

Cookie Monster teaches self-control

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Who would have thought a Sesame Street video starring the Cookie Monster, of all characters, could teach preschoolers self-control?

But that's exactly what Deborah Linebarger, an associate professor in the University of Iowa College of Education's Department of Teaching and Learning, found when she studied a group of preschoolers who watched videos of Cookie Monster practicing ways to control his desire to eat a bowl of chocolate chip cookies.

"Me want it," Cookie Monster sings in one video. "But me wait."

In fact, preschoolers who viewed the Cookie Monster video were able to wait four minutes longer than their peers who watched an unrelated Sesame Street video. They were also better able to control the impulse to shout out character names and to remember and repeat back longer number sequences.

Linebarger says learning to master these executive functioning skills are critical to school readiness.

"A formal school situation requires that children control impulses, follow directions, transit smoothly between activities, and focus on relevant task information," she says. "These skills also predict other academic skills including reading, math, and science."

Linebarger presented the findings of her study Nov. 10 during the London International Conference on Education. The results of the study, which was funded by a grant from the Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind the Sesame Street television program, have not yet been published.

The study involved 59 preschool children who were recruited from six child-care centers in and around a small city in the Midwest. The study involved a new curriculum developed by Sesame Street that features Cookie Monster and is designed to teach preschoolers executive function skills such as self-control, working memory and switching gears between activities.

"These are the nonacademic skills that help make a child successful at school," Linebarger says. "They help children manage their behavior, sit still and pay attention."

The children in Linebarger's study were first shown one of two five-minute video: Cookie Monster being taught to listen, remember and control his desire to eat cookies, or Murray being led through a series of clues to figure out where he and Little Lamb were going to visit. After that, the children were given DVDs to view at home for three weeks which followed the same storyline as the first video they watched.

Kindergarten teachers report that more than half of children entering school suffer deficits in these areas.