

Kids learn moral lessons more effectively from stories with humans than human-like animals

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A study by researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto found that four to six-year-olds

shared more after listening to books with human characters than books with anthropomorphic (human-like) animals.

The findings are noteworthy since so much of children's media— books, movies, video games, etc.— use human-like animal characters. But since many children in this study did not see these characters as similar to themselves, researchers say they may be less likely to translate social lessons from these stories into their everyday lives.

"These findings add to a growing body of research showing that children find it easier to apply knowledge from stories that are realistic," said Dr. Patricia Ganea, Associate Professor of early cognitive development at OISE, University of Toronto. "Overall, children were more likely to act on the moral of the [story](#) when it featured a human character."

Human versus human-like animal characters

In the study, children listened to a story with either human or human-like animal characters who spoke and wore clothes. Each book taught children about sharing with others. Children's altruistic giving was assessed before and after the reading.

Overall, preschoolers shared more after listening to the book with humans. Children who were read the book with animal characters shared less after the reading.

Researchers assessed whether children viewed anthropomorphic animal characters as human or not. Most children said these animals lacked human characteristics. Of the children who read the animal book, those who attributed human characteristics to anthropomorphic animals shared more after reading. Researchers say one of the reasons some children did not act generously may have been because they did not interpret the anthropomorphic animals as similar to themselves.

Books with realistic characters lead to better learning

Dr. Ganea says the results highlight that storybooks can have an immediate impact on children's social behaviour.

"Books that children can easily relate to increase their ability to apply the story's lesson to their daily lives," she said. "It is important for educators and parents to choose carefully when the goal is to teach real-world knowledge and social behaviours through storybooks."

Nicole Larsen, who worked with Dr. Ganea on the study as part of her master's degree, agreed, noting, "Parents can play an important role in children's learning by asking them to explain parts of the story and helping them see the similarity between the story and their own lives."

Children's sharing tested

In the study, children first had a chance to share some of their 10 stickers with another child. They were then read one of three books: a book about sharing with human characters; the same book with anthropomorphic animal characters; or a book about seeds. This book was used to check how sharing changed when the story did not involve sharing. After the reading, children had another chance to give away new stickers. The number of stickers shared provided a measure of children's altruistic giving.

Children were also asked to categorize different pictures of human, anthropomorphic, and realistic animals with either human traits or animal traits.

To see if a story with animal characters is more appealing to young children, the researchers asked the children who read the seeds book to

choose between the human and animal [books](#).

Overall, the researchers found:

- Children shared more after reading the human book, and less after reading the animal book or the unrelated book about seeds.
- The more a child attributed human characteristics to the anthropomorphic [animals](#), the more they shared after reading the animal book.
- Children did not prefer one type of book over the other.

The study, "Do storybooks with anthropomorphized animal characters promote prosocial behaviors in young [children](#)?" appeared online in the August issue of *Developmental Science*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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