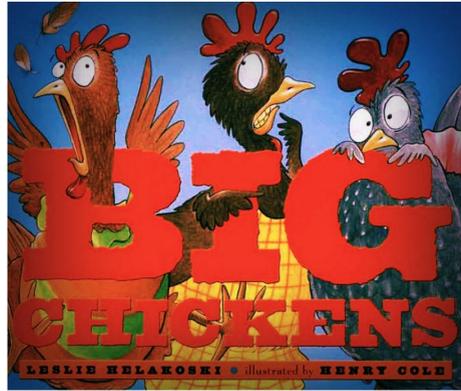


Is Humor Contagious? Effect of Storyteller Expressiveness on Children's Response

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of storyteller expressiveness on children's humor appreciation during a funny story. Participants consisted of 25 preschool children (13 girls, 12 boys, $M_{age} = 3.64$). A storyteller read a funny book in either a monotone voice or with expressive tones. It was hypothesized that children in the expressive condition would laugh and smile more than those in the non-expressive condition. Data collection utilized a time sampling observational method. Incidences of smiling and laughing were higher in the expressive condition. Results imply that expressive adults may more effectively capture the attention of children, particularly in a learning setting.



Research on interpersonal humor has focused on how the presence of others facilitates one's humor appreciation. For instance, laughing and smiling occurred more frequently when children heard a humorous story with others than when alone. Since humor naturally occurs in the presence of others, it is necessary that children have the ability to decipher the facial expressions of others in order to fully comprehend humorous stimuli. Between 3- to 5-years of age, children have the ability to recognize and rely on facial expressions as social cues (Hoffner & Badzinski, 1989). In fact, Hoffner and Badzinski found that 89% of social cues interpreted by their sample of 3- to 5-year-olds were solely derived from deciphering facial expressions. Dunsmore (2001) showed that children are able to recognize and interpret the emotions of mothers who exhibit positive expressions, such as happiness, while describing a daily event.



A significant interpersonal interaction between children and adults that often occurs on a daily basis is storytelling. When a story is being read or told to a child, there is more than the storyline that is being relayed. Daniel (2007) believes that storytelling characterizes an effective teaching environment and that children listening to a story are actively imagining the story line and integrating it into their world.

A type of storytelling that is frequently entertaining to young children and important in their social development involves the use of humor. This type of storytelling must be expressive and sometimes exaggerated to successfully deliver the funny story. Klor (1991) noted that when the story was being told enthusiastically, children were more attentive and showed appreciation through their laughter and participation.



Bergen (2009) found that children will laugh at stories read to them without completely understanding their meaning, simply because others around them are laughing. In cases where funny stories elicit laughter in children, it is difficult to know whether the children's humor response is stimulated by the story or the expectations of the storyteller. The present study sought to determine whether the social interaction between the child and the storyteller is a more important variable than the story itself. Specifically, it was hypothesized that children who listen to a funny story read by a storyteller who smiles, laughs, and uses an expressive voice, will laugh and smile more during the story than those who hear the same funny story read without expression.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 25 children (13 girls, 12 boys) aged three and four ($M_{age} = 3.64$), attending two private preschools in northern California.

Materials

The children's book *Big Chickens* by Leslie Helakoski was read to all participants by one of the researchers in both conditions. The storybook contained humorous material depicting the adventures of farm chickens. Observers utilized an interpersonal reaction data sheet to mark the occurrence of behavior. Behaviors were divided into two major categories: interested and disinterested. Interested behaviors included: a) smiling, b) laughing, c) audible expressions, and d) active listening. Disinterested behaviors included: a) blank face, b) looking away, c) talking to peers, and d) getting up to leave. A metronome application on an iPod beeped every 10 seconds to synchronize all observing researchers.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Children in the experimental condition were given an animated reading of the storybook which included the use of tonal variety, hand gestures, and facial expressions. Children in the control condition were exposed to a monotone reading, characterized by limited verbal and physical expression. The same storyteller performed the readings for both conditions. While the story was read, observers recorded the occurrence of children's responses in 10-second intervals using an interpersonal reaction data sheet.

