The stuffed animal sleepover: enhancement of reading and the duration of the effect

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Abstract

Stuffed animal sleepover programs have been conducted by libraries worldwide. This study sought to (1) determine whether the stuffed animal sleepover program increased children’s reading and (2) examine the duration of the effect. Forty-two children who attended preschool participated in the study. The results indicated that the number of children who read picture books to stuffed animals increased following the program, but the program’s effect decreased within three days. One month later, the children were reminded of the stuffed animal sleepover program. The number of children who read picture books to stuffed animals increased again after the reminder. The results suggest that (1) stuffed animal sleepover programs can positively affect children’s reading of picture books, (2) the duration of the program’s effect can be short, and (3) reminding children of the program can be an effective strategy to revive and sustain their interest in picture books. These results are discussed in terms of the psychological characteristics of childhood.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, stuffed animal sleepover programs have attracted increasing international attention. The primary feature of the program is the use of children’s stuffed animals to increase reading among children. The stuffed animal sleepover program originated in a library in Pennsylvania in 2007 and quickly spread to libraries across the globe (for an example, see the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, McMahon, 2007). However, despite the popularity of the program, scientific evidence regarding its effect on children’s reading has not been provided to date. This study on the stuffed animal sleepover program addresses this void by providing evidence that the program does positively affect children’s reading behaviors.

Although the procedures and purposes of stuffed animal sleepover programs vary slightly, depending on the host library, they do share key procedures. On the first day, each child brings his/her own stuffed animal to the library and entrusts it to the library staff. Once the children leave, the staff and volunteers take photographs of the stuffed animals engaging in various activities in the library. For example, in one photograph, the stuffed animals explore the inside of the library and read a picture book with other stuffed animals. The following day, the children collect their stuffed animals and the photographs showing their activities during the night. The staff and volunteers then introduce picture books “selected” by their stuffed animals and tell the children that the stuffed animals have asked that the children read the picture books to them.

The stuffed animal sleepover program involves a fantastical worldview in which the stuffed animals move around a library at night. Children typically receive evidence regarding fantastical beings from diverse cultural sources; therefore, fantasy is a pervasive component of childhood (Clark, 1995). Children are qualitatively different from adults, in that they live in a fantasy world and exhibit high levels of credulity (Dawkins, 1995; Samuels and Taylor, 1994; Taylor and Howell, 1972). Indeed, in early childhood, the distinction between fantasy and reality is not as clear as it is in adulthood (Bunce and Harris, 2008; Martarelli et al., 2015; Skolnick and Bloom, 2006). The effect of the program can depend on whether children distinguish between fantasy and reality. Young children have been thought to confuse fantasy with reality (Piaget, 1930). However, the results of previous studies have clarified children’s distinction between fantasy and reality by developmental stage. From 3 to 4 years of age, children begin to explore fantasy and distinguish between the appearance of reality and actual reality (Flavell et al., 1983). The ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality develops fully by the time children reach 7 to 8 years of age (DiLalla and Watson, 1988; Martarelli and Mast, 2013; Morison and Gardner, 1978). Therefore, young children who are at least 3 to 4 years old are likely to be open to a fantasy world in which stuffed
animals read picture books with others at night. However, there is no definitive evidence indicating that the stuffed animal sleepover program affects children’s reading.

1.1. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to determine whether the stuffed animal sleepover program would promote reading among children. The effect of the program was measured by counting the number of children who read stuffed animal picture books before and after the program. If the stuffed animal sleepover program triggered children’s motivation for reading, the number of children who read the stuffed animals picture books was expected to increase subsequent to the program.

1.2. Study 2

The effect of the stuffed animal sleepover program was no longer present three days after the initial intervention (Study 1). This result suggested that a means of sustaining the increase in the number of children who read the picture books subsequent to the program was required. This study examined the effect of reminding the children about the stuffed animal sleepover program as an effective strategy. Reminding the children about the stuffed animal sleepover program was intended to jog their memories that the stuffed animals had asked them to read the picture books. Study 2 sought to determine whether reminders about the stuffed animal sleepover program would trigger the children’s motivation to read again, and thereby, increase the number of readers to the stuffed animals.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study 1

2.1.1. Participants

An advertisement was sent to each preschool in the cities of Okayama Prefecture to recruit participants. In the announcement, we asked two classrooms in a public preschool to participate in the study. The classes consisted of 42 preschool children (27 boys and 15 girls) with a mean age of 65.2 months (SD = 7.0 months). All of the children in the classes participated in the stuffed animal sleepover program.

