

UW study shows kids relate to stories that are read to them

BY LUISA D'AMATO, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO — Every parent and teacher knows the power of a good story.

And now, a study from University of Waterloo shows that four- and five-year-olds identify intensely with the characters in stories that are read to them.

This research sheds light on how even children too young to read on their own can still step into the mind and spirit of those characters. This ability is key to developing the crucial skill of comprehension.

"We think in stories," said psychology professor Daniela O'Neill, who worked with Agnieszka Fecica, a researcher who recently earned her PhD. "We try to understand the world through stories. Even mathematical proofs are kind of like a story."

The two researchers got four- and five-year-old children from Kitchener and Waterloo who aren't yet readers. They sat each child in front of a computer to listen to a story.

The computer was programmed to tell a little bit of the story at a time. There were no images to go with the story, just the voice. And to continue the story, the child had to click the mouse.

The researchers found that the children were faster to click to move the story along if the character was moving fast — for example if the character was being driven somewhere instead of walking.

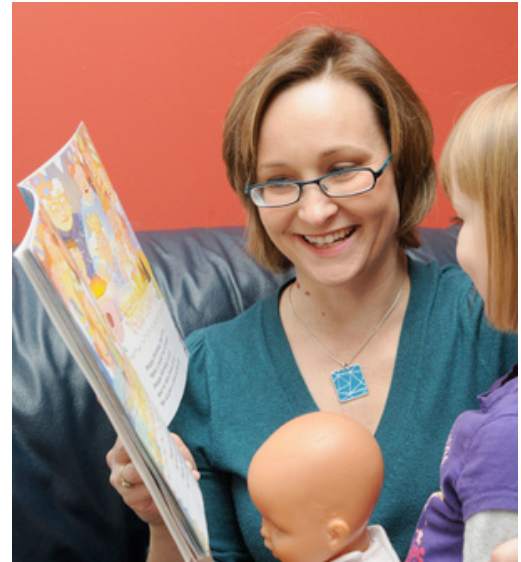
But if the character was walking along the street and saw interesting things in the nearby park, such as kids playing baseball, then the children in front of the computer clicked more slowly, as if they were moving at the same leisurely speed as the character.

Also, if the character had to go somewhere he or she didn't want to go, the children sympathetically took longer to click, as if to put off the unwanted trip.

O'Neill said that this suggests the children were mentally simulating the experience of the character in the story. That's called a "situation model."

Next step is for researchers to try to discover if there's a relationship between being able to imagine the story as if it is happening, and later, being able to comprehend what you have just read.

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Philip Walker/Record staff
Daniela O'Neill reads to her daughter in their home. Research shows that even very young children imagine they're the characters when someone's reading a story to them.