Psychology 449
Cognitive Development and
Children’s Understanding of Media

Professor Catherine Sophian, Ph.D. and Professor Ashley Maynard, Ph.D.

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Overview: How do children develop the ability to think, reason, and solve problems, and to reason mathematically and scientifically? How does language develop? And how do these skills interact with children’s understanding of various media? This course will consider a range of attainments in children’s cognition and the ways that these developmental changes relate to children as consumers of media, including television, video games, computers, movies, and music. We will consider media aimed at infants and toddlers as well as those media aimed at older children and adolescents. The class will consider the social implications of media as well, and ways to help children understand and manage media influences.

Parts of several class meetings will be used for project presentations and discussion of the readings, lecture/film material, and projects. There will be an opportunity to sign up for the projects in class. Read through the projects and select your top 3 choices by our class time on January 22. We will randomly draw numbers in class that day. The person who draws #1 will have the first choice of the projects, the person who draws #2 will have the second choice, etc. We hope that we can accommodate everyone's first choice in projects; however some people may get another choice. We hope that you will find all the projects interesting and that you will enjoy hearing about them in class. We also hope that the projects help to stimulate class discussion.

Required attendance: Attendance in this course is mandatory and will be worth a total of 14 points, 1 point for each of 14 weeks. Attendance will be taken at random times during class throughout the semester. If you are not present when attendance is taken, you will not earn the point for that day.

Readings for the class
As much of the learning will take place through ongoing class discussion, it will be very important to keep up with the readings.

3. Additional readings will occasionally be distributed by the instructors.
Assigned Activities and Basis for Grading

Papers

Purpose: The papers are to give you an opportunity to reflect on and integrate readings, lectures, and films. They will also give you an opportunity to practice and develop your skills in written expression. A final purpose is to enrich class discussion. For this reason, papers must be turned in either the day before or during class, with you in attendance during the class meeting. Late papers will have 2 points deducted for each day they are late.

Essay questions/topics will be handed out approximately one week prior to their due dates. If any source you cite is not obvious, please put a reference in parentheses (e.g., lecture, 2/14). If you are not satisfied with your grade or want to improve your writing skills, you may rewrite your papers to improve your grades.

Field Research Project: (36 points)

Purpose: The projects will give you an opportunity to explore an issue in an empirical, sometimes personal way. For you and your classmates, they provide an opportunity to extend and even test the conclusions that have been presented in readings and lecture. They will give you an opportunity to explore methods, such as interview and environmental observation, that go beyond the experimental methodology you mastered in your methods or statistics courses. Finally, because the projects are presented orally, you will have a chance to enrich the learning of your classmates, get responses from them, and develop your presentation skills.

How to do it: You will have a chance to sign up in class on January 22. In principle, two people will sign up for each project. Therefore you may work in pairs, or you may choose to work on your own. If you work in pairs, you must each collect your own data and both play an active role in the presentation. The directions for each project are given in the week-by-week outline that follows. Each field project will be directly based on issues from one or more of the readings. Working with your partner or alone, plan your data collection and presentation.

The presentation should have four basic parts: (1) your goal(s) (very brief), (2) what you did, (3) what you found, and (4) how your findings relate to one or more readings and the larger issues brought up in lecture. Each presentation should take no more than 20 minutes. You should bring handouts so that there are enough for all participants and the instructor. Students in the past have often found visual displays useful. Handouts or poster boards or overhead transparencies can be used. Each project will be presented at the class time under which it is listed. Please inform Dr. Maynard at least 24 hours before class if you will need to borrow a laptop computer.

Requirement: Each member of the class will carry out and present one project. Grades will be based on the oral presentation. No written work will be handed in. The evaluation and grade will be based on the project and presentation of it. If you choose to work in pairs, you will be graded together as a whole. That is, if you work together, each
member of the presenting team will receive the same grade. Therefore, it is important for members of each presenting team to coordinate their components and help each other improve. The field research project and its presentation will be worth 85 points.

Summary of Requirements and Point Distribution

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Details</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1 point per class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Papers</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4 papers (each paper assignment will detail the expected length; each paper worth 20 points)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Field project</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1 field research project</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>130</strong></td>
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TURNING IN PAPERS

Paper due dates will be explained in class, with each assignment. You must complete the first two assignments by the dates given. You will have choices for the next assignments, which must be completed by the last day of class.

