

Attitude of 5 and 6 Years Old Preschoolers to Cartoon Characters

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This work is devoted to the study of the peculiarities of attitude of 5- and 6-year-old preschoolers towards cartoon characters. Hypothesis: There are significant changes in the child's attitude towards cartoon characters, which is manifested both in an increase in the use of his subjective personal assessments of heroes and in a change in the correlations between different personal assessments of characters. Sample: 60 children from 5 to 7 years old (30 girls) we recruited for this study. The 1971 Soviet cartoon "Old Toy" was used as the research material. The study included watching the cartoon by each child. Then he/she was offered a modified method of personal constructs by J. Kelly. The results showed that there are differences in the attitude towards the characters. Six-year-olds use subjective personal constructs more often than objective ones and more often rely on the relationships of the characters. In addition, the structure of the interrelationships of subjective personal constructs differs in five- and six-year-olds. 6-year-old children correlate ethical assessments with the actions of the characters, while children of five years evaluate the ethics of the characters according to their characteristics. The results allow us to draw general conclusions about age differences towards cartoon characters in children aged five and six years.

Keywords: cartoons, cartoon characters, personal constructs, preschooler's attitude, perception of cartoons, understanding of cartoons, preschool age.

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Особенности отношения дошкольников 5 и 6 лет к персонажам мультфильма

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Настоящая работа посвящена изучению особенностей отношения дошкольников от 5 до 7 лет к персонажам мультфильма. Гипотеза: с возрастом происходят существенные изменения в отношении ребенка к персонажам мультфильма, что проявляется как в увеличении использования детьми субъективных личностных оценок героев, так и в изменении структурных взаимосвязей между различными по своему содержанию личностными оценками персонажей у детей 5 лет и 6 лет. Выборка составила 60 детей от 5 до 7 лет: первая группа, условно 5 лет — 30 детей ($M = 65,6$ мес., $SD = 2,98$); вторая группа, условно 6 лет ($M = 79,0$ мес., $SD = 4,04$). В качестве материала исследования был использован мультфильм «Старая игрушка» (1971). Исследование включало просмотр данного мультфильма ребенком, после которого ему предлагалась модифицированная методика личностных конструкторов Дж. Келли. Результаты показали, что существуют различия в отношении к персонажам у детей 5 и 6 лет. Шестилетние дети используют субъективные личностные конструкторы чаще, чем объективные, и чаще опираются на взаимоотношения героев, обосновывая свои оценки. Кроме того, структура взаимосвязей субъективных личностных конструкторов различается у пяти- и шестилетних детей: для последних характерна связь этических оценок с действиями героев, в то время как дети пяти лет оценивают этичность персонажей в связи с их характеристиками. Полученные результаты позволяют сделать общие выводы о возрастных различиях в отношении к персонажам мультфильма у детей 5 и 6 лет.

Ключевые слова: мультфильмы, персонажи мультфильма, личностные конструкторы, отношение дошкольника, восприятие мультфильмов, понимание мультфильмов, дошкольный возраст.

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Introduction

The sociocultural environment of contemporary children is deeply influenced by pervasive media exposure. Studies indicate that children, on average, spend approximately 2.5 hours daily watching entertainment content, with cartoons comprising the majority of this viewing time [18; 26]. While much recent research on cartoons highlights their educational potential [23; 24; 28] and their ability to influence children's behavior [30; 33], there is limited exploration of how children perceive films and relate to cartoon characters, particularly within the preschool demographic.

Nevertheless, age-specific perceptions and attitudes toward films can serve as effective foundations for educational development [16]. Immersive engagement with art is known to prompt an internal restructuring of experiences for both children and adults [4; 5; 9; 11; 12; 20]. In this context, cartoons significantly shape children's worldviews and contribute to their understanding of personal experiences. This effect arises largely because young viewers often relate on-screen events, characters, and actions to their own lives [25; 27; 29; 30; 31; 33; 34]. However, due to the limited continuity in their perceptual abilities, preschoolers may find it challenging to establish emotional and meaningful connections with the film's space [19]. Accumulated exposure to artistic

experiences, coupled with *character engagement* and self-referential connections, aids children in navigating the film's narrative and developing aesthetic appreciation [3; 6]. Through engagement, the child is "included" in the narrative world, forming attachments to its characters. In A.A. Tarkovsky's words, the child enters the author's "flow of time" [32].

