Fall 2011 Newsletter

Hello from the KID Lab at Michigan State University!

This is an update on research projects that have been conducted at the Knowledge in Development Lab under the direction of Dr. Judith Danovitch over the past year. Our lab is very excited to celebrate its third anniversary this fall. We could not have succeeded without the help of the parents, children, and educators in our community. We have enjoyed working within the community very much and your involvement has provided us with a better understanding of how children develop.

What is the Knowledge in Development Lab?

The Knowledge in Development Lab is located on Michigan State University’s campus within the Department of Psychology. Graduate and undergraduate students conduct research studies in order to gain a better understanding of how children process information, how they seek out and evaluate knowledge throughout their development, and how such thought processes develop.

The lab primarily works with children between the ages of 2 and 12. A visit to our lab entails one session, scheduled by the parent, lasting no longer than half an hour, where the children complete a game or activity with our friendly researchers. Our research rooms are located just outside our waiting room where parents can observe the interaction through our video monitoring system. At the end of each session, children receive a prize as well as a free pass to the Impression 5 Science Center.

When a study is complete, we analyze the differences in thinking between children of different ages and we publish the results so that they are available to other scientists, parents, and educators.

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Meet Dr. Danovitch

Dr. Judith Danovitch is a professor in the department of Psychology. She received her BA in Psychology and Biology from Harvard University and her PhD in Psychology from Yale University. When she is not conducting research or teaching Developmental Psychology courses at MSU, she enjoys reading and traveling with her family.

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How Do Emotions Affect Behavior?
Participants: Elementary school children ages 5-10

This project examined whether children understand that different emotions affect the way people think and act. Children heard stories about different characters who experienced emotions and made good or bad decisions. Based on how the character felt, children decided which outcome went with which character or which choice a character made. Children were also presented with simple scenarios about a character experiencing one of four emotions (happiness, anger, fear, or sadness). They then rated how strongly they believed the character was feeling the emotion at the time and predicted how strongly the character would feel the emotion in a week.

In the final part, children heard stories in which the main character experiences an emotion very strongly. While in this state of heightened emotion, the character does something out of the ordinary.

The children were asked to explain why the character did something out of his or her normal routine. Our results suggest that children become better at understanding how different emotions affect others’ cognitive processes between ages five and ten. In addition, even five- and six-year-olds in this study understood that emotions can affect a person’s behavior, suggesting that this ability starts to develop before age five. Our results may help guide adults’ social and emotional interactions with children, as well as improve therapeutic practices involving children.

Student researcher:
Meghan Kanya

Seeing Spongebob Affects Children’s Choices
Participants: Preschool children ages 3-5

It is estimated that children view an average of 40,000 advertisements per year, giving advertisers ample opportunity to influence children’s judgments. This study examined how seeing a familiar cartoon character affects children’s judgments about products and information. In part one, preschoolers saw a set of popular animated characters (Dora the Explorer, Bob the Builder, Nemo, and Blue) and selected their favorite. Their favorite character and a novel character similar in appearance then made contradictory statements about novel information and children had a chance to agree or disagree with each. Next, children heard one character make obviously incorrect claims and they were asked whether they agreed with that character’s statements about novel information again. In part two, children chose between two objects - one that was brand new and one that was damaged but featured an image of their favorite character. Our findings suggest that hearing a familiar character make incorrect statements does not cause children to distrust that character in the future and that seeing an image of a familiar character can play an influential role in a child’s decision making.

Student researchers:
Erinn Kohn and Alyssa Segal
Boys Prefer Male Mechanics, but Girls Don’t!
Participants: Preschool children ages 3-5

Last year, we explored children’s understanding of expertise and their knowledge of gender stereotypes by presenting children with two puppets and asking a series of questions both related to the mechanic and nurse professions and also questions about typically male and female activities. The puppets were either a female nurse and male mechanic or a male nurse and a female mechanic. American and Egyptian children participated in this study and we found that children use occupation (rather than gender) as a stronger indication of a person’s knowledge. They also thought a female mechanic would know more about football than a male nurse. This year, we followed up on these results with a study where we used the same methods and questions but did not introduce the puppet’s professions. Our results show that boys express a preference for the male puppet to know more about mechanic-related knowledge and typically male activities, while girls choose both puppets equally frequently when answering questions about mechanical and biological knowledge as well as male and female activities. This suggests that young boys may start forming stereotypes about male knowledge earlier than girls, although further research is needed to determine exactly why they do so.