Re-writes

You will be allowed to re-write any paper on which you receive a score with which you are not fully satisfied. Re-writes will be due one week after you get them back.

Final Grades

We will use a +/- system in grading. In order to maximize learning and enjoyment and minimize competition, a straight scale will be used:

- A range 90-100%
- B range 80-89%
- C range 70-79%
- D range 60-69%
- F range Below 60%
LECTURE TOPICS, PAPER TOPICS, FIELD PROJECTS, AND READINGS

CLASS MEETING #1
January 8
Introduction to the course

January 15 No Class Meeting: Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

CLASS MEETING #2
January 22
Intro to Cognitive Development and Piaget
Reading:
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 1, pp. 1-25
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 2, Piaget’s theory of development

CLASS MEETING #3
January 29
Reading:
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 3, pp. 65-75 & 97-106
IP, esp. cognitive evolution
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 10, pp. 341-357
problem-solving overview

PAPER #1 DUE by 5 pm on Sunday, February 4. Please email a copy to both Dr. Sophian and Dr. Maynard

CLASS MEETING #4
February 5
Reading:
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 8, pp. 268-283 & 292-302
concepts, esp. number & biological
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 10, pp. 360-363, 366-378
causal inference, tool use, logic
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 11, pp. 381-400
academic skills: math
CLASS MEETING #5
February 12

Reading:
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 4, Sociocultural theories of development

Project #1: Magazine ads targeted to teens
Find 8 magazine ads targeted to teens from at least two different sources. For each ad, what type of product is being advertised? Do you see evidence of gender- or racial-stereotyping in the ad? What is the main appeal used in the ads? Is there anything about the ads that might make teens feel self-conscious about their own physical appearance, gender, or ethnicity? Does anything in any of the ads reflect our knowledge of cognitive development in adolescence? What is the social ecology of the ads (this will be more clear after reading Siegler & Alibali’s chapter 4)?

February 19 No Class Meeting: Presidents’ Day Holiday

CLASS MEETING #6
February 26

PAPER #2 DUE
Reading:
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 5, Perceptual development
Siegler & Alibali Ch. 9, Social cognition

Project #2: Perceptual development and children's media
Watch an episode of Teletubbies and an episode of Blue’s Clues. Analyze each episode in terms of perceptual features that would appeal to toddlers or babies. Using what you know about babies’ and toddlers’ perceptual preferences, do you think the Teletubbies and Blue’s Clues are cognitively appropriate for babies and toddlers? Does one show seem more advanced, cognitively speaking, than the other? Bring some examples of clips to class to illustrate your points.

CLASS MEETING #7
March 5

Reading:
Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 1, Children and adolescents: Unique audiences

Project #3: Rating systems
Compare and contrast two rating systems designed to inform parents about media content: (a) the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings for movies (see Web site: www.mpaa.org/movieratings/) and (b) the TV Parental Guidelines for television
shows (see www.tvguidelines.org/guideline.htm). Evaluate the two systems in terms of what we know about child development discussed in chapter 1. Do the systems seem accurate? Are they likely to be helpful to parents? How could they be improved? Can you think of a movie or TV show that you think is rated inappropriately? Think of 3 movies that you think are rated appropriately, one rated "G", one rated "PG", and one rated "PG-13" and show how the film is rated according to the MPAA guidelines (i.e., why did your PG-13 film get that rating?)

CLASS MEETING #8
March 12
Reading:
Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 2, Advertising

Project #4: Magazine ads targeted to children
Find 8 magazine advertisements targeted to children from at least two sources. What type of product is being advertised in each ad? Does each ad fit into one of the top four categories of children's ads found on television (see the Kunkel & Gantz, 1992 study discussed in Chapter 2)? What is the main appeal used in each ad to persuade children? Is there any disclaimer offered in the ads? If so, is it likely to be noticed or understood by a child? Is there anything in the ad that might be misleading or confusing for a 5-year-old child? For a 10-year-old child?

CLASS MEETING #9
March 19
Reading:
Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 3, Media violence

Project #5: Media violence
Watch a popular cartoon made for children and an evening crime drama (for adults, such as NYPD Blue or CSI) on television. Compare the two in terms of how violence is portrayed. Think about contextual features such as the nature of the perpetrators, whether violence is rewarded or punished, and the consequences of violence. According to the research cited in Chapter 3, which program poses more risk to a young child viewer? Why?

