Research Spotlight: Undergraduate Training

Dr. Anna Fisher’s Developmental Research Methods students conducted their final projects during the month of November and will be doing their public poster presentations on December 7th. We will then share their posters in the Children’s School hallway throughout December.

• Does clutter on the activity table impact children’s speed and accuracy when completing iSpy tasks that vary in difficulty? (The Pictures Game, AM 4’s and K)

Undergraduates Rebecca Ahmad, Patrick Dykiert, and Jordan Romah are studying the effect of cluttered tables on a child’s ability to stay attentive to a task. Various sources of distraction exist for children and adults alike, and it is commonly thought that one’s workspace affects their performance. Indeed, there are a number of studies regarding office workers about this topic. To investigate the effect that clutter has on children, this research team made a “Pictures” game about finding specific objects amongst a number of objects, much like typical “I Spy” or “1001 Things to Spot” activities.

The team randomly assigned children to either have a table cluttered with common objects from the classroom or a table without anything on it, and then they asked each child to use a pen to circle specified objects from the pictures (e.g., a basketball, bird, and bowling pin in the picture below left). The team measured children’s speed and accuracy on finding specific objects in four different pictures with either 30 or 50 objects. They hope to determine whether or not cluttered tables have a noticeable impact on the performance of the children.

• How do children consider merit vs. need when suggesting fair distribution of extra goods? (The Story Game, PM 3’s, PM 4’s & K)

Undergraduates Jiwon Ban, Jonathan Kim, and Sophia Weisma are interested in children’s perceptions of fairness. In the past, researchers believed this ability developed slowly. However, recent studies suggest otherwise. The latest literature on children and fairness supports the belief (to be continued …)
Research Spotlight, continued …

that children are able to follow the logic of fairness pretty well, even in early preschool years. Some of this literature included studies examining how children distribute goods, such as cookies, in pretend scenarios and found that preschoolers allocate resources to the individuals who contributed more in the scenarios, which indicates an understanding of merit. Other studies examined how preschoolers distribute resources in scenarios where there were certain individuals who needed a good more than others, such as a friend who had not eaten breakfast and is hungry. This research team investigated how children value merit and need when they are in conflict. To address this question, they asked children to make judgements after hearing two types of stories. One type presented need and merit in conflict with each other, where one child did more work (merit) but the other child needed the item more (need). For example, one conflict story involved two friends who were planting flowers. One friend had a garden at home and knew how to plant and, therefore, helped a lot (merit). The other friend just moved to Pittsburgh and had an empty garden at home but did not know how to garden and, therefore, did not help as much (need). Potted plants were divided evenly between children, and there was one pot left over. Researchers asked each child which character in the story should get the extra flower pot and why they made their choice. One example of a no-conflict story had two friends chopping fruit to make a fruit salad. One friend took a break while the other friend kept working until all the fruit was done (merit). In the end, each child was asked who should get the extra bowl of fruit salad to take home. The results of this study should provide insight into children’s understanding of fairness and their preference for merit-based and/or need-based distribution strategies.

• How well can children of different ages identify emotions and link them to the situations that might trigger them? (The Matching Faces Game, AM 3’s, AM 4’s & K)

Undergraduates Tori Iatarola, Priscilla Medor, Saru Nanda, and Lucy Truschel are exploring children’s ability to recognize an emotion (happy, sad, surprised, or disgusted) and to contextualize each emotion in a particular setting that would likely trigger that emotion (e.g., linking a happy face with a birthday party, a sad expression with a fallen ice cream cone, a surprised face with a jack-in-the-box toy, or a disgusted expression with rotting food). The researchers presented multiple trials with new sets of children’s faces expressing the same four emotions and various sets of settings in which to contextualize the emotion. There is significant research in the field of developmental psychology exploring children’s ability to recognize emotion in facial expressions. This work has shown that typically developing children are generally able to categorize common emotions in this way. This team’s study extends that research by exploring the less frequently studied ability of emotional contextualization.