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Brief Report

The opportunity to collaborate increases preschoolers' motivation for challenging tasks



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ABSTRACT

Collaborating on challenging endeavors is a foundation of human society. Recent research suggests that young children are not only motivated to cooperate with others—for instance, to help others accomplish their goals—but may also be motivated to collaborate with others—to pursue shared goals. However, a primary reason why collaboration is so important is because opportunities to collaborate can bring people together to work hard to overcome challenges. Two studies ($N = 70$) tested whether the collaborative nature of an activity itself can cause preschoolers to enjoy challenging tasks more and to persist longer on them. To isolate the psychological feeling of collaboration, we tested this hypothesis by manipulating purely psychological cues of collaboration; in all cases, children worked while physically alone. Both studies found that such cues substantially increased preschoolers' motivation on a challenging puzzle, including their persistence on and liking for the puzzle, relative to two non-collaborative control conditions. We suggest that an early emerging drive to engage in shared collaborative activities leads children to find collaborative activities to be intrinsically motivating. This may represent an important basis of motivation as children embark on formal schooling.

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Introduction

The tendency to collaborate—to work toward shared goals—is fundamental to human achievement, facilitating everything from everyday business and social transactions to the development of systems

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of math, science, and law (Asch, 1952; Axelrod, 1984; Tomasello, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Past research suggests that a drive to collaborate emerges early in life, motivating young children to engage in collaborative social games (Ross & Lollis, 1987; Warneken, Chen, & Tomasello, 2006). We hypothesized that if children have this drive, opportunities to collaborate with another child may inspire young children to work hard on and enjoy challenging tasks. Such a finding would suggest the early emergence of a mechanism that brings humans together to accomplish difficult tasks. Moreover, if this mechanism exists, cues of collaboration may facilitate children's learning and motivation as they begin formal schooling. To identify the causal effect of the experience of collaboration precisely, we tested whether this hypothesis holds even when the cues that signal the opportunity to collaborate are merely symbolic and children work physically alone.

Substantial evidence indicates that young children are motivated to engage in activities with others. For instance, 12-month-olds point informatively to make others aware of something new (Liszkowski, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2007) or to locate hidden objects (Liszkowski, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2008), and 14-month-olds imitate others' goal-directed actions (Meltzoff, 1995) and help others to achieve their goals (Over & Carpenter, 2009; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007). In addition, 2-year-olds are motivated to engage in collaborative social games (Ross & Lollis, 1987; Warneken et al., 2006), urging partners to continue participating even when they can accomplish the task alone (Warneken, Gräfenhain, & Tomasello, 2012).

These findings reflect a family of prosocial motives present early in life. For instance, young children are motivated both to help others—to prosocially facilitate another person's goal pursuit (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006)—and to collaborate—to work toward goals that are shared (Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). As an example of collaboration, 2- and 3-year-olds coordinate their actions to solve simple problems collaboratively; one child may manipulate a handle so another can retrieve an object for both children (Ashley & Tomasello, 1998; Brownell & Carriger, 1990). Suggesting that this behavior relies on the ability to pursue shared goals in a coordinated fashion, the better 2-year-olds understand their own and others' goals (measured by facility with joint attention and language about self and other), the better they coordinate their actions (Brownell, Ramani, & Zerwas, 2006). Notably, collaboration involves helping; people help one another achieve a joint goal. But collaboration goes beyond helping in that people represent the goal as shared and may pursue this goal in their private behavior without overt requests for help (e.g., Carr & Walton, 2013).

Human collaboration differs from related behavior in other primates. Chimpanzees, for instance, may work with others toward mutually beneficial endpoints, but only when it serves their individual interests and a cooperative partner is necessary for success (Warneken et al., 2006). Moreover, nonhuman primates generally do not expect the rewards of cooperative behavior to be shared equally, suggesting that they might not represent this behavior as in pursuit of shared goals (Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, & Tomasello, 2011).

We hypothesized that as the motivation to collaborate emerges during childhood, not only do children simply want to engage in collaborative activities (e.g., social games) for the sake of doing things "together" (see Tomasello, 2009; Warneken et al., 2012), but also that the collaborative nature of activities can make such activities more enjoyable and worthy of sustained pursuit. If this is the case, opportunities to collaborate may increase young children's motivation for challenging tasks. To test this hypothesis, the current studies assessed classic indexes of achievement motivation: freely chosen persistence on a challenging task and reported enjoyment of the task (see Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). We examined this hypothesis among 4- and 5-year-old children. Children of this age understand the perspectives and goals of others—factors that contribute to their ability to collaborate (Brownell et al., 2006). In addition, such children are about to enter formal schooling, where they will encounter more difficult academic challenges. Thus, identifying factors that can enhance children's motivation for challenging tasks at this age is critical.

To test the effect of opportunities to collaborate, we isolated the psychological experience of collaboration from its physical aspects (see Carr & Walton, 2013). This distinction is critical. If the power of collaboration lies fundamentally in the act of sharing and pursuing a joint goal and this makes tasks more appealing in and of themselves, this should be evident even when the collaborative partner is absent from the child's physical environment and the cues that signal that the activity is collaborative are only symbolic. In contrast, if collaboration is motivating only because of its physical aspects—such

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