One month before the program, parents of the participating children were informed that the teachers agreed with the implementation of the program. The preschool teachers provided details to the parents about the stuffed animal sleepover program via a letter. The parents were assured that the confidentiality of their children’s personal information would be protected. All of the parents agreed to allow their children to participate in the stuffed animal sleepover program through verbal informed consent.
Parents were asked to avoid talking about the program to minimize the possibility of contributing to the study’s effects on their children, other than those intended by the program. In particular, parents were carefully requested not to tell their children that a stuffed animal cannot move and play at night, emerge from picture books, or write letters during the program. Moreover, if children asked their parents whether a stuffed animal could do any of those things, the parents were instructed to tell them “it may be possible.”

2.1.2. Stuffed animals

Thirteen stuffed animals were given to the preschool to ensure equivalent opportunities for the children to develop attachments to the stuffed animals because some of the children did not have their own stuffed animals. The children were not permitted to take the stuffed animals home with them. The stuffed animal sleepover program began after the children had formed attachments to the stuffed animals. The teachers in the preschool checked the children for the presence of the following behaviors: (a) walk with a stuffed animal in the preschool, (b) play pretend with a stuffed animal, (c) make a home with woodblocks for stuffed animals, (d) look for the stuffed animals immediately after arriving at the preschool, and (e) always want to keep a stuffed animal at hand. We determined that a child had formed an attachment to the stuffed animals when at least two of the behaviors were observed to be repeated by the child. It took approximately 30 days to confirm that all of the children exhibited the behaviors.

2.1.3. Procedure

At the preschool, the children discovered thirteen stuffed animals and a letter stating that the stuffed animals had emerged from picture books during the previous night, to play with the children. The stuffed animals represented characters from the picture books that the preschool teachers had read to the children the previous day.

After confirming that the children had formed attachments to the stuffed animals, staff members ensured that the children discovered an envelope addressed to the stuffed animals containing an invitation to a book-night party and photographs of the party. The stuffed animal sleepover was introduced as “the book-night party” because it seemed to be a term that would help the children to imagine the event more easily. The invitation provided a map and details regarding the book-night party. The book-night party was described as an event in which only stuffed animals could participate, and the invitation explained that they would read picture books together at night. In addition, a sign was marked on the map, indicating the location of the bookstore nearest to the preschool. The stuffed animal sleepover program is typically conducted in a library. However, in the current study, the
program was conducted in a bookstore to ensure the shortest distance from the preschool to the venue because of traffic safety. There was no public library within walking distance of the preschool. Moreover, the programs in other locations have been conducted in bookstores as well as libraries. In addition, the number of books and sizes of the sitting areas in the bookstore and the nearest public library did not differ markedly. The teachers asked the children’s permission to allow the stuffed animals to participate in the book-night party, and all of the children agreed.

The stuffed animal sleepover program was implemented in the children’s reading area of the bookstore. The children brought the thirteen stuffed animals to the children’s reading area. Then, staff members read two picture books, which included both fantastical and magical stories to the children and their stuffed animals. The children then put their stuffed animals to sleep. The staff told the children that the stuffed animals were going to go on an expedition that night.

Once the children had gone, the staff members took photographs of the stuffed animals engaging in various activities. For example, the stuffed animals climbed bookshelves, encountered other stuffed animals, and hid behind bookshelves if adults came. The stuffed animals explored the inside of the bookstore and, finally, arrived at the picture books area in the bookstore (Fig. 1).

The following day, the children visited the children’s reading area of the bookstore to collect their stuffed animals and receive photographs showing their animals’ activities during the previous night. In addition, the staff members told each child that his or her stuffed animal’s request was as follows: “At least once in a while, I would like you to read some picture books to me.”

