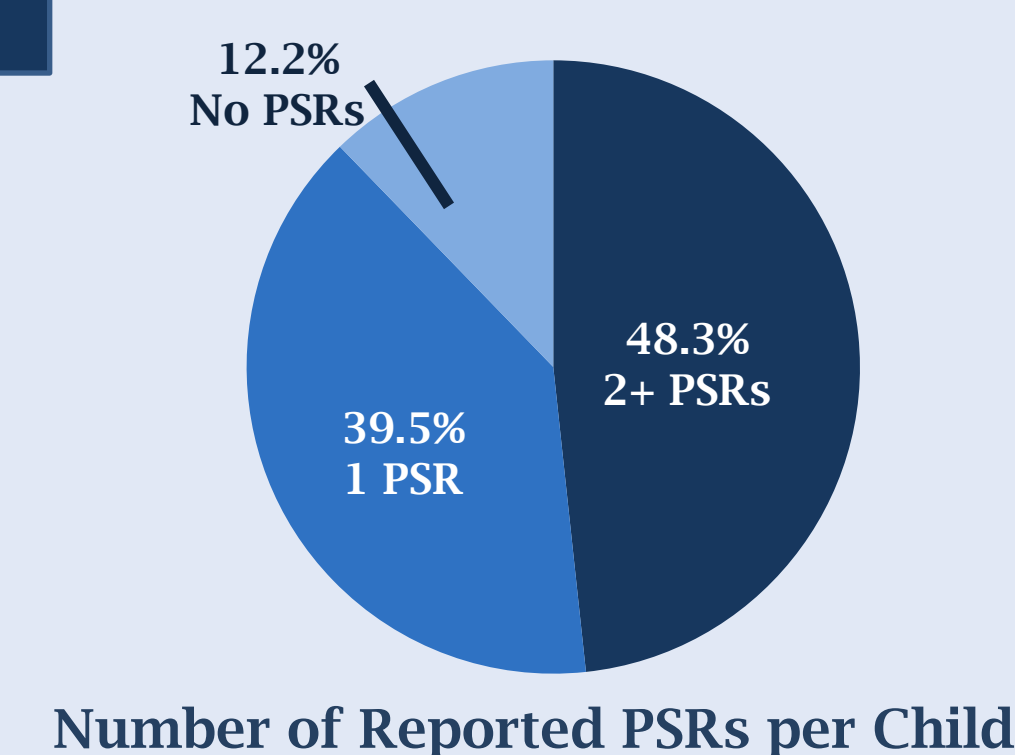
- Personality & physical traits** (strong, popular, baby-faced, etc.) from character images
- Sex role** features from videos of characters

If parents reported both a current and former favorite character (n=55), we compared the character dyad to assess how character preferences and parasocial relationships change over time.

Results

Parasocial Relationships

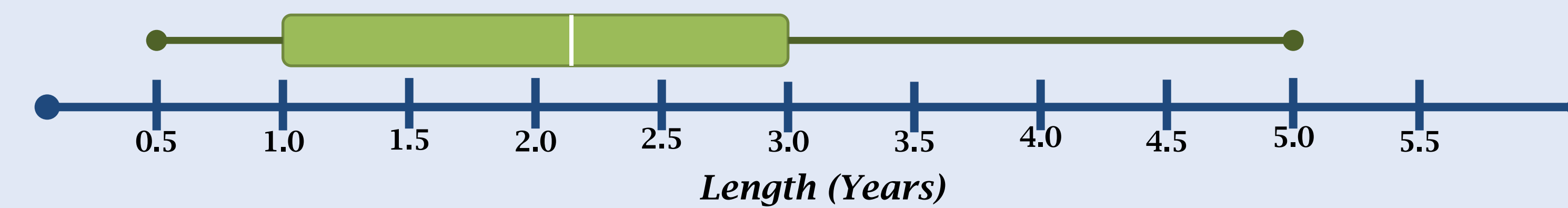
- The vast majority (88%) of children have experienced a PSR with at least 1 media character during childhood.