Notably, a viewer's perspective significantly influences their attitudes toward film characters [8]. For instance, studies on the formation of meaning in fiction perception, particularly those led by V.S. Sobkin, suggest that adopting a character's internal viewpoint enables viewers to examine the ethical and moral dimensions within character relationships [14; 15]. Moreover, research led by E.O. Smirnova has shown that understanding cartoons stimulates children's imagination, preparing them for subsequent role play [13], which is crucial in the preschool years.

The present study builds upon these insights, *aiming* to identify specific attitudes that preschoolers aged 5 and 6 hold toward cartoon characters.

Hypothesis: With age, significant changes occur in children's attitudes toward cartoon characters, manifested in increased use of subjective personal evaluations and shifts in the structural relationships between these evaluations, as evidenced in 5- and 6-year-olds.

Materials

The cartoon "The Old Toy" (1971; duration: 9:42) was used as exposition material. Script by V. Livanov, directed by V. Samsonov.

A detailed analysis of this cartoon's artistic features, examining both internal and external viewpoints (M.M. Bakhtin; Yu.Yu. Lotman; P.D. Uspensky), shows that the structural features of the film's narrative invites viewers to identify objectively with the Girl (external viewpoint) and subjectively with the Teddy Bear (internal viewpoint) [14; 15].

Method

Methodology. The study employed a modified version of J. Kelly's personal construct methodology, which aims to investigate the meaningful units for ascertaining the similarities and differences between objects [7]. This adapted approach in relation to the study of film perception has been used in a number of studies [10; 13; 17].

In the present study, the methodology was applied as follows [1]. 6 cards were prepared: 5 cards with cartoon characters (Girl, Teddy Bear, Doll, Clown, and Doggie) and a "You" card denoting the child. After watching the

cartoon, three cards were presented to the child in different combinations; the names of the characters on them were read out, and the question was asked: "Who will you put together and who will be set apart?" After the child had made their choice (combining 2 cards and setting 1 card apart) they were asked a clarifying question: "Why are they together? Why are they set apart?" The child's answers to these questions act as clarifying content criteria, referred to as *personal constructs* within this methodology.

The total number of all possible triadic card combinations is 20. Thus, each preschooler gave 20 triadic solutions, with all possible combinations of the different characters. There was no limit on the number of content criteria used by the subject in each triadic comparison. The order by which the different triads were presented to each child was randomized.

All resulting statements (personal constructs) on the triadic comparisons were coded on the following two bases. Objective criteria (constructs) defining similarities/differences: animals/people, animate/inanimate, toys/not toys, etc. Subjective criteria (constructs) defining similarities/differences: cheerful/sad, mean/not mean, etc.

Sampling. Sixty children participated in the study: 30 boys and 30 girls, aged 5 to 7 years (60 to 86 months).

The children were divided into 2 age groups:

Group 1 – 14 boys and 16 girls (46.7% and 53.3%) aged 60 to 72 months (M=65.6, SD=2.98); referred to as the *age 5 group*.

Group 2 – 14 girls and 16 boys (46.7% and 53.3%) aged 73 to 86 months (M=79.0, SD=4.04); referred to as the *age 6 group*.

Study location and procedure. The study was conducted in two kindergartens: Smart Team, a private kindergarten in Krasnogorsk and Kindergarten No. 1344 in Moscow. Each child was individually assessed in a separate room.

A voice recorder was used during the study. Each child was first shown the cartoon "The Old Toy" on a laptop. Then, they were tested using the personal constructs methodology by J. Kelly.

The data was mathematically processed using the Jamovi software. The distribution of choices was analyzed using the Chi-square criterion for independent samples, and Spearman's correlation analysis was employed to examine the structure of relationships between subjective personal constructs.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the correlation between the groups of objective and subjective personal constructs for preschoolers 5 and 6 years old.

