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Preschoolers sometimes seek help from socially engaged informants over competent ones



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ABSTRACT

The current studies examine whether children can selectively seek help from more competent others to solve simple problems. Across two experiments, 4- and 5-year-old children watched two adults demonstrate using a toy: one adult appeared competent but was socially unengaged, while the other appeared incompetent but was socially engaged. Children were then able to seek help from the adults while working with their own problem-solving toys. In Experiment 1, children appeared to seek help indiscriminately between the two adults. In Experiment 2, which had a more salient competence cue, children showed a statistically significant preference for questioning the socially engaged informant. For both experiments, children were able to remember post-test which adult demonstrated which characteristic, though they did not make strong inferences regarding future behaviors. This research demonstrates that preschool-aged children sometimes prefer to seek help from socially engaged sources, even if those sources may not be competent.

1. Introduction

From very early on in life, children prefer to learn from people who seem knowledgeable over people who do not. For instance, 14- to 24-month-olds respond differently to someone who is likely to know something (e.g., has previously labeled a familiar object correctly; has looked inside a box) compared to someone who is not knowledgeable (e.g., [Chow, Poulin-Dubois, & Lewis, 2008](#); [Koenig & Woodward, 2010](#)). Looking at slightly older children, 3- and 4-year-olds are more likely to learn object names and functions from someone who has correctly identified the objects in the past than someone who has not (e.g., [Koenig, Clément, & Harris, 2004](#)). Indeed, a number of studies have found that by age 4, children are quite successful at selectively learning from informants who are somehow *competent* (i.e., able to provide accurate information; e.g., experts on a topic, shown knowledge in the past) over those who are not (for reviews, see [Mills, 2013](#); [Sobel & Kushnir, 2013](#)).

In a real-world context, however, competency is only one of the many characteristics that people use when evaluating whether to trust informants' claims. In order to understand whether other characteristics sometimes trump competence in trust decisions, several recent studies have pitted two informants with different characteristics against each other. Some studies have focused on contrasting competence with stable, unchangeable characteristics of informants, like age and gender. In these studies, competency typically supersedes any previous preferences shown toward the stable characteristics ([Jaswal & Neely, 2006](#); [Taylor, 2013](#)). Other research has examined competency with other characteristics that may be more dynamic and susceptible to change, such as an informant's level of niceness or meanness. In this research, preschool-aged children frequently (but not always) prefer to learn words from a competent informant who is mean over an incompetent informant who is nice ([Johnston, Mills, & Landrum, 2015](#)). Although there

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are exceptions to this (e.g., Landrum, Mills, & Johnston, 2013), it seems that when competence and other characteristics are weighed against each other, preschool-aged children *tend* to prefer to trust based on competence.

Notably, however, much of the past selective trust research has involved experimental paradigms that focus on children responding to competing factual claims, such as determining the name of an object or deciding which expert best answered a question (e.g., Corriveau & Harris, 2009; Jaswal & Neely, 2006; Landrum et al., 2013; Brosseau-Liard & Birch, 2010; Pasquini, Corriveau, Koenig, & Harris, 2007). In everyday life, preschool children are likely to encounter other tasks that are less fact-based, such as how to complete a puzzle or how to recognize a pattern, and these problem-solving tasks can provide many opportunities for children to consult adults for help. Findings from past research indicating that children tend to prefer more competent informants over less competent ones may not apply when children are consulting adults for information in help-seeking situations. The current research investigates this issue.

Prior research examining help-seeking behaviors has focused on the circumstances under which children ask for help, whom they question, and how they ask. When it comes to deciding when to seek help, preschool-aged children most typically request help from others when they are faced with problems that they find challenging, either because of the inherent difficulty of the problems or because of weaknesses in their own skill set for those problems (Vredenburg & Kushnir, 2015). Regarding whom they question, preschool-aged children most often seek help from parents and teachers, though they also seek help from other adults and peers (Newman, 2000; see also Boehm, 1957; Edwards & Lewis, 1979). In regards to how they ask, they tend to use a combination of nonverbal and verbal strategies (Cooper, Marquis, & Ayers-Lopez, 1982), with young children sometimes preferring nonverbal strategies (Carpenter & Nagell, 1998) and becoming more capable of using verbal strategies, like questions, as they get older (Mills, Legare, Bills, & Mejias, 2010).

Although the above research demonstrates that children do sometimes seek help from others, little research has examined the specific characteristics of others that children attend to when seeking help. One characteristic that may be important is the aforementioned competence: children may be more inclined to seek help from others who have demonstrated competence in the past than from others who have demonstrated incompetence. Indeed, research in the selective trust domain supports this idea: when children are faced only with information about competence, children prefer to learn from more competent others (for review, see Mills, 2013).

Notably, though, another characteristic that may be particularly salient to young children when they are asking for help is whether someone appears socially engaged – i.e., provides indication of an interest in interacting with others. There are several behaviors that demonstrate positive social engagement, including maintaining some level of eye contact and using language that varies in prosody. Past research has indicated that when children do not have much other information to go on, they will attend to people who demonstrate positive social engagement over people who do not. Even 14-month-olds have been shown to follow the gaze of someone who was reliable when looking for a toy over someone who was unreliable, showing how important eye gaze from others can be when learning (Chow et al., 2008). Young children also prefer to learn from someone who displays confident body cues, such as open posture or nodding one's head, over less confident ones, such as closed posture or shaking one's head (Birch, Akmal, & Frampton, 2010). Indeed, these cues may be as integral to fostering a communicative context as the information transmitted (see Csibra & Gergely, 2009).

Although we know that preschool-aged children attend to the components of social engagement, little research has examined how preschool children weigh social engagement against other characteristics when deciding whom to trust. The most closely related study examined how 2- and 3-year-old children weigh these characteristics when seeking help in a problem-solving task. This study found that when competence and social engagement were inconsistent (i.e., a competent, unengaged informant was contrasted with an incompetent, engaged informant), children did not show help-seeking behavior preferences above chance for either informant (Cluver, Heyman, & Carver, 2013). In other words, two- and three-year-olds seemed pulled in multiple directions, not knowing whom to trust when one source seemed more competent and the other source seemed more socially engaged.

Perhaps one reason that 2- and 3-year-olds did not have stronger intuitions about whom to trust is that they appear to know less about competence than older children; indeed, other research suggests that in many situations, 4- and 5-year-old children *do* have intuitions about whom to trust, and their intuitions lead them to prefer competent informants over other kinds of informants (see Mills, 2013). Moreover, we know that 5- and 6-year-olds have been found to prefer to seek information from someone who gets them to the outcome that they would like, regardless of intentions (see Liu, Vanderbilt, & Heyman, 2013). Thus, perhaps 4- and 5-year-olds will focus on gathering information from a more competent informant, who is more likely to provide information leading to a successful outcome, than a socially engaged one.

The two experiments presented here varied the levels of competence and social engagement to better understand what matters most for preschool-aged children when seeking help for problem-solving. When confederates display competence and social engagement inconsistently (high levels of one with low levels of the other), we hypothesized that four- and five-year-old children will weigh competence as more salient, as indicated by a greater likelihood of seeking help from the confederate that displays high levels of competence and low levels of social engagement. We also hypothesized that children will show explicit recognition of these two informant characteristics, measured in this study with post-test questions.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Twenty-nine preschool children were recruited. Because three children did not receive permission to be videotaped, the total

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