Testimony and Children's Learning from Storybooks: An Ongoing Study

Aubrey Clayton & Dr. Jacqueline Woolley, Ph.D.
University of Texas at Austin, Department of Psychology

Background

Testimony: personal anecdotal stories.
Religious testimony: relates to one's experience with God or the divine. Can function to make an abstract concept more relatable.
Reader's dilemma: the choice people make when they engage with media on what applies to reality and what is purely fantasy. Correctly solving this dilemma improves with age.

No current research on the use of testimony as a learning aid for children as they interpret the relevance of storybooks.

Research Questions

1.) Is a testimonial that relates to the moral of a story helpful for children in bridging the gap of the reader's dilemma for that story?

2.) Is testimony equally helpful for religious and realistic stories?

3.) Are children that regularly engage with religious stories better at learning morals from stories than children who do not?

Methods

- Currently recruiting a desired sample size of 100 children ages 5-6

- Children are read one reality-based story and one Biblically-inspired story and complete identical learning assessments after each story.

- Children in the Testimony Condition will be told a scripted first-person testimonial that engages with the intended moral of the story. Children in the Summary Condition are told a short summary of the story just read.

- **Learning assessments:** 8 T/F questions and 4 moral learning tasks
  - Moral learning tasks include identifying the moral of the story, selecting the moral of the story in new contexts, and generalizing the moral to a novel real-life scenario.
  - 8 possible points for memory and 4 possible points for moral learning (maximum composite learning score = 12)

- Parents complete a Family Religiosity Questionnaire that asks multiple-choice and open-ended questions about family engagement with religion and religious stories.
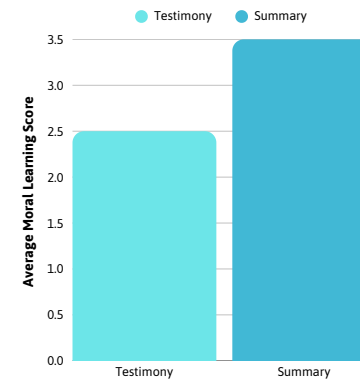
Results

Research Question 1
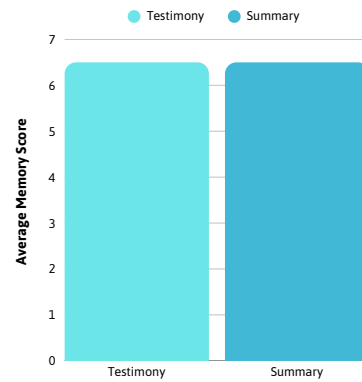
Memory Assessment Scores Between Conditions
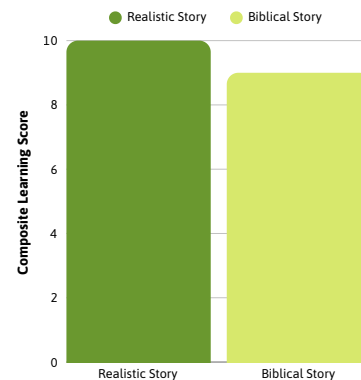*N=2 (1 in Testimony, 1 in Summary)*

No initial differences in memory scores.

Moral Assessment Scores Between Conditions
N=2 (1 in Testimony, 1 in Summary)

Initial pilot participants show Summary condition as slightly more successful on moral learning assessments.

### Research Question 2

Composite Learning Scores Between Story Types
N=2

Initial pilot participants show slightly better scores for learning assessments for Reality-based stories. Possible effects of religion will be investigated when larger sample size is obtained.

Stimuli

Participants were read two books: one reality-based and one Biblically-inspired story.

To control for variance in the storybook morals and possible ease of children learning one moral over another, children were administered either Book Set 1 or Book Set 2.
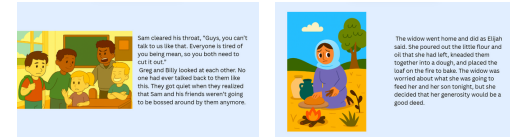
Book Set 1

Sam's School Project
Reality-based moral of standing up to bullies

Elijah and the Widow
Biblically-inspired moral of sharing

Book Set 2

Jack and the Book Fair
Reality-based moral of sharing

Deborah and the Big Battle
Biblically-inspired moral of standing up to bullies

Future Directions and Goals

- Data collection to continue into Spring 2026
- Recruiting through Children's Research Center at UT and local children's ministries and religious schools
- Future results to inform further research on children's learning from storybooks, moral learning, and possibilities of religious education methods in academic and secular contexts.