Table 1
Peculiarities by age in the ratio of the groupings the preschoolers made for the objective and subjective personal constructs (%), n – number of responses

Constructs	5 year old, n=1126	6 year old, n=1188	Whole sample, n=2314
Objective	65.4%*	59.7%*	62.5%
Subjective	34.6%*	40.3%*	37.5%

* – differences between age groups are significant at the 0.05 level (z-criterion analysis for independent samples)

As shown in Table 1, younger children tend to use objective constructs (e.g., toy/person, animate/inanimate) more frequently, while older children increasingly rely on subjective constructs (e.g., cheerful/sad).

Since subjective evaluations are of such fundamental importance for understanding the psychological peculiarities with which preschoolers perceive cartoons, the following seven generalized structural semantic units differentiating the variants of subjective personal constructs were identified.

1. *Character traits*. This subgroup included statements related to the personal traits of the characters in the film and their emotional states, for example, “The Doll is mean”, “The Clown is loud”, “The Doggie likes to laugh”, “The Teddy Bear was sad”.

2. *The child’s reality*. This subgroup of constructs includes statements related to the children’s own world and the surrounding stimuli. For example, “I love doggies but I’m allergic.” “Because I want to get my sister a clown,” or “I have two doggies and lots of dolls.”

3. *Positive conflict resolution*. This subgroup includes statements related to the child’s desired (imagined) resolution of the conflict, e.g., “The Teddy Bear and the Doll will get married”, “The Girl and the Teddy Bear should be together”.

4. *The child’s attitude toward the character*. This subgroup includes statements related to the child’s expressed attitude to the cartoon characters: “I liked the Teddy

Bear” or “The Girl probably *doesn’t like* boys” (boy’s answer), “I want a teddy bear like the one in the film”, “the Teddy Bear is *the most important* character and is *cute*”, “I *don’t like* they way it chuckles” (about the Clown), “We would *help* each other if I were in the cartoon”.

5. *Relationships between characters*. This subgroup included statements related to the attitudes of the characters to one another: “The Teddy Bear and the Girl *were friends*” or “The Clown *loved* the Doll”, “The Girl *was happy to have the Clown*”, “The Doll *helped* the Teddy Bear”, “They *love each other*”.

6. *Action*. This subgroup includes statements reflecting directly on actions, e.g., “The Clown and the Girl *were together*”, “The Doll *is walking* the Doggie”.

7. *Ethical assessment*. This subgroup includes statements containing ethical assessments both about what was directly seen in the cartoon and indirectly related to it: “I want the Teddy Bear *to have a better companion* than he had in the Doggie”, “*the Teddy Bear needs someone*”.

In some cases, the children’s phrasing included not one but a number of statements: “The Teddy Bear was sad and thought that the Girl would not play with him, but that was wrong” (“Character traits” and “Ethical assessment” are combined here); “I can show him (the Clown) to my friends” (“The child’s attitude toward the character” and “Action”); “the Doggie can bite if you hit it, but if you don’t hit it, it won’t bite” (“Action” and “Ethical assessment”); “I like the Doll, but she gave the Teddy Bear a mirror, and he thought he was bad, he climbed on the roof, and then went to the park” (combined: “The child’s attitude toward the character”, “Ethical assessment” and “Action”). Such statements belong to several subgroups at once.

The findings were analyzed in relation to the frequency with which they were used among children in the two age groups (5 and 6 years) (see Table 2).

Across both age groups, constructs expressing *attitudes* toward cartoon characters are the most frequently

Table 2
Peculiarities in frequency of use of variants of subjective personal constructs in preschool children by age (%), n – number of responses

Subjective personal constructs	5 year old, n=390	6 year old, n=479	Whole sample, n=869
Character traits	19.2%*	13.4%*	16%
The child’s reality	9.5%	9.6%	9.5%
Positive conflict resolution	1%	0.0%	0.5%
The child’s attitude towards the character	40.5%	40.1%	40.3%
Relationships between characters	23.2%*	29.2%*	26.8%
Action	24.6%*	18.4%*	21.2%
Ethical grounds	4.4%	2.5%	3.3%

* – differences between age groups are significant at the 0.05 level (z-criterion analysis for independent samples).

used. Examples include statements such as “I didn’t like the Doll a bit”, “I like doggies, but not any girls”, “At least, I like the Teddy Bear, and the Teddy Bear likes me, so we like each other”. Children also commonly referenced relationships (“The Girl fell in love with the Clown”, “The Doll does not like doggies”), as well as their actions (“The Girl walks the Doggie”, “Because the Teddy Bear will give me berries”) and personal characteristics (“The Clown is unnecessary because all he can do is make others laugh”, “the Teddy Bear and the Doggie are friendly and nice”).

