

# Morality demonstrated in stories can alter judgement for early adolescents

October 1 2021, by Bert Gambini

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An important lesson in the moral education of children could be as close as the book in their hands. Stories matter. And they can play a role in shifting the importance of particular moral values in young audiences, according to the results of a new study.

"Media can distinctly influence separate moral values and get kids to place more or less importance on those values depending on what is uniquely emphasized in that content," says Lindsay Hahn, Ph.D., an assistant professor of communication in the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences.

Hahn is first author of the new study, which adds critical nuance to a body of literature that explores how [media](#) content affects children. While many previous studies have focused on broad conceptualizations, like prosocial or antisocial effects that might be associated with specific content, Hahn's study looks at how exposure to content featuring specific moral values (care, fairness, loyalty and authority) might influence the weight kids place on those values.

Do children reading about particular moral characteristics absorb those traits as a building block for their own morality? The findings, which appear in the *Journal of Media Psychology*, suggest so, and further support how this indirect approach to socializing children's morality can supplement the direct teaching of moral principles kids might receive through formal instruction.

"Parents, caregivers and teachers are often wondering how media can be used for good," says Hahn, an expert in media psychology and media effects. "How can it be used for good things? How can it discourage bad habits? How can it educate?"

Answering those questions begins with a better understanding about how to use media.

"When parents are considering what media they might want to select for their children, they can take into account what particular moral value is being emphasized by the main character, and how the main character is treated because of those actions," she says.

For the study, Hahn and her colleagues took the main character from a young adult novel and edited the content to reflect in each version the study's focus on one of four moral values. A fifth version was manipulated in a way that featured an amoral main character. Those narratives were shared with roughly 200 participants between the ages of 10 and 14. This is a favorable range for media research because it's more difficult to introduce narrative comprehension in younger kids, while equally challenging to hold the attention of older adolescents, who become bored with rudimentary storylines, according to Hahn.

The team then created a scale designed to measure the importance kids place on moral values to determine how participants might be influenced by specific narratives.

"Measuring these effects can be difficult," says Hahn. "That's why, in addition to testing our hypothesis, another purpose of this research was to develop a measure of moral values for kids. Nothing like that exists yet, that we know of."

That measure, notes Hahn, can facilitate future research on media

effects in young audiences.

Paper co-authors include Ron Tamborini, Michigan State University (MSU) professor of communication; Sujay Prabhu, an MSU affiliate; Clare Grall, Dartmouth College postdoctoral researcher; Eric Novotny, University of Georgia postdoctoral researcher; and Brian Klebig, Bethany Lutheran College associate professor of communication.

**More information:** Lindsay Hahn et al, Narrative Media's Emphasis on Distinct Moral Intuitions Alters Early Adolescents' Judgments, *Journal of Media Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1027/1864-1105/a000307](https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000307)

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