2.1.4. Measures

At the end of the stuffed animal sleepover, we told the children that the stuffed animals had asked that they read the picture books to them. Therefore, the number of children who read picture books to their stuffed animals was recorded. The measurement was conducted during free playtime at the preschool. When the children spent time reading without a stuffed animal, this behavior was not counted because it was not known whether the reading was affected by the stuffed animal sleepover program. The free playtime lasted 90 min and began after lunch (13:00) until it was time to go home (14:30). Home-based reading was excluded because we did not allow children to take the stuffed animals home. In addition, passive reading, such as being read to by an adult, was not counted. Staff members who were unaware of the study’s purpose recorded the number of the children who read before and after the stuffed animal sleepover program. The numbers of readers subsequent to the stuffed animal sleepover program were measured at three time points: one day, three days, and one month after the program, to examine the duration of the program’s effect.
2.2. Study 2

2.2.1. Participants

The 42 preschool children who participated in Study 1 also participated in Study 2.

2.2.2. Procedure

The intervention was implemented one month subsequent to the stuffed animal sleepover program. The thirteen stuffed animals had remained at the preschool since the implementation of the program. The teachers at the preschool hid the thirteen stuffed animals on the evening preceding implementation of the intervention. The children noticed that the stuffed animals were missing, and the teachers asked them where they thought the stuffed animals were. When one of the children suggested that the stuffed animals had attended another book-night party,
one of the teachers proposed that they should wait for the stuffed animals to return to the preschool. The children agreed with the suggestion.

The following morning, the teachers ensured that the children found the stuffed animals at the preschool, and showed them photographs of the stuffed animals’ activities during the previous night. The photographs were those taken during the stuffed animal sleepover program and were used as cues to remind the children about the program. The children were asked questions about the photographs (e.g., “What did the stuffed animals in the photograph do?” and “Which picture book did the stuffed animals read?”). The children were permitted to answer the questions freely and enjoy imagining what the stuffed animals had done. However, the teachers did not refer to the stuffed animals’ request for storytelling.

2.2.3. Measures

The study was conducted during free playtime at the preschool. The number of children who read the picture books to the stuffed animals was recorded in accordance with the procedures for Study 1. The staff members who were unaware of the study’s purpose recorded the number of children who read to the stuffed animals before and after the intervention.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Study 1

There were bookshelves full of picture books in the preschool. Children were able to go to the bookshelves during free playtime. The preschool valued the autonomy of the individual children and did not require them to read picture books. However, the children did not spend time reading during free playtime, before the stuffed animal sleepover program, and most of the children went to playground during free playtime. After the stuffed animal sleepover program, the children picked a picture book and read it to a stuffed animal spontaneously, when they found a stuffed animal in the classroom. Then they placed the stuffed animal back on the shelf and engaged in another play activity after the reading was finished. The children’s play changed frequently from one activity to another and moved from room to room and the athletic field during free playtime. The reading durations were short, so that there was never a lack of stuffed animals. Therefore, reading without a stuffed animal never occurred during free playtime. Indeed, the type of play in which the children engaged at the preschool varied. During free playtime, the children not only read picture books to stuffed animals but also played with other children in the playground. In addition, confusion between reality and fantasy after participating in the program was not reported by the teachers or parents.
Fig. 2 shows the numbers of children who read picture books to the stuffed animals before and after the stuffed animal sleepover program. The numbers of readers increased immediately following the stuffed animal sleepover program but decreased three days later ($\chi^2(2) = 30.8$, Cramer’s $V = .50$, $p < .01$). Moreover, the residual analysis showed that the number of children who read picture books to the stuffed animals was significantly higher, relative to the number of those who did not read to the stuffed animals, but only at the first time point ($p < .01$). In contrast, the number of children who did not read books to the stuffed animals was higher, relative to that of those who read books to the stuffed animals, both three days and one month later. This result indicated that the duration of the effect was not sustained three days after the stuffed animal sleepover program. It is important to note that no other reading intervention was implemented during the study period. Therefore, the effect can be interpreted as being the result solely of the stuffed animal sleepover program (i.e. without contamination). Stuffed animal sleepover programs have been conducted in bookstores as well as libraries. Therefore, the implications of the effect of our stuffed animal sleepover program are applicable to libraries.

