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About this Newsletter

This is the second volume of our lab newsletter, published once a year to update teachers, parents, and others who have been involved with our research.

Inside, you'll find summaries of some of our most recent findings, as well as descriptions of some of the projects we are just beginning. We also have some information about our lab in case you know a family or a school that might be interested in

participating—we are always looking for more people to participate in our projects! We've now added a function to our website that allows people to sign up online, making participation even easier.

Thank you for your support, and please enjoy our newsletter. Also feel free to look us up online at:

www.utdallas.edu/research/thinklab

How do children predict and evaluate the judgments of others?

As adults, we recognize that there are times when other people may not be able to offer a fair and objective judgment about something, like the outcome of a court case or the results of a competition. How do children start to understand this? This is an important question because children are bombarded with information from many sources, and not all of these sources have pure intentions or provide accurate messages. Being able to predict or understand that someone may make an inaccurate or skewed claim may help children better cope with those claims.

We recently published two scientific journal articles on this line of research. One article by Dr. Candice Mills and Dr. Frank Keil of Yale University, published in the journal *Cognition* in May of 2008, examined children's understanding of the qualities important for being a fair and accurate judge. Children heard short stories about different kinds of contests, with different potential

judges, and we asked questions to try to understand how children decide what qualities are important for making someone a good judge. We found that even kindergartners are surprisingly good at this task, recognizing some of the qualities important for being a good judge, like relevant experience, knowledge of a topic, and the perceptual capacity to make a decision. However, we also found that young children tend not to predict that judges might be partial or biased (e.g., choose their best friend as the winner of a beauty pageant), even if the evidence suggests that is plausible.

Another article by Dr. Mills and Meridith Grant, a graduate student in the Think Lab, is currently in press in the journal *Developmental Science*. We'll provide more information about our findings in a later issue!

How do children ask questions to solve problems?

Children like to ask questions from a very young age for many reasons: to get attention, to obtain facts (e.g., “What’s that called?”), and to understand things (e.g., “Why do people have birthday parties?”). We know that in elementary school children have to ask questions to solve problems, but we don’t know much about how this ability develops.

To examine this issue, we have been working with children between the ages of 3 and 6 on a task where they are able to ask questions to two different puppet experts to solve a problem.

For this game, children can ask questions to figure out what is inside a special box. They are shown two pictures of what could be in the box, and then have to figure out which of the two things is inside. In this game, the children can ask anything they want about what is hiding in the box: for instance, what it looks like, sounds like, or feels like.

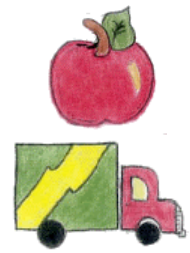
Children are then introduced to two puppets that know different kinds of things. One puppet shows that he is knowledgeable: in an introduction session, he accurately answers some simple questions. The other puppet is different. Sometimes the second puppet is inaccurate; he gives a wrong answer to the

questions asked. Sometimes the second puppet is ignorant or “clueless”: he answers questions with “I don’t know.”

In this study, we are examining several things. First, we are examining how effective children’s questions are at determining what is inside the box. Second, we are looking to see if children direct their questions to the knowledgeable expert as opposed to the inaccurate or clueless one.

So far, not surprisingly, children ask more questions to the knowledgeable puppet than the clueless one, but they do not seem to do this as much when the knowledgeable puppet is contrasted with the inaccurate one. Older children are more likely than younger ones to prefer the knowledgeable experts.

In real life, this may mean that children draw stronger conclusions about someone who is clearly unhelpful (providing no answer to their questions), while being more forgiving of someone who has just been inaccurate a few times (perhaps thinking that person still might get an answer right). In the future, we would like to vary the characteristics of the “experts” as well as use humans instead of puppets to understand how children ask questions.



Children ask questions to figure out which of a pair of objects like the above is inside a small box.



The puppet experts used in this study. Children like interacting with the puppets and asking them questions.

Do preschoolers recognize silly explanations?

Children nowadays are faced with more information from a larger number of sources than ever before, so they must decide which information is accurate and which should be discarded. One goal of our study called “The Detective Game” is to gain insight into the types of explanations children between the ages of 3 and 6 believe.

In one part of this study, the child and a researcher play a simple game that ends with the child and researcher counting a few coins. The child and researcher leave the room for a moment, and return to find that the number of coins sitting on the table has changed. A different person tells the child something about what happened to the coins. Sometimes this person says something that

makes sense, and sometimes this person says something silly, like a unicorn jumped out of a book and added a coin.

We’re still working on this study, but so far, most of our 3-year-olds believe the silly explanations, but most of the 4-year-olds do not. As you might expect, the older the children are, the more skeptical they are about silly or implausible explanations. Other researchers working with preschoolers often suggest that 4 and 5 year olds are as gullible as 3-year-olds. We think, instead, that experience with the world shapes children’s understanding of what is silly or implausible, and that children understand different things at different rates. We hope to understand more about this in the future.



Callier Center at Richardson, where some of our research takes place. We also work with local preschools, schools, after school programs, and daycares.

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Special thanks to...

We are extremely grateful to all of the parents, teachers, directors, staff, and children who have helped make this research possible.

Special thanks to everyone associated with the following schools, preschools, and programs for your help with some of the projects mentioned in this newsletter:

- The Westwood School
- Town North Family YMCA
- Frisco YMCA

- Rainbow Connection Preschool
- Spring Valley United Methodist Preschool
- Arapaho United Methodist Day School
- Lookout Lutheran Community School
- Wateview Christian Preschool
- The Creative School
- Rainbow Days Preschool

We couldn't do it without you!

Participate!

Your help with this research is invaluable. We are always inviting families and schools with children between the ages of 3 and 14 to join our research family.

In our research, we generally tell children short stories and ask them questions about the stories, or we play simple games with toys, watch their strategies, and ask more questions. Most studies involve a **one-time session that lasts between 15 and 60 minutes**, depending on the study, and we do our best to **schedule appointments at your convenience** (afternoons, evenings, and some Saturdays).

These sessions take place at our lab at the Callier Center at UTD, where convenient free parking is provided, or at local daycares,

after school programs, and elementary schools. Most studies also involve a small toy or gift for your child as a thank you for participating, and parents receive helpful information about child development. Our families tell us that the experience is enjoyable and interesting for children, parents, and teachers.

If you are interested in finding out more about our research or scheduling an appointment, please contact us. You can sign up online on our website:

www.utdallas.edu/research/thinklab

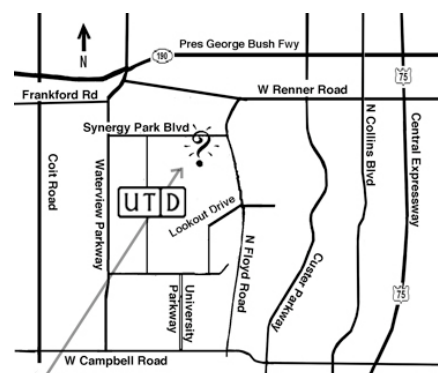
You can also contact us by email at utdthinklab@yahoo.com or by phone at (972) 883-6075.

About Us...

The UTD Think Lab is located at the University of Texas at Dallas, and is under the direction of Dr. Candice M. Mills.

At the Think Lab at the University of Texas at Dallas, we seek to discover knowledge that will contribute to the healthy cognitive and emotional development of our children, and we are looking for schools, parents, and children to take part in important and fun research studies on child development. We believe that this research can help educators, families, and scientists understand important aspects of how children think, learn, and develop.

Our location:



think?LAB at Callier Center Richardson: 811 Synergy Park Blvd.