Parasocial Breakups

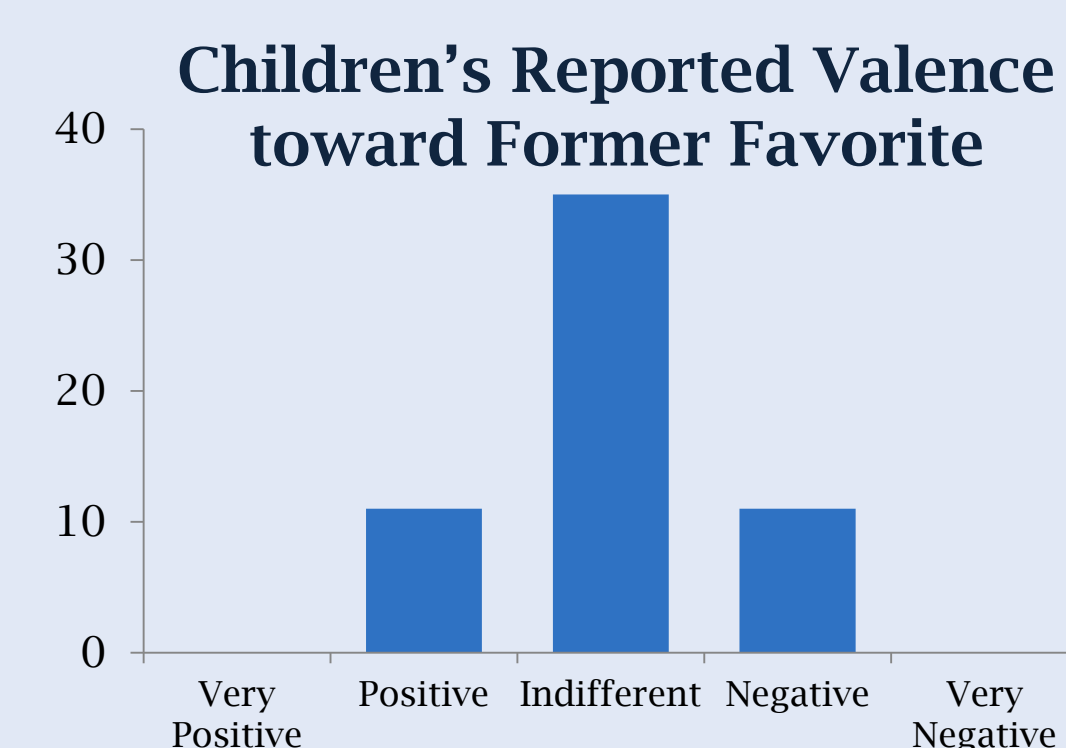
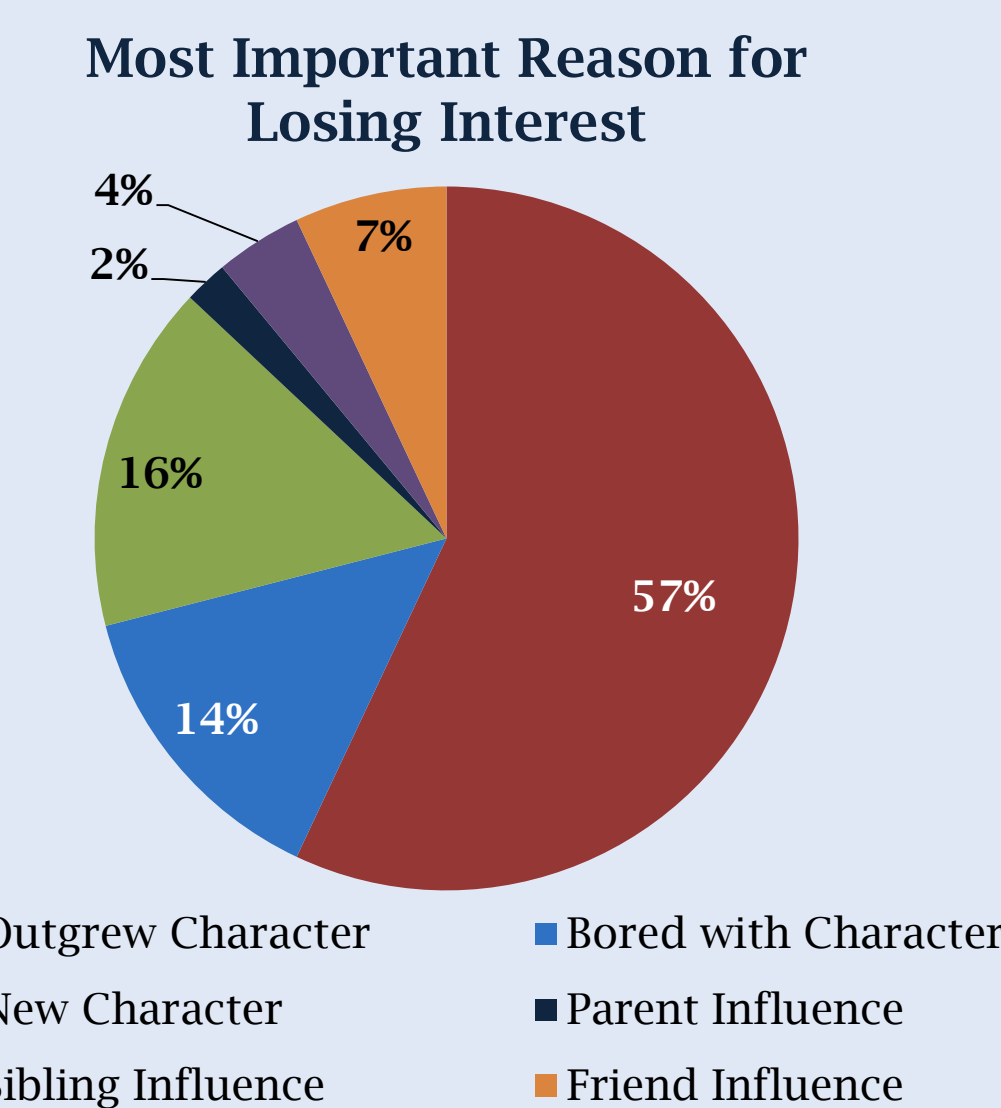
PSRs Start/End in Early Years