At the same time, the frequency with which they use the “Character traits” and “Action” constructs decreases markedly with age, while the use of the “Relationships between characters” construct increases markedly.

In addition to changes in the frequency with which they use subjective personal constructs, it can be assumed that the very nature of interrelations between

them or such personal constructs changes with age. In other words, the *structure* of the child viewer’s subjective attitude to the cartoon characters changes.

Correlation analysis of interrelations between different variants of subjective personal constructs using the Spearman coefficient revealed the peculiarities of such a structure in the two age groups (Tables 3, 4).

Table 3 shows that, in the structure of subjective personal constructs displayed by 5-year-old children, the “The child’s attitude toward the character” construct is directly related to the following constructs:

- “Actions”,
- “My reality”.

The “My reality” and “Actions” constructs are also interrelated.

A correlation was also found between the “Character traits” and “Ethical grounds” constructs.

The following structure of interrelations among subjective personal constructs was evinced in 6-year-old

Table 3

Intercorrelation coefficients for subjective personal constructs in the subgroup of 5-year-old children (n=390 responses)

Internal bases	My reality	Positive conflict resolution	The child’s attitude towards the character	Relationships between characters	Action	Ethical grounds
Character traits	r=0.205 p=0.277	r=0.077 p=0.685	r=-0.103 p=0.587	r=-0.154 p=0.416	r=0.090 p=0.637	r=0.370* p=0.044
My reality	—	r=-0.018 p=0.923	r=0.510** p=0.004	r=-0.138 p=0.465	r=0.466** p=0.009	r=-0.025 p=0.897
Positive conflict resolution	—	—	r=-0.201 p=0.286	r=0.231 p=0.220	r=0.109 p=0.568	r=-0.119 p=0.532
The child’s attitude towards the character	—	—	—	r=0.186 p=0.325	r=0.572*** p<0.001	r=0.054 p=0.776
Relationships between characters	—	—	—	—	r=0.180 p=0.342	r=0.024 p=0.900
Actions	—	—	—	—	—	r=0.031 p=0.872

* — p ≤ 0.05; ** — p ≤ 0.01; *** — p ≤ 0.001.

Table 4

Intercorrelation coefficients of subjective personal constructs for the subgroup of 6-year-old children (n=479 responses)

Internal bases	My reality	The child’s attitude towards the character	Relationships between characters	Action	Ethical grounds
Character traits	r=-0.128 p=0.501	r=0.066 p=0.729	r=0.489** p=0.006	r=0.165 p=0.384	r=0.088 p=0.645
My reality	—	r=0.448* p=0.013	r=-0.025 p=0.896	r=0.497** p=0.005	r=0.267 p=0.153
The child’s attitude towards the character	—	—	r=0.034 p=0.858	r=0.255 p=0.174	r=0.234 p=0.214
Relationships between characters	—	—	—	r=0.317 p=0.088	r=0.113 p=0.552
Actions	—	—	—	—	r=0.514** p=0.004

* — p ≤ 0.05; ** — p ≤ 0.01; *** — p ≤ 0.001.

children. “Actions” construct is directly related to the following constructs:

“Ethical grounds”,
“My reality”.

The “My reality” and “The child’s attitude toward the character” constructs, as well as “Character traits” and “Relationships between characters” are also inter-related.

Discussion

First of all, it should be noted that the results indicate that as the children age, the actualization of their orientations aligns exactly with their *subjective assessments of the characters* in the cartoon, which is consistent with similar results found in other studies [14; 15; 17]. This shift reflects key developmental traits in 6-year-old preschoolers, including an emerging capacity for reflection, an increasingly differentiated understanding of emotions, and a more robust internal agency and imagination. These qualities allow children to access deeper layers of meaning in media through their engagement with the emotional and interpersonal relationships of cartoon characters [19].

