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Children spontaneously police adults' transgressions



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ABSTRACT

Maintaining social order requires the policing of transgressions. Prior research suggests that policing emerges early in life, but little is known about children's engagement in such behavior in live interactions where there is uncertainty about the consequences. In this study, 4- to 11-year-old children ($N = 158$) witnessed an unfamiliar adult confederate intentionally destroy another adult's property. Of interest was whether children would engage in policing behavior by protesting to the transgressor or by spontaneously reporting the transgression to a third party. Some children engaged in these behaviors spontaneously; nearly half (42%) protested the transgression, and 27% reported it without being prompted. Even when children did not spontaneously report the transgression, they almost always reported it when asked directly. The findings show that children commonly engage in policing even in the face of potentially negative consequences.

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Introduction

Large-scale systems of cooperation and coordination among individuals who share minimal genetic relatedness are a unique and striking aspect of human societies (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Fehr & Gächter, 2002). The viability of these systems depends on their members abiding by their norms and, thus, can be threatened by individuals who seek to undermine them. Such threats are often

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addressed by imposing social costs for antisocial behavior (Henrich et al., 2006; Mathew & Boyd, 2011). However, for this to occur, there must be some system in place for monitoring and reporting on transgressions. Recent research provides evidence that an interest in helping to fulfill this role first emerges during early childhood (see Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). However, little is known about children's spontaneous policing in the context of live interactions with real people. The current research was designed to help fill this gap by examining children's responses to an adult's transgression.

One area of research that has addressed children's reasoning about rule violations involves moral evaluations of story characters who report on the transgressions of others (Chiu Loke, Heyman, Forgie, McCarthy, & Lee, 2011; Chiu Loke, Heyman, Itakura, Toriyama, & Lee, 2014; Kim, Harris, & Warneken, 2014; Lyon, Ahern, Malloy, & Quas, 2010). These studies have shown a developmental trend that begins during the preschool years in which children increasingly endorse the reporting of other children's transgressions. By around 8 years of age, children begin to evaluate the reporting of severe transgressions (e.g., deliberately pushing a classmate to the ground) more positively than the reporting of less severe transgressions (e.g., bringing the wrong size of paper for an art project). These findings are generally consistent with evidence that even young children appreciate that not all transgressions are equivalent (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2002; see also Tomasello & Vaish, 2013).

There is also evidence that children are willing to act on their concerns about others' transgressions. Observational studies of young children at home with siblings (Den Bak & Ross, 1996; Dunn & Munn, 1985) and in preschool (Ingram & Bering, 2010) suggest that they often report transgressions by siblings to their parents and report transgressions by peers to their teachers. This work shows that by 4 years of age children engage in such behaviors even when the transgressions do not directly affect them and there is no obvious self-interest at stake (e.g., a child with plenty of food reporting on a classmate who takes too much food at snack time). However, the fact that participants were interacting with highly familiar others raises questions about whether they might have been affected by the memory of previous transgressions (e.g., someone taking their food) and whether they might have been concerned about the possibility of transgressors repeating the behavior in the future (see Hawley & Geldhof, 2012, concerning strategically motivated moral behavior). It is also possible that children may be motivated to gain standing with important adults in their lives (e.g., to appear morally superior to the transgressor; see Dunn & Munn, 1985).

These observational studies also suggest that reporting on others in these contexts is unlikely to carry a significant social cost because parents and teachers typically do not reprimand children for providing information about wrongdoing of other children and instead tend to focus on the reported wrongdoing itself (Den Bak & Ross, 1996; Ingram & Bering, 2010). Thus, it seems unlikely that young children who are thinking about reporting on others would be concerned about potential retaliation or other negative outcomes in these contexts.

There has also been experimental work on children's responses toward transgressors. Most of this work has been conducted with children who watch puppets act out scenarios (Kenward & Östh, 2012; Rakoczy, 2008; Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009; see Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012, and Tomasello & Vaish, 2013, for reviews). This research has documented that by 3 years of age children actively police transgressions even when the transgressions do not personally affect them. For example, Rossano and colleagues (2011) examined the responses of 2- and 3-year-olds who observed a puppet violate norms about property rights by taking or throwing away an item of clothing that belonged to someone else. The 3-year-olds in the experimental condition protested more when a puppet took or threw away someone else's clothing than did the children in a control condition who observed the puppet taking or throwing away his own clothing. Children's protests were often expressed using normative language such as "You can't do that. It's hers." In contrast, 2-year-olds tended to protest only when their own property was targeted.

Vaish and colleagues (2011) provided experimental evidence that children report on the transgressions of others. In that study, one puppet was shown destroying a picture or sculpture belonging to a puppet who was absent at the time. The 3-year old participants were more likely to report on the transgressor puppet (as well as to protest) under these circumstances than in a control condition where the transgressor puppet engaged in a victimless but otherwise similar act of property destruction.

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