- Most parents reported their child's parasocial relationship
 - Began during toddlerhood ($M_{\text{age}} = 2.55$, $SD = 1.21$)
 - Ended during the preschool years ($M_{\text{age}} = 4.65$, $SD = 1.33$)
- PSRs lasted an average of **2.1 years** before breakup ($SD = 1.09$).



Largest Contributing Factor: Outgrowing the Character

- 90% of parents agreed/strongly agreed with "My child outgrew [character]."
- 67% of parents agreed/strongly agreed that "My child thinks [character] is 'for babies.'"
- Outgrowing the character was most important compared to all other reasons (overall $\chi^2 (5, n=56) = 71.5$, $p < .0001$, all pairwise comparison $ps < .0001$)

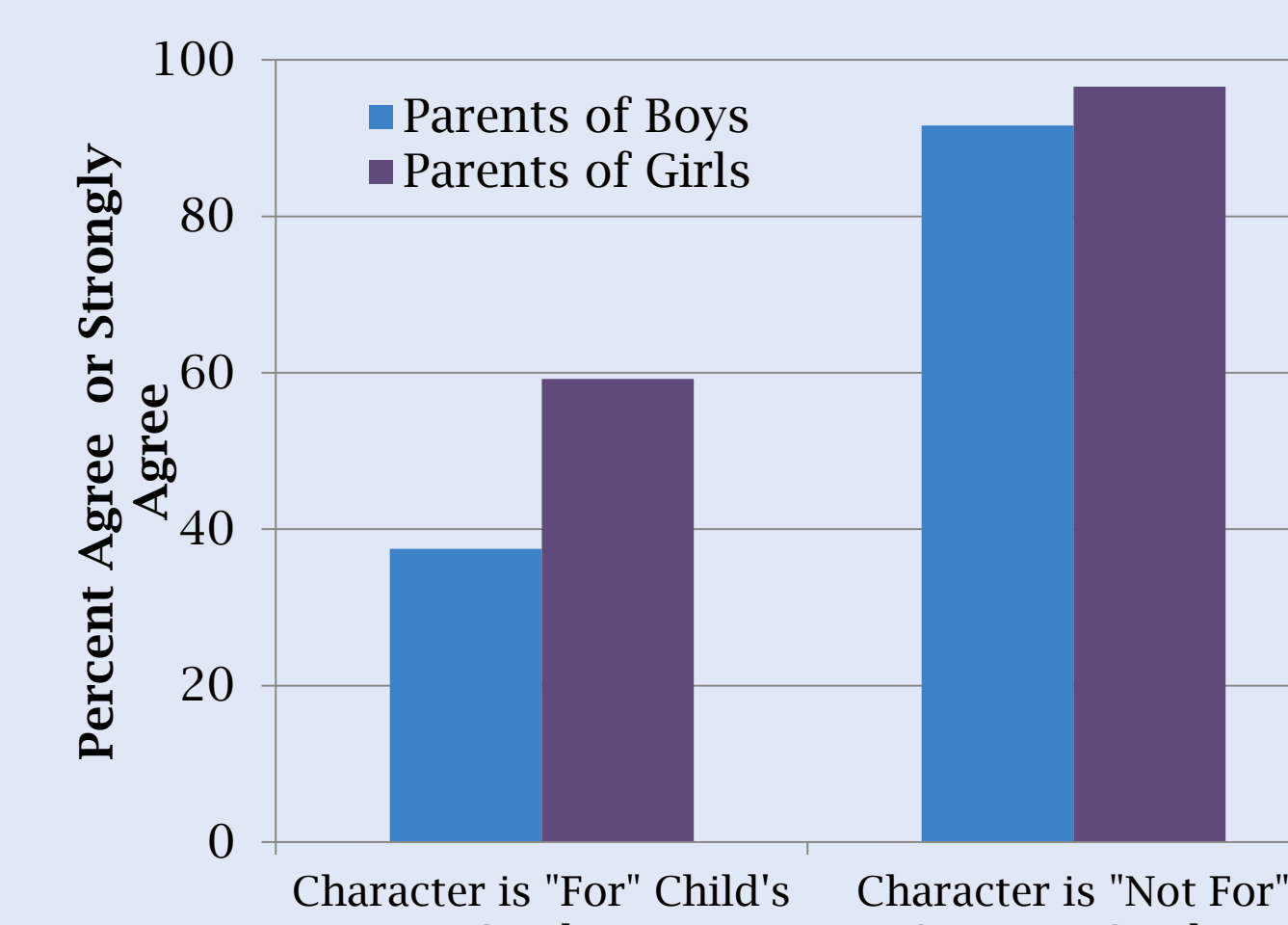


Children Feel Indifferent toward Former Favorite Characters. No parents reported their child had strong feelings about a previous favorite, either positive or negative. Reports of indifference were most highly reported ($\chi^2 (2, n=57) = 20.2$, $p < .0001$)

Influence of Older Siblings. Children with older siblings are more influenced by their siblings about breakups than children with younger siblings ($\chi^2 (1, n=48) = 11.2$, $p = .004$, FET).

No Parent Influence. Parents overwhelmingly disagree that they influence their child's parasocial breakups ($\chi^2 (4, n=57) = 63.1$, $p < .0001$).

Gender Influences. Parents of girls reported their daughters felt their breakup character was 'for girls' ($\chi^2 (1, n=39) = 8.762$, $p < .01$). Parents were more likely to agree their child thought the breakup character was 'not for' the opposite gender than 'for' their child's gender.

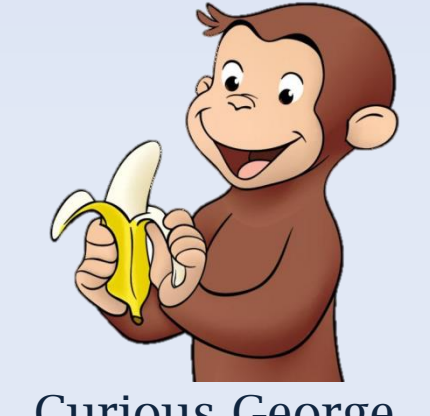



Previous and Current Favorite Character Dyads

Breakup Characters are...

Younger. Current favorite characters are older in age than former favorites ($t = 2.28$, $p < .05$).

Example Dyad: Female Child, Age 5.5, Time 2 Survey

Breakup Character	Current Favorite
 Curious George (Curious George) Age: Toddler/Preschooler	 Elsa (Frozen) Age: Young Adult

