



Society for Research in Child Development

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Young Children Don't Believe Everything They Hear

Childhood is a time when young minds receive a vast amount of new information. Until now, it's been thought that children believe most of what they hear. New research sheds light on children's abilities to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

Through conversation, books, and the media, young children are continually exposed to information that is new to them. Much of the information they receive is factual (e.g., the names of the planets in the solar system), but some information is not based in truth and represents nonexistent entities (e.g., the Easter bunny). Children need to figure out which information is real and which is not. By age 4, children consistently use the context in which the new information is presented to determine whether or not it is real.

That's one of the major findings in new studies conducted by researchers at the Universities of Texas and Virginia and published in the November/December 2006 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

In three studies, about 400 children ages 3 to 6 heard about something new and had to say whether they thought it was real or not. Some children heard the information defined in scientific terms ("Doctors use *surmits* to make medicine"), while others heard it defined in fantastical terms ("Fairies use *hercs* to make fairy dust"). The researchers found that children's ability to use contextual cues to determine whether the information is true develops significantly between the ages of 3 and 5.

Moreover, when new information is presented to children in a way that relates the information in a meaningful way to a familiar entity, they are more likely to use the contextual cues to make a decision about whether the new information is true than if the new information is simply associated with the entity.

"These studies provide new insight into the development of children's ability to make the fantasy-reality distinction," explains Jacqueline D. Woolley, lead author of the studies and a professor at the University of Texas. "It is clear from the present studies that young children do not believe everything they hear, and that they can use the context surrounding the presentation of a new entity to make inferences about the real versus fantastical nature of that entity."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 6, *Effects of context on judgments concerning the reality status of novel entities*, by Woolley, JD (University of Texas) and Van Reet, J (University of Virginia). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.