An age-related trend of note is the *increased frequency* with which 6-year-olds apply the “*Relationships between characters*” construct. In turn, this can be interpreted in terms of the specificities of age: the greater ability of six-year-old children to systematize thought [2], allowing the child to take simultaneously two or more attributes into account when ordering objects, thereby relying on the *correlation* thereof. This advanced cognitive ability enables children to reliably differentiate and categorize relationships within a social, rather than merely material, context. These social relationships become central to the child’s interests and are often expressed in role play. This stage aligns with D.B. Elkonin’s fourth level of play development, wherein a *child’s role is defined through a network of relational dynamics* [21]. In such a play, the most intense and creative plots can be observed due to the complex network of inter-role relationships. Obviously, the ability to “grasp relations” becomes reliable for the child when viewing an artistic work, including a cartoon. This helps to explain the increased use of the “Relationships between characters” personal construct as found in our study.

Another significant developmental marker in 6-year-olds, as opposed to 5-year-olds, is a shift in how they evaluate characters: while 5-year-old children link their ethical assessments of cartoon characters with their personal traits and emotional states (“The Clown is nice, he was cheerful”), for 6-year-old children, the ethicality of a character is manifested

primarily in actions or deeds. This age group becomes increasingly focused on whether a character performs good or bad deeds and how these actions impact others (“She gave the Teddy Bear a mirror, and he thought he wasn’t good and started climbing on the roof”). Here, the meaning of the character’s actions becomes central to the child’s moral judgment.

These findings reflect the age dynamics in the ethical and moral development of preschoolers. Thus, the ethical behavior of children under six years of age is primarily related to the ability to notice and correctly understand the emotional state of people and their characteristic features [22]. Meanwhile, their behavior is characterized by situationality, immediacy, and involuntariness. Taken together, these mental features lead to the fact that children can easily repeat someone else’s “wrong” behavior, even if they know how to do the “right” thing because the *rule* has not yet become determinative for them. Rather, personal traits and emotional states act as a reference point for them to build interaction with others. These attributes are clearly manifested, including in the play of five-year-old children, whose acceptance of roles is already based on social content, but the role-specific features are primary – appearance, behavioral traits, character, emotional states, etc. It is worth repeating that the moral and ethical behavior of children of this age is largely determined by their ability to distinguish all these *features in others*.

As for six-year-old children, for whom rules become a meaning-making aspect of personality, we can observe dramatic changes in their behavior and attitudes toward others. Above all, a child of six years of age shows a sharp increase in arbitrariness and behavioral mediation. A moral rule, as a kind of standard, becomes a means of regulating his own behavior. When they know how to behave, the children tend to do so. Note that it is at this age that most children begin to initiate simple rules-based games out of pleasure and are able to set them up completely independently. In a role play, the creation of a role is now determined by a system of relationships that are governed by common agreements (rules accepted by the participants in the game). The main measure of “good play” for a child of this age is the *truthfulness by which the role is portrayed*, which indicates the presence of a certain *pattern* the child consciously relies upon in his or her play. Thus, an ethical rule (a moral pattern) becomes a measure for evaluating both one’s own and the other’s behavior: while five-year-old children are guided in their evaluations by the various traits of the other, a *six-year-old child relies on actions or deeds to make a moral judgment*. This is clearly evident in our study when the actions of the characters in the film are linked to ethical assessments.

In summary, these results capture developmental distinctions between 5- and 6-year-olds, illustrating the significant shifts in how they perceive and relate to cartoon characters.

Conclusion

The study revealed a number of age-specific features in the attitudes of older preschoolers to cartoon characters. The findings may be of interest to researchers, psychologists, and educators concerned with children's perception and understanding of cartoons and other creative works, and may also be used to educate adults caring for children.

Our planned continuation of the present study is based on assumptions concerning children's attitudes toward characters depending on variations in their identification with them.

In general, the study allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. With age, the number of subjective personal constructs increases, which indicates the emerging actualization of the child's orientations to his or her subjective assessments of the characters in a cartoon.

2. Regarding watching cartoons, there is a transition between the ages of 5 and 6 from an ethical assessment of the character based on personal traits (kindness, being pest, good, etc.) to the perception of the character's actions as moral or ethical.

3. By the onset of primary school age, there are complex structural changes in the peculiarities of the child's personal attitude to characters on film, the basis of which is the comparison of the film's reality with the child's own, which causes the actualization of the child's sense of the boundary between the artistic space and his or her lived reality.

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