Research Spotlight

The Story Game

The purpose of graduate student Karrie Godwin’s study is to investigate how children allocate their attention in learning environments. In particular, Karrie and her advisor, Dr. Anna Fisher, are interested in examining whether children’s ability to effectively distribute their attention has consequences for learning and remembering new content. To answer this question, we are investigating the role of divided and sustained attention on children’s long-term memory. In this study, we will examine whether children’s ability to engage in sustained attention during a short lesson affects children’s long-term retention of the lesson content. To test retention, your child will be asked questions about several stories that he or she heard during the fall semester. For example, if your child listened to a story about modes of transportation, your child may be asked questions similar to the example provided below.

Research Methods Class Project: The Doll Game

Each group of students in Dr. Erik Thiessen’s Research Methods in Developmental Psychology class will work with a few children to collect data for a class project. Their Doll Game is a modified version of the Sally-Ann Task (Frith, 1989), which assesses Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind is the ability to attribute mental states (beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, lies, knowledge, etc.) to oneself and to others, as well as to understand that others have beliefs, desires and intentions that are different from one’s own. In this experiment the child observes two dolls, Susan and Ann, playing with a marble. Susan places the marble in her basket. Then, Susan and your child either watch or cover their eyes while Ann moves the marble from the basket to a box sitting nearby. A short time later (after uncovering the eyes if applicable), the child is asked: "Where will Susan look for her marble?" The marble is then returned to Susan’s basket and the experiment is repeated with the child watching but Susan having left the scene prior to the marble being moved. Upon Susan’s return the child is asked, "Where will Susan look for her marble?" It is hypothesized that the children who are given the opportunity to experience Susan’s perspective by covering their eyes are more likely to be correct in the second scenario, which requires them to understand that since Susan was away from the scene she will look for the marble in her basket where she left it. It is further hypothesized that the older children (5 years old) will correctly answer the task more readily than younger children (3 years old). It is believed that children are aware of their own mental states and, with the aid of role-playing other individuals’ perspectives, we hope to help them infer the mental states of other people. While exploring the impact of this training on children’s Theory of Mind, the students are also learning to interact with young children and to follow our laboratory school’s research procedures carefully.

“Circle the picture of a type of transportation you could use on the sea.”