Results

The hypothesis that participants in the expressive storyteller condition would laugh and smile more than those in the non-expressive storyteller condition was examined using an ANOVA. As predicted, participants in the expressive condition had more instances of smiling ($M = 2.87$) compared to those in the non-expressive condition ($M = .20$) $F(1,25) = 10.95, p = .003$. Similarly, participants in the expressive condition had more instances of laughing ($M = .80$) than those in the non-expressive condition ($M = .00$) $F(1,25) = 4.23, p = .052$. See Figure 1. There was no gender difference found for laughing and smiling, however boys ($M = .15$) got up to leave more than girls ($M = .00$) $t(22) = 2.87, p = .009$. See Figure 2. Inter-rater reliability was assessed on the collected data and ranged from .80 to 1.00.

Figure 1. Incidences of Humor Responses by Condition

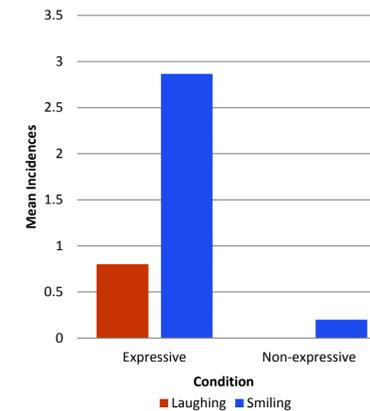
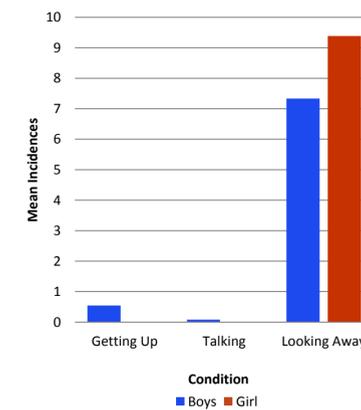


Figure 2. Incidences of Disinterest by Gender



Discussion

As hypothesized, children who listened to a funny story read by an expressive storyteller laughed and smiled more than those who heard the same story read without expression. These results support the work of Klor (1991) showing active engagement and appreciation for stories read with expressive tones and gestures.

Although social facilitation theory plays a role in explaining why children feel a need to laugh, smile, or show emotions when presented with humorous or expressive situations amongst their peers, it appears that the children in our study were more likely affected by the storyteller's social cues because children in the control group did not laugh and smile more even in the presence of their peers. Participants in the expressive condition may have been striving for social acceptance from the adult storyteller. It would seem that when an expressive adult gives off cues for humor, this provides a more powerful social facilitation of laughing and smiling than the responses of the other preschool children present.

As previously mentioned, Hoicka, Jutsum, and Gattis (2008) found it difficult to determine whether a child's humor response is stimulated by a funny story or facilitated by the preconceptions of the reader. In the current study both groups of children were read the same funny story allowing researchers to specifically isolate and test the effects of the storyteller's expectations and expressions. Because children smiled and laughed more during the expressive reading, this implies that the storyteller has a greater impact on children's humor responses than the humorous content of the story.

The results of this study suggest that lessons that are especially animated may positively contribute to a student's attention span, learning potential and teacher admiration. Specifically, teachers may want to apply these findings by utilizing vocal cues and hand gestures as an attention-getting aid. Doing so could encourage students to be more interested in the teacher's lessons. By creating a connection with adults on the basis of humor, children can achieve a sense of reassurance which can help them relate to their parents and teachers.

These findings provide insight into the importance of interpersonal relationships between children and adults. By recognizing the role of expressiveness in children's humor, parents and teachers can use this knowledge in interpersonal relationships with children, contributing to increased learning and self-esteem