



# Young children's interpersonal trust consistency as a predictor of future school adjustment<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Young children's interpersonal trust consistency was examined as a predictor of future school adjustment. One hundred and ninety two (95 male and 97 female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 6$  years 2 months,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 6$  months) children from school years 1 and 2 in the United Kingdom were tested twice over one year. Children completed measures of peer trust and school adjustment and teachers completed the Short-Form Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment. Longitudinal quadratic relationships emerged between consistency of children's peer trust beliefs and peer-reported trustworthiness and school adjustment and these varied according to social group, facet of trust, and indicator of school adjustment. The findings support the conclusion that interpersonal trust consistency, especially for secret-keeping, predicts aspects of young children's school adjustment.

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Trust is a multifaceted phenomenon representing the propensity to believe that the actions, words, or behaviours of an individual or group can be relied upon (Rotenberg, 1994, 2010; Rotter, 1967; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Consequently, trust has been regarded as the 'glue' needed to form and maintain social relationships (Rotenberg, 1994, 2010). From a developmental perspective, the emergence of trust is regarded as a crucial developmental stage (Erikson, 1963), with children from the age of three relying on trust for knowledge acquisition (Harris, 2007). Therefore, the role of trust and the importance of trust across the lifespan have been examined by researchers.

The propensity to trust others, and to engage in trustworthy behaviour, is associated with psychosocial adjustment (Bernath & Feshbach, 1995; Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005; Rotenberg, MacDonald, & King, 2004; Rotenberg, McDougall, et al., 2004) and school adjustment during childhood (Betts & Rotenberg, 2007a; Betts, Rotenberg, & Trueman, 2009; Rotenberg, Michalik, Eisenberg, & Betts, 2008; Rotenberg et al., 2010). The likely mechanism that underpins these relations is that trust and trustworthiness facilitate the development

of peer relationships which, in turn, aid positive school adjustment (Betts & Rotenberg, 2007a). However, whilst the role and importance of trust and trustworthiness for social relationships and psychosocial adjustment are widely acknowledged (Rotenberg, 1991, 1994, 2010; Rotter, 1971, 1980), researchers have only recently begun to explore the relation between an individual's trust beliefs and their trustworthiness termed interpersonal trust consistency (Rotenberg & Boulton, 2012). The current study extended this line of research and examined the extent to which interpersonal trust consistency predicted school adjustment over a year in five- to eight-year-olds.

Interpersonal trust consistency reflects the extent to which there is coherence between an individual's trust beliefs in others and the individual's trustworthiness as reported by others (Rotenberg & Boulton, 2012). Drawing on Rotenberg's (1994, 2010) Bases, Domains, and Target framework of interpersonal trust, trust beliefs represent cognitions about, and confidence in, others to engage in trustworthy behaviours such as keeping promises, keeping secrets, telling the truth, and acting honestly. Trustworthiness represents the extent to which an individual engages in trustworthy behaviour that is observed by others such as keeping promises, keeping secrets, and telling the truth (Bussey & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Rotenberg, McDougall, et al., 2004). Trust beliefs and trustworthiness vary according to the target and domain of trust (see Rotenberg, 2010). In the current study, the domains of reliability and emotional trust were examined and operationalised as promise-keeping and secret-keeping respectively. These domains were selected because young children can readily understand these activities (Rotenberg et al., 2008). Further, evidence of the accuracy of preschool children's reports of promise-keeping and

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secret-keeping has been obtained using teacher reports of the same behaviour (Rotenberg et al., 2008).

As the emergence of trust is associated with attachment formation and internal working model refinement (Bridges, 2003; Szcześniak, Colaço, & Rondón, 2012), it is likely that from an early age children begin to make judgements about the extent to: (a) trust others and (b) which it is appropriate to engage in trustworthy behaviour. In support of this proposition, Harris (2007) reported that three- to four-year-olds were able to distinguish between a reliable information source and an unreliable information source in ambiguous situations. Preschool children also form impressions of an individual's trustworthiness based on the individual's previous actions and non-verbal endorsements from bystanders (Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Harris, 2007). Together, these studies indicate that not only do young children have an appreciation of the relation between trust and trustworthiness but that they also may use this information when determining who to trust.

Young children's peer relationships provide important socialisation opportunities (Martin et al., 2012), facilitate skill development (Kutnick & Kington, 2005), and promote psychosocial adjustment (Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). An appreciation of the relationship between trust and trustworthiness and the extent to which young children demonstrate interpersonal trust consistency may impact the development and maintenance of their peer relationships which, in turn, may influence their school adjustment. Further, due to the social learning aspects of trust, it is likely that young children who have low interpersonal trust consistency face challenges when they try to develop and maintain social relationships with their peers. Specifically, either displaying low trust beliefs and high levels of trustworthiness or high trust beliefs and low levels of trustworthiness would likely be regarded by other children as inconsistent with their expectations that high trustworthiness accompanies higher trust beliefs (Fusaro & Harris, 2008). Therefore, similar to other peer behaviours (Galvan, Spatzier, & Juvonen, 2011; Kwon & Lease, 2009; Nesdale & Dalton, 2011; Nesdale et al., 2009), peer groups may have embedded interpersonal trust consistency as a normative expectation. In support of this proposition, Rotenberg and Boulton (2012) reported that 9- to 11-year-olds with low interpersonal trust consistency, expressed as high trust beliefs in peers and low peer-reported trustworthiness, reported lower quality peer relationships. Specifically, children with lower interpersonal trust consistency experienced lower peer preference, higher peer victimization, and higher social disengagement in comparison to children with higher interpersonal trust consistency expressed as similar peer trust beliefs and peer-reported trustworthiness scores.

