Research Spotlight

Parenting & Children’s Behavior

Senior Ashley Herrick is working with social psychologist Dr. Brooke Feeney to study the effects of parent attachment style and parent socialization strategies on preschool and kindergarten children’s behaviors. It is well known that the relationship between a parent and a child affects how the child develops physically, mentally, and emotionally. However, less is known about the ways in which a parent’s own attachment style in their relationships affects how they interact with their children. Ashley’s research project involves investigating how parent’s own attachment style, the amount of stress they experience, and the harmony in their marriage affect the parenting strategies they use with their children. Then, she will investigate the relationship between these strategies and the observed behavior of the children in a variety of school situations.

For children whose parents volunteer to complete a set of confidential questionnaires that will not be seen by Children’s School staff members, Ashley will observe six categories of the children’s behavior: prosocial behavior, social interaction, exploration, emotion regulation, gender roles, and negative behavior. To test prosocial behavior, children will participate in a play-doh session with two other children and their sharing behaviors will be observed. To examine social interactions, the parent will give researchers the name of the child’s closest friend. The child will then be shown a variety of cards displaying various tasks they may complete with their friend, differing in levels of closeness. From these choices, the researchers will infer the depth to which the child has developed close relationships. Exploration will be measured through observing the tasks a child engages in during free time. Emotion regulation will be measured by observing children during transition periods throughout their day to observe how they separate from their attachment figure when brought to school, how they transition between tasks in the classroom, etc. Gender roles will be measured with the help of the parents, who will be provided with a list of general household chores and indicate which member of the household typically completes the task. Then, the children will be shown cards relevant to the make-up of their household and will be asked who generally completes certain tasks so that the consistency between the parents’ and children’s views of gender roles is evident. Lastly, negative behavior will be measured by the actions children portray while playing with plastic toys, such as police officers, generally aggressive animals, etc. In order to triangulate the data, teachers also will complete a behavior scale rating the frequency of different behaviors for each child, which can then be compared for consistency with the scores from the other measures.

The data from this project will allow the researchers to draw conclusions about the ways in which parents’ relationship styles affect their parenting strategies, as well as how they in turn affect their children’s behavior. Parent consent forms are included with this newsletter, and questionnaires will be sent to those families who return the consent forms for each parent in the household. During the spring undergraduate “Meeting of the Minds”, Ashley will share her summary data, and she will provide a report for the May Children’s School newsletter.
Research for Undergraduate Courses

Carnegie Mellon’s Psychology Department offers multiple courses to provide undergraduates with a variety of theory, research, and practice experiences.

Non-Participant Observation: Students from Dr. Carver’s Principles of Child Development class will do two observation projects during the spring semester, in order to have firsthand experience with the dramatic developmental progress that occurs during the early childhood period (i.e., rather than just reading about it in a textbook). For each assignment, they observe specific differences between preschoolers and kindergartners in motor skills, social interactions, etc., using a checklist to record observations and then discussing the similarities and differences in an essay. Dr. Anna Fisher (mom of Sasha in the AM 3’s) is teaching a new freshman seminar called How Children Learn to Learn. Her students will also learn observation skills by watching classes in a variety of contexts to better understand their approaches to learning.

Research Methods Class Studies: Students in Dr. Erik Thiessen’s Research Methods course will start with a lab to learn basic strategies for conducting ethical research with young children. Then they will work in groups to conduct a study of their own design, which will be approved both by their teacher and by Dr. Carver. The course is designed to teach undergraduates both the theoretical and practical skills necessary to conduct effective early childhood research.

Undergraduate Spotlight: Getting to Know You !!

Sam French is an assistant in the Children School’s Kindergarten and is a freshman directing major at the Carnegie Mellon University School of Drama. In high school, in Saint Petersburg, Florida, Sam founded a children’s theater company dedicated to taking shows to local elementary schools and introducing children to theater. He also taught theater during the summers at local camps. After college, Sam is planning on continuing theater outreach with young students to help develop new audiences for theater and to help develop artistic passion in children.