3.2. Study 2

Fig. 3 shows the numbers of children who read picture books to the stuffed animals before and after the reminder about the stuffed animal sleepover program. The results of a chi-square test indicated that the number of children who read to the stuffed animals subsequent to the reminder was significantly higher relative to the number of those who read to the stuffed animals prior to the reminder ($\chi^2(1) = 9.34$, $\phi = .33$, $p < .01$). This result indicates that the reminder about the stuffed animal sleepover program increased the number of children who read to the stuffed
animals, suggesting that the increase could be sustained. In particular, the photographs and conversations about the book-night party captured the children’s imagination. They reminded the children not only about the stuffed animal sleepover program, but also that the stuffed animals had asked them to read the picture books, even though their requests were never mentioned.

### 3.3. General discussion

This study examined the effect of the stuffed animal sleepover program on children’s reading to the stuffed animals. Given the scarcity of scientific evidence regarding this issue, despite the fact that libraries worldwide have put this program into practice, we investigated the effects of the program empirically. This was the first study to provide evidence demonstrating a positive effect of the stuffed animal sleepover program.

The results indicate that the stuffed animal sleepover program exerted a significant effect on the number of children who read to the stuffed animals. It is important to note that the children did not participate in other reading interventions during the stuffed animal sleepover program. Therefore, the findings exclude the possibility that the results occurred because of carry-over or synergistic effects of other programs. Moreover, communication between the parents and their children did not affect the results of the study, as discussion regarding the stuffed animal sleepover program was controlled. The study’s results suggest that stuffed animal sleepover programs conducted in libraries worldwide might increase reading among children. Moreover, our study provides a basis for further research to examine other reading programs’ effectiveness in increasing children’s interest in picture books, relative to the standard program, which follows the procedures that are implemented mostly by libraries. It was important for the children in this study
to become emotionally attached to the stuffed animals because the program is based on the assumption that this attachment is present. Gjersoe et al. (2015) suggest that children’s attributions of mental lives to inanimate objects depend on their emotional attachment to the objects. Therefore, it was particularly important that the children in this study were emotionally attached to the stuffed animals in the stuffed animal sleepover program.

Furthermore, our results raised a new question with regard to the effects observed: Which types of children are affected? Two psychological features present in childhood could provide an answer to this question. First, children with high levels of fantasy orientation would believe in the stuffed animal sleepover program more strongly relative to those with low levels. Thus, future studies should include a measure of fantasy orientation to determine whether children who increase their time spent reading to the stuffed animals also exhibit high levels of fantasy orientation. Fantasy orientation has been measured using questions, interviews, and tasks. For example, Woolley et al. (2004) examined measures of fantasy orientation from previous studies. In studies using questions and interviews (Singer and Singer, 1981; Singer and Singer, 1990), children were asked about their favorite toy. The responses that had a clear fantastical element (e.g., unicorn) were considered high fantasy (scored as 1), but those that had no fantastical element (e.g., train) were considered low fantasy (scored as 0). In interviews of children, Taylor and Carlson (1997) asked them if they had ever pretended to be someone else, an animal, or a robot. Their responses were scored 1 for “yes” and 0 for “no.” Tasks to measure fantasy level (Taylor and Carlson, 1997) required children to select one of two toys: a “magical wand” or an alphabet puzzle. The selection of the “magical wand” was coded as high fantasy (scored as 1) and selection of the puzzle was coded as low fantasy (scored as 0). The children with the high scores on this task were considered to have a high fantasy orientation. Second, the children in this study were informed that the stuffed animals wanted them to read picture books to them. Therefore, it is possible that the children who read the picture books to the stuffed animals could pass theory of mind tasks easily. Theory of mind includes the ability to predict and interpret the actions of other agents in terms of their mental states (e.g., Lillard, 1993; Lillard and Kavanaugh, 2014). Previous studies have demonstrated a significant positive relationship between fantasy orientation and theory of mind (Martarelli et al., 2015; Taylor and Carlson, 1997). Therefore, further research should include the theory of mind task.

Third, the stuffed animal sleepover program should change children’s reading interests, which can be assessed by observing the types of books they select. Studies of reading interest mainly have investigated developmental changes in this area. For example, Gates (1947) proposed an eight-stage model. The children in the present study selected a picture book for a stuffed animal after participating in...
the program. Thus, the program should promote their reading interests in the future.