More Baby-Faced. Children break up with more neotenous characters than their new favorites ($t = 3.50$, $p < .001$).

Example Dyad: Male Child, Age 4.0, Time 1 Survey

 Elmo (Sesame Street) Baby-Face Score: 10/10	 Anakin Skywalker (The Clone Wars) Baby-Face Score: 1/10
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For Girls, More Feminine. Girls' new favorite characters were rated as having more feminine sex role traits (yielding, empathetic, etc.) ($t = 2.85$, $p < .01$).

Example Dyad: **Female** Child, Age 5.0, Time 1 Survey

 Barney (Barney and Friends) Sex Role: Gender Neutral (0)	 Strawberry Shortcake (Berry Bitty Adventures) Sex Role: Very Feminine (+2)
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For Boys, More Masculine/Dominant. Boys' new favorite characters were rated as appearing more masculine ($t = 2.18$, $p < .05$) & dominant ($t = 2.96$, $p < .05$).

Example Dyad: **Male** Child, Age 3.8, Time 1 Survey

 Thomas the Tank Engine (Thomas and Friends) Masculinity Score: 7/10 Dominance Score: 5/10	 Superman (The Animated Series) Masculinity Score: 10/10 Dominance Score: 10/10
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Discussion/Conclusions

- Majority of children experienced 1+ PSRs** with media characters.
- Losing interest in characters is usually the result of **outgrowing them**, which is also influenced by **older siblings**.
- Children show **indifference** to previous favorite characters.
- Children's taste in characters changes over time.
 - New favorite characters are **older, more mature-looking**, & more consistent with developmental **color preference** trajectories.
- Girls and boys pick new favorites who are more **gender-stereotyped**.
- Uncovering the mechanisms responsible for parasocial relationships and breakups provides insight into children's early social development.

References

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Acknowledgments

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