How Do Children Think about Reflection and Impulsivity in Others?
Participants: Elementary school children ages 6-10

This project investigated whether children understand that the amount of time a person spends thinking about a problem determines the quality of their decision. Children heard 16 scenarios about fictional people in different situations. In each scenario, one person acted impulsively and another acted reflectively (e.g., one person colored their picture really fast and one person took their time). The children were then presented with an outcome regarding each scenario and asked to predict which person experienced the given outcome (e.g., which person’s picture was colored all inside the lines?). We found that by age six, most children understand that the time a person spends thinking about a problem determines the quality of that person’s decision. We also found that children are better able to understand the link between impulsivity and decision making for decisions involving memory and knowledge application, but they have more difficulty when judging moral behavior. This study may enable us to improve children’s performance in school and other settings by teaching children why working carefully and reflecting on their actions leads to better outcomes.

Student Researchers:
Christine Shenouda
(graduate student) and
Elizabeth Boudiab

Student Researchers:
Amanda Hardwick &
Courtney Sharp
How Children Share Knowledge
Participants: Elementary school children ages 5-10

When asking a child a question, the child’s answer could range from a concise and accurate reply to a lengthy monologue that has almost nothing to do with what was asked. This raises the question of whether children can appropriately share information that is most important for another person to know, rather than what they think is most important for them. Previous experiments have shown that as children age, they are better able to choose what pieces of information experts would want to know. The current study built upon this by investigating how what children want to know compares to what they think others want to know. There were two parts to this experiment. In the first part, each child heard two facts about an obscure animal and they had to decide which fact they thought was most important to remember. In the second part, each child heard a fact about an animal and decided which of two characters would need to know that fact based on their occupations. We found that as children age, they are better able to distinguish what a person needs to know by considering his or her occupation. Our results suggest that adults who question children about information (e.g., witnessing a crime) should be clear about their background knowledge and goals in order to get children to provide more relevant answers.

Student Researcher: Kaitlin Reilly

Where Our Research has Lead Us

The KID Lab is proud to have bright and talented student research assistants involved in all aspects of our research projects. On April 8, 2011, they had the opportunity to present findings from their studies at Michigan State University’s University Undergraduate Research and Arts Forum (UURAF). In addition, Meghan Kanya and Alyssa Segal presented research projects at the Midwestern Psychological Association Meeting in Chicago in May 2011. Graduate student Christine Shenouda won a first place award for her presentation at the MSU Graduate Academic Conference and she presented her research at the Society for Research in Child Development Meeting in Montreal, Canada. In October 2011, Meghan and Christine will be presenting their work again at the Cognitive Development Society meeting in Philadelphia, PA.
What Next?
Research at the KID Lab never ends! We still have much to learn about children’s cognition and how it changes across the lifespan. When we finish gathering evidence for our initial research questions, we often need to conduct follow-up studies in order to gain a more complete picture of certain aspects of child development. We are eager to learn more about these fascinating phenomena. Some topics we will be addressing in our upcoming research include:

- How children’s control over their own behavior relates to their understanding of the consequences of others’ behavior
- How children seek out information in real-world situations
- How exposure to computers and emerging literacy influence children’s preferences for information sources

A Special Thank You!
We would like to thank the following schools and organizations for allowing us to visit and conduct our research this year:

- Annie’s Children’s Center
- Eastminster Child Development Center
- Greyhound Intermediate School
- Hillel Day School
- MSU Child Development Labs in East Lansing and Haslett
- Northwestern Elementary School
- People’s Church Preschool
- Ridge Wood Elementary Kid’s Club and Wondergarten
- Silver Springs Elementary Kid’s Club
- Stepping Stones Montessori School
- St. Paul Early Childhood Center
- St. Thomas Aquinas School

We also extend a big thank you to the parents and children who visited our lab on the MSU campus. Our research would not be possible without your support!

Get Involved!
We are always looking for families, daycare centers, and schools that are interested in participating in our research. You can contact us by calling 517-432-8166, sending an email to msukidlab@gmail.com, or signing up on our website at http://psychology.msu.edu/kid/. If you are a parent, we will contact you as soon as we have a study available for your child’s age group.

Also, if you have moved, changed your phone number or contact information, or simply have questions or concerns, please let us know!