

# CAMmer in the Spotlight

## Sandra L. Calvert, PhD

Georgetown University; Professor of Psychology, Director of the Children's Digital Media Center  
Contact: [calverts@georgetown.edu](mailto:calverts@georgetown.edu) / [personal website](#)

### Getting to know... Sandra Calvert

**What are you currently working on?** I am currently working on projects from two collaborative grants from the National Science Foundation that examine how children's emotionally tinged parasocial relationships with their favorite media characters influences their learning of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) concepts as well as how popular media characters influence children's food decisions. These interests have taken me into an exploration of children's play with plush and/or personalized media characters to develop parasocial relationships with those characters, building a prototype of a popular intelligent character to teach an early math skill, and using apps that involve popular media characters to influence children's food choices. Most of my recent papers can be accessed at our [website](#).



**What has been your most memorable project so far, and why?** My most memorable recent project involves toddlers' learning from a video when participants had been previously familiarized with an interactive plush toy dog that was personalized to be similar to them or not. In the personalized condition, toddlers received a plush dog that was the same gender as them and who was programmed to call the child by name and to have similar interests as the child for a favorite food, song, and color when the child interacted with the toy by pressing its paws. Toddlers in a non-personalized condition played with an interactive toy dog of the opposite gender, which had been programmed to call the child "pal" and which had been randomly programmed for favorite foods, songs, and colors. Children were familiarized

with either this personalized or non-personalized character between 18-21 months of age. A control group received no exposure to either interactive toy. Toddlers' learning of a seriation task that was presented onscreen was higher if they had seen the personalized character perform the task onscreen when compared to toddlers in the no exposure control group; that was not true for those who were familiarized with the non-personalized character. Play sessions with these characters were also scored for nurturing behaviors (e.g., putting them to bed; feeding them) indicative of an emotionally tinged parasocial relationship. Growth curve analyses revealed that only toddlers who interacted with a personalized character demonstrated a significant increase in nurturing behaviors indicative of a parasocial relationship over time. This increase in these parasocial, nurturing behaviors was also positively correlated with better learning (Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2014). This project is particularly memorable to me because it grew out of two earlier studies in which we tied down what parasocial relationships are for young children. It also was about an interactive character, and set the stage for our next study in which we built a prototype of an intelligent

character. I enjoy building lines of studies over time that answer research questions.

**Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?**

I am most proud of being a co-founder of the Children's Digital Media Center, as it allows groups of scholars to come together and work on large scientific projects and questions of mutual interest, thereby moving our field forward.

**Dale Kunkel, the previous CAMmer, would like to know: How did your mentors influence you?**

Aletha Huston and John Wright were my mentors, and they influence everything that I do in my academic life. I admire their vision to look at media in a way that was always forward thinking and evolving. Both embodied curiosity and intellectual rigor in their scholarly work. They were a dynamic duo as scholars, as husband and wife, and as my mentors and friends.

**What would be your work motto?**

Go where no one has gone before you, and let curiosity be your guide.

**Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?** I have many favorite articles, some of them old favorites and some of them new ones. Of my recent scholarship, I like two the best. One is a handbook chapter that allowed me to explore children's digital media across a wide range of content. This particular handbook is published about once every ten years, and has been a staple in psychology for decades. I was honored to be part of that ongoing series.

The second article is one that I mentioned earlier (Calvert et al., 2014). It is an empirical article that focuses on how very young children form parasocial relationships with interactive characters and subsequently learn from them onscreen. The basis for developing close relationships with characters is personalization of the character in terms of knowing a child's name and having similar interests as the child. When children play with personalized characters in emotional ways, such as feeding them and putting them to bed, they create closer relationships with the characters and subsequently learn more from them. This study is a basis for my next focus on STEM learning, involving intelligent characters, so it paved the way to my future work.

**If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?**

I would expand the intelligent character project and make it automated so that children could use it on their own schedules and with their favorite characters as the interface. Intelligent characters, I believe, will revolutionize and transform our understanding of children's parasocial relationships with media characters as well as create new ways to educate our children through media interfaces.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?** Follow your dreams, be very curious, and be very bold!

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?** I would like to nominate Ellen Wartella. I'm curious to know what she would like her legacy to be in the field of children and media.