March 26-30  Spring Break

CLASS MEETING #10
April 2
Project #6: Electronic games and parents
Find two families with kids who play video games, either at home or outside the home. You will be interviewing one parent and one child from each family. You should select families that will provide information about boys and girls (i.e., there could be a girl in one family and a boy in the other family, or there could be girls and boys in both families). The children should be age 2 or older. Find out the ages and genders of the children in the family.
Ask the parents about the availability of video games in the home and children’s use of games outside the home. What kinds of games do the parents allow their children to have? Do the parents allow their children to have some games and not others? Do they play the video games with their children? Do their monitor or limit children's use of the games? Are there different games or rules for boys and girls? You should also ask any other interesting questions that come up.
Ask the children about how much they play video games, which games they play, why they like video games, and why they like the particular games they play. Report your findings to the class. You should also ask the children any other interesting questions that come up.

CLASS MEETING #11
April 9

Reading:
Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 5, Sexuality and the media

Project #7: Sexuality in advertising
Select 10 magazine ads from publications marketed to women and 10 magazine ads from publications marketed to men. Analyze the ads in terms of gender and sexuality. How do the ads portray women? Men? People of different ethnic groups? How suggestive are the ads in terms of sexuality? How is sexuality used to sell each product, if sexuality is a factor? Is the link an obvious link, e.g., sex and condoms, or is the link more distant, e.g., using sex to sell hair color? Why do you think sex is used to sell products such as hair color and shampoo? Discuss your findings with the class.

CLASS MEETING #12
April 16

Reading:
Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 7, Eating and eating disorders

Project #8: Weight and celebrity
Interview 4 adolescents or young adults between the ages of 16 and 25. Ask them what cultural group they most identify with and what the body type "ideal" is in their culture.
If they identify with a culture that is not the dominant one presented in the Hollywood media, ask them to compare the "ideal" body types in those two cultures. Next, ask them to name their five favorite television or movie actors and actresses. Would your subject still like or watch them if the celebrity weighed 30 pounds more than they currently weigh? Ask them these questions: Does being overweight or obese ever "help" an actor or actress (hint: Renee Zellweger/Bridget Jones, Robert DeNiro/Jake LaMotta, Chris Farley)? Overweight people are often depicted in comical ways on television and in movies. What are good traits attached to being overweight? Does losing weight to become very, very thin ever help an actor or actress? Ask your subjects to think of an example and discuss all your findings with the class. Also, please ask your suggests two or three additional questions that are of interest to you on this topic.

CLASS MEETING #13
April 23
Reading: Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 6 Drugs and the media

Project #9: Drug advertising on TV
This project is for a student or two who like to watch television each week. (It's o.k. to admit that.) Watch TV for at least two hours between the hours of 7 pm and midnight. Note the stations and programs you watch. For each program you watch, record the drug ads that are aired. Be sure to include prescription drugs, over-the-counter non-prescription drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Record also any ads that are anti-drug, such as ads to quit smoking (e.g., for gum or the patch) and ads that are against hard drugs (e.g., "this is your brain on drugs" ads). Tally the number of ads in each category. What is the implied demographic of the ad (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity)? Were there any drug ads that did not explain the purpose of the drug, i.e., the symptom it was meant to treat? How is each ad related to the content of the television program, if at all? Tell the class about the content of 4 or 5 of the drug ads and provide an analysis of the ads in terms of the demographics and the effects you think the ads will have (i.e., do you think people will buy this drug? Get off drugs or quit smoking because of this ad?) What were most of the drug/anti-drug ads about? Show us your tallies as you present your findings to the class.

CLASS MEETING #14
April 30
Reading: Strasburger & Wilson, Chapter 9, The internet

Project #11: The internet
Figures 9.11 through 9.13 in chapter 9 illustrate examples of Web sites that are of educational value for children. Find at least 10 other educational web sites. Why would you consider each of the sites you find to be particularly beneficial for children? Bring examples of web pages from each site to class (you can put them in Powerpoint slides to show the class) and analyze them in terms of possible benefits for children's social and cognitive development. I.e., Are the sites "good" for children? In what ways? Would you want your child to peruse these websites? Why or why not?