With respect to the duration of the effect, although the stuffed animal sleepover program increased the number of children who read to the stuffed animals, the effect of the program was no longer present three days later. However, the results of Study 2 indicated that reminding children about the stuffed animal sleepover program encouraged them to read picture books to the stuffed animals again. This suggests that the increases in the number of children who read to the stuffed animals because of the program can be sustained via relatively simple methods. In addition, Study 2 involved a considerable amount of conversation between the children and teachers. Therefore, it appears that conversation is important in promoting reading. It is noteworthy that the teachers encouraged the children to imagine what the stuffed animals had done when they disappeared from the preschool, and this encouraged the children to read picture books to the stuffed animals. The teachers’ encouragement of the children’s use of imagination could have been an important factor in sustaining the effect of the program. In addition, although the conversations occurred only during free playtime at the preschool in Study 2, it is possible that if parents are encouraged to talk about the stuffed animal sleepover at home, the duration of the effect can be extended. Parents often read picture books to young children. Although this is known to benefit their education (Isbell et al., 2004; Penno et al., 2002; Robbins and Ehri, 1994), it is difficult to determine how to encourage children to read voluntarily without an adult’s help. The program should contribute to the smooth transition from passive to active reading because the children read to the stuffed animals voluntarily, and the reading was unforced.

The study has some limitations. First, children’s reading habits could have affected the results. The program’s effect was expected to be weaker in children who habitually read books for a substantial proportion of the day. Reading habits refers to the extent to which a child interacts with books (Maynard, 2010) and is measured by the number of hours per week a child spends reading. The present study did not investigate the children’s reading habits. Further studies should measure this variable before children’s participation in the program.

Second, the study did not determine whether the children read the picture books to their own stuffed animals at home. Future studies should examine children’s reading habits at home and interview parents about their children’s home-based reading habits before and after the program.

Third, although the children appeared to read the stories in the picture books to the stuffed animals, we were not able to confirm whether they read words, because most of the children showed the picture books to the stuffed animals without uttering a word. It is essential to assess whether the children read words or not in
future studies. An investigation to confirm children’s reading ability (reading efficiency, including speed and comprehension) in future studies also would be useful (Perfetti, 1985). The reading ability of children in future studies should change after participating in the program after they repeatedly read picture books to stuffed animals.

Fourth, the effect of the stuffed animal sleepover program might differ between children in rural and urban settings. Their access to libraries and bookstores might be important. If there are no libraries or bookstores in an area where children live, the stuffed animal sleepover program might not have an effect because the program is based on the assumption that stuffed animals go to a library or a bookstore. Therefore, differences in the effects would be expected between children in rural and urban areas. Indeed, the stuffed animal sleepover program in this study was conducted in an urban context. Therefore, further studies should consider differences in these locations.

Stuffed animal sleepover program would be one of early reading education. The idea of early reading is pervasive in Japanese education. The stuffed animal sleepover program in Japan began to spread in 2010. The Book-Start-Program in the UK began in 2000, and this year, the educational system in Japan (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) adopted the “National Year of Reading for Children” program to promote reading. Japanese education does not officially emphasize early reading. However, there has been a wave of early reading programs, including the stuffed animal sleepover program in Japan, with activities conducted mainly by lay organizations. Despite the great popularity of the program, scientific evidence regarding its effect on children’s reading has not been provided to date. It is important to verify the effect of the stuffed animal program. Therefore, it is urgent that our country is aware of the effects of the stuffed animal program.

In conclusion, our findings showed that the stuffed animal sleepover program increased the number of children who read to the stuffed animals, and suggested that continuing to engage children in the make-believe world of their toys might be one method of sustaining their interest in early reading. These findings should help researchers and librarians develop stuffed animal sleepover programs that are more effective in enhancing children’s reading. Specifically, the evaluation method used in the study should allow researchers and librarians to improve the program and quantify the presence or absence of the intervention’s effects. The psychological characteristics of children that might be associated with the effectiveness of the stuffed animal sleepover program also require scientific investigation.
Declarations

Author contribution statement

Yoshihiro Okazaki: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Atsushi Asakawa: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data.

Ishii Kentaro: Analyzed and interpreted the data.

Yuki Yamada: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

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Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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