About the Study: Information for Parents

Study: Children’s Evaluations and Explanations toward Novel Stereotypes

Researchers: Steven Roberts & Susan Gelman, University of Michigan Department of Psychology

Thanks for Participating!

With your permission, your child participated in a study that explored how children reason about stereotypes based on fictional characters. To test this, we showed children images of fictional characters that were described as engaging in specific behaviors. We then showed your children individual characters that endorsed or violated the group behaviors, and asked your child whether doing so was good or bad.

Other research has shown that young children believe that cartoon characters that belong to the same group are morally obligated to protect and befriend one another, but research has not yet explored whether children believe that these characters should behave in the same way. If children do believe that fictional characters of the same group should behave similarly, why is that the case? What explanations would children give to explain their reasoning? These are some of the questions we’re trying to found out!

Why are we interested in this?

A large body of research suggests that from a young age, children are biased toward various social categories, such as those based on gender, race, ethnicity, or age. For instance, several studies suggest that even young preschoolers prefer to play with children of their same social group and feel negatively toward other-group children. Exploring these biases toward fictional characters enables to explore these biases removed from social experiences, and provide us with greater insight into how social category-based attitudes develop.

What can parents do?

We hope that this research encourages you to talk about social categories with your children. For younger children, parents can pretend with dolls, puppets, or action figures, exploring what your child thinks about behaviors that are characteristic or uncharacteristic of the toy (e.g., a male doll that wants to do something that is stereotypically feminine). For older children, parents can ask more explicit and direct questions about what they think about stereotypical behaviors. Research suggests that talking to children about similarities and differences among and within groups, such as those based on gender, ethnicity, or race, can reduces children’s group biases.

If you or your children have any questions about this study, feel free to email Steven Roberts (sothello@umich.edu). Thank you for your participation in this study!

If you or your child have questions about your rights as research participants, or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, 2800 Plymouth Rd., Building 520, Room 1169, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800, (734)-936-0933, irbhsbs@umich.edu. Thank you very much for your cooperation.