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Newsletter

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Outreach

Published: 05/11/2012
Summer 2012

Fear and Pooh at Paws-on Science

Two Psychology Department research labs participated in the [UW Paws-on Science](#) event at the Pacific Science Center on March 30-April 1, 2012. Close to 10,000 people attended the three-day outreach event which showcased almost 50 UW research groups.

Associate Professor Lori Zoellner and her research team from the [Center for Anxiety and Traumatic Stress](#) (UWCATS) engaged kids and parents in an exercise about emotional and physical responses to fear. Center's staff members Frank Farach, Travis Dennison, Janie Jun, Libby Marks, Helen Kinsel, Alissa Jerud, Jon Poquiz, and Larry Pruitt operated the booth over the weekend. The goal was to demonstrate how environmental information is used to make judgments and form expectations about ambiguous situations, and that fear is a combination of both reality and imagination. Kids and parents participated in a demonstration in which they were instructed to reach into a "mystery box" and guess, by touch alone, what was inside. Each box had fear-evoking pictures (e.g. a reptile bearing its teeth), on the front, while a non-fearful, but related object (e.g. a toy reptile), was placed inside. Visitors rated their fear levels before reaching into each of the boxes, which were discussed at the end of the exercise.



Photo: A brave toddler explores Associate Professor Lori Zoellner's booth on fear at PAWS on Science at the Pacific Science Center.

Center staff discussed how fear is an adaptive emotion, and that in ambiguous situations people often err on the side of caution (e.g. being anxious or afraid). The body's response to fear was also discussed (e.g. feeling your heart race), as were the learning processes involved. Staff members explained that these processes are universal, and described how these fearful interpretations of ambiguous situations can be especially problematic for individuals who have gone through traumatic experiences, as is the case for individuals suffering with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For those that were interested, information was available about PTSD and [no-cost PTSD treatment options](#) through a National Institute of Mental Health-funded research study going on at UWCATS.

Psychology Professor Randy Kyes and the affiliated [Center for Global Field Study](#) also participated in this event. The Center's exhibit "Animals and the Future" allowed children to learn about some of the

methods used to study animals in the wild and practice with some of the actual research equipment and techniques used in the field. These included radio telemetry, GPS, trap cameras, and biological sample collection. The exhibit demonstrated the close relationship between humans and the environment and how animals can provide the first indication of future environmental impact and global health issues. One of the exhibit activities that was a real hit involved a hands-on demonstration of primate fecal sample collection to look for intestinal parasites. As Center Director, Professor Kyes noted that no real fecal samples were used, but that the fake "pooh" attracted a lot of interest.



Photo: Professor Randy Kyes (rt) providing exhibit demonstration during the UW Paws-on-Science event