

# SEPCHE

## Nurturing Student Scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty-Student Undergraduate Research Project

### Faculty Proposal Additional Information

**Research Project: VALENCE OF BEHAVIOR AND CHARACTER DISPOSITION: INFLUENCES ON PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S SOCIAL JUDGMENTS OF HYPOTHETICAL CHARACTERS**

**Discipline: PSYCHOLOGY**

**Faculty Mentor: ELAINE F. JONES, Ph. D. Arcadia University, ([jonese@arcadia.edu](mailto:jonese@arcadia.edu))**

**Project Description:** During the summer 2008 Dr. Jones will conduct a research study with preschool children. The study will focus on the influences of valence of behavior (positive and negative) and character disposition (likes to be “nice” or “mean” to a friend) on children’s social judgments of story characters. Valence is an important judgment cue that even preschoolers use to differentiate the behavior of others. For example, studies have found that preschoolers judge positive behavior more favorably than negative behavior. I recently conducted a study on preschoolers’ use of information about valence of character disposition (“nice” or “mean”) and found that “nice” characters received more favorable moral and liking judgments than “mean” characters. Also, children made consequence of behavior judgments (reward or punishment) and judged that “nice” characters should receive a reward but children were neutral (no reward or punishment) when judging “mean” characters. However, children’s differentiation of characters by disposition was influenced by behavior valence. Specifically, information about character disposition had less influence on children’s judgments given negative behaviors (e.g., pushing and verbal insult) than positive behaviors (e.g., sharing and helping).

The summer 2008 project is the next study on this topic. Female and male preschoolers (4-5 year olds) will be recruited from local day care centers. Children will be interviewed one at a time at their day care center. They will hear 4 scenarios about the behavior of different characters and see illustrations that depict the content of the scenarios. The scenarios feature characters interacting with a friend and the behaviors are either positive (helping the friend pick up toys, sharing a book with the friend) or negative (telling the friend a drawing looks bad, or pushing the friend to the ground). The scenarios also describe the characters’ disposition, namely likes to be “nice” or “mean” to the friend.

**Student Task(s):** The students will learn various aspects of conducting research with children. Because the project entails interaction with children, the students will need to apply for state level clearances, specifically child abuse check and criminal background check, to work on this research project. Thus, the students will obtain proper clearances by June 2008. They will complete readings related to the project, including a review of ethical guidelines established by child developmental researchers. They will receive training to conduct interviews with preschool children for the purposes of data collection. The interviews will be conducted at local day care centers/preschools, and the students will travel with the mentor to the sites. Also, the students will learn how to create a data file and enter data and will assist the mentor with data analyses using SPSS. The students and mentor will develop the presentation for the SEPCHE Fall 2008 Symposium.

**Student Time Commitment:** The project requires the students to be available during weekdays to interview children at child care centers/preschools. Students will need to be available 8 hours a day

2-3 days a week over 6 weeks. Training and data collection will likely require 3 weeks of time. The remaining time during the summer will be spent entering and analyzing data and discussing and preparing the fall presentation. There will be time for informal discussions about graduate school and career goals as well.

**Student Learning Outcome:** The primary learning outcome entails becoming familiar with the research process. Specific learning goals include (1) how to obtain clearances needed to interact with children for the purposes of data collection, (2) how to carefully follow data collection procedures, (3) how to use SPSS for the purposes of data entry and analysis, and (4) how to interpret and present research findings.

**Expected Student Product:** The students will complete a research study and have data to present at conferences, including the Fall 2008 SEPCHE Symposium and SEPCHE Honors Conference in 2009. Depending on the sample size and research findings, there may be opportunities for them to present the findings at psychological conferences such as The Society for Research in Child Development which will meet in spring 2009. Also, depending on the sample size and findings a journal article will be prepared and submitted for publication, with students as co-authors.

**Other Expected Outcomes:** Dr. Jones hopes that the summer research program will spark excitement and interest in graduate programs and careers in psychology and that the students aspire to obtain an advanced degree as an outcome of their experience in the summer research program.