

Critical thinking: How do children learn who to trust?

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A UT Dallas researcher is examining how children evaluate information to solve problems and learn how to think critically, with the aim of combating misleading advertising aimed at young people.

Children's lack of cynicism is refreshing to adults. But to navigate through life successfully, individuals must develop an ability to differentiate between reliable and doubtful sources of information. Dr. Candice Mills, assistant professor in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences and a researcher in the Center for [Children](#) and Families, is currently working with preschool and elementary-age children in two separate studies.

The first study, sponsored by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, is examining ways to help preschool-age children determine which source will be most helpful in answering their questions for [problem solving](#). Mills and her team also are looking at other aspects of problem solving, such as the ability to ask good questions and use new information.

A group of 4- and 5-year-olds are being asked to solve simple problems with the help of outside sources with different levels of knowledge: a knowledgeable source, an "ignorant" source (who admits to not knowing the answers) and an "inaccurate" source (who provides wrong answers). The experiment manipulates how children learn about the knowledge status of each source: through experience, explicit labeling, observation or the combination of explicit labeling and observation.

"Given the difficulty that children and adults often have in problem solving, it is important to better understand the rudimentary development of problem-solving skills," Mills said. "The results from this research will inform scientists and practitioners in education and [child development](#) regarding early developments in children's problem-solving abilities. Determining some of the factors that may help children recognize that a source should be discounted should be useful in developing programs to combat misleading ads."

Another study looks at 7-to 9-year-old children and how they develop the ability to critically evaluate the information they encounter. Children are participating in several short tasks designed to measure how they consider information.

The study also involves observing how parents and children interact when discussing questionable sources because parent-child interaction is considered vital to learning. Parent-child conversations are being monitored to see how they discuss different kinds of misinformation presented in storybooks.

Most young children can recognize some sources are untrustworthy because of inaccuracy or deception, but they may have a hard time spotting biased information or exaggerated claims. Developing this ability to discern will arm young people against misleading information and could help them develop into better decision-makers as adults, Mills said.

This project is supported by a grant from the Timberlawn Psychiatric Research Foundation.

"By examining these issues, we can gain important insight into how to nurture the development of critical-thinking skills as children grow into adults," Mills said.

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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