Similar to older children, young children who violate the normative expectation of their peer group with regard to interpersonal trust consistency are likely to experience poorer quality peer relationships which, in turn, may impact negatively on their adjustment. The longitudinal relations between young children's peer-reported trustworthiness and various indicators of school adjustment identified by Betts and Rotenberg (2007a) provided evidence that how young children are perceived by their peers impacts on their school adjustment. Therefore, because of the: significance of children's social relationships for subsequent adjustment (Hay et al., 2004); importance of trust for social relationship formation and maintenance (Rotenberg, 1994, 2010); and relation between trustworthiness and school adjustment (Betts & Rotenberg, 2007a), young children's interpersonal trust consistency is likely to be predictive of school adjustment.

School adjustment reflects the extent to which children are interested, engaged, and successful whilst at school (Ladd, 1996; Ladd, Buhs, & Troop, 2002). To reflect this multi-faceted definition, a range of indicators has been used to assess school adjustment including children's reports of their attitudes toward school and their affect in the classroom and teacher reports of children's classroom behaviour and performance (Ladd, 1996; Ladd et al., 2002). A similar approach was adopted in the current study. Positive peer relationships have been identified as a crucial antecedent in facilitating young children's

school adjustment (Hay et al., 2004; Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987). For example, developing positive peer relationships is associated with higher levels of school liking (Hughes & Zhang, 2007; Ladd & Coleman, 1997), higher academic performance (Bossart, Doumen, Buyse, & Verschueren, 2011), and lower levels of loneliness (Coplan, Closson, & Arbeau, 2007) during the early years of school. Further, both trust beliefs and trustworthiness predict children's school adjustment such that higher trust beliefs and higher levels of trustworthiness are predictive of successful school adjustment (Betts & Rotenberg, 2007a; Betts et al., 2009; Imber, 1973; Rotenberg, McDougall, et al., 2004). A sense of trust has also been identified as crucial for fostering a positive classroom community (Graff, 2003). Together, these studies reinforce the importance of trust beliefs and trustworthiness for school adjustment and provide support for Ladd and Kochenderfer's (1996) proposition that consideration of the role of young children's trust for successful school adjustment warrants exploration. However, whilst the importance of peer perceptions of trustworthiness for school adjustment has been established in previous research (Betts & Rotenberg, 2007a), the importance of interpersonal trust consistency for young children's school adjustment has yet to be systemically examined.

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that from around the age of three the propensity to form same-sex peer relationships is strong (Hay et al., 2004; Maccoby, 1988, 1990; Yee & Brown, 1994), the social groups that children form at school often reflect the institutionalised class structure determined by the school administration (Howe, 2010). Therefore, it is important to recognise that children's social relationships operate in the broader social context of the classroom (Maassen, van Boxtel, & Goossens, 2005) and that whilst differences may emerge between same-sex peer groups' and the class groups' behaviour, the role of these two social groups should not be overlooked (Bukowski, Gauze, Hoza, & Newcomb, 1993; Duncan & Cohen, 1995; Underwood, Schockner, & Hurley, 2001). Consequently, the present research explored interpersonal trust consistency for same-sex peers and class-wide peers as separate predictors of school adjustment. Same-sex peer groups comprised same-sex peers within a child's class and the class-wide peer groups comprised all peers within the class including both same-sex and other-sex peers.

The aim of the present study was to explore young children's interpersonal trust consistency for same-sex peers and class-wide peers as predictors of future school adjustment over a year. Two indices of trust and trustworthiness were examined in the present study: Promise-keeping and secret-keeping which reflect the reliability and emotional bases of Rotenberg's (1994, 2010) Bases, Domains, and Target framework, respectively. As trust beliefs and trustworthiness tend to be associated with young children's knowledge acquisition (Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Harris, 2007), and because of the importance of normative expectations for children's social interactions (Galvan et al., 2011; Kwon & Lease, 2009; Nesdale & Dalton, 2011; Nesdale et al., 2009), we explored the statistical nature of the relation between interpersonal trust consistency and school adjustment. Consequently, the present study used quadratic and linear regression as analytical techniques. Quadratic relations were expected with greater promise-keeping and secret-keeping interpersonal trust consistency (either trust beliefs exceeding trustworthiness or trustworthiness exceeding trust beliefs) predictive of higher school liking, on-task-classroom involvement, positive orientation, and maturity and lower loneliness. Further, it was expected that lower promise-keeping and secret-keeping interpersonal trust consistency would predict reduced school liking, on-task classroom involvement, positive orientation, and maturity, and greater loneliness over a year. Rotenberg and Boulton (2012) proposed that children with peer trust beliefs that exceed peer trustworthiness would be at greatest risk for developing poor peer relationships. Moreover, children with trust beliefs that exceeded their trustworthiness may be regarded as unreliable information sources (Fusaro & Harris, 2008; Harris, 2007) and this in turn

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