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# Young children mostly keep, and expect others to keep, their promises



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## ABSTRACT

Promises are speech acts that create an obligation to do the promised action. In three studies, we investigated whether 3- and 5-year-olds ( $N = 278$ ) understand the normative implications of promising in prosocial interactions. In Study 1, children helped a partner who promised to share stickers. When the partner failed to uphold the promise, 3- and 5-year-olds protested and referred to promise norms. In Study 2, when children in this same age range were asked to promise to continue a cleaning task—and they agreed—they persisted longer on the task and mentioned their obligation more frequently than without such a promise. They also persisted longer after a promise than after a cleaning reminder (Study 3). In prosocial interactions, thus, young children feel a normative obligation to keep their promises and expect others to keep their promises as well.

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## Introduction

Promises express commitments to future actions. Austin (1975) was the first to systematically describe promises as speech acts, highlighting that they are more than mere words but also a way

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of acting with words. In many societies, saying the words “I promise to do A” or simply “I will do A” under the appropriate circumstances creates an obligation to do A (Searle, 1969). Yet, what makes promises binding and people keep their word is debated among philosophers (Gilbert, 2011; Prichard, 2002; Rawls, 1955; Scanlon, 1990) as well as behavioral scientists (Charness & Dufwenberg, 2006; Ellingsen & Johannesson, 2004; Vanberg, 2008). Some theorists view promises as social practices that play an important role in sustaining social coordination and cooperation (Bicchieri, 2002; Hume, 1890; Lewis, 1969/2002); indeed, experimental work has overwhelmingly shown that rates of cooperation in social dilemmas increase substantially when participants promise each other to cooperate (Orbell, Van de Kragt, & Dawes, 1988; Ostrom, Walker, & Gardner, 1992; Sally, 1995).

Studies with children have found that (English-speaking) children begin to talk about commitments (“I will do it”) and produce promises from 4 to 5 years of age (Astington, 1988a; Diessel, 2004). At around the same age, children adjust their behavior following an adult’s request to promise; Han Chinese children were less likely to cheat in a competitive game after having promised to follow the rules (Heyman, Fu, Lin, Qian, & Lee, 2015), and North American children revealed transgressions (i.e., reported that they had played with a forbidden toy) more frequently after having promised to tell the truth (Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002). Yet, the effect of promises is more variable, and potentially more context specific, in children under 5 years of age: Heyman et al. (2015) found that promises did not reduce cheating rates in 4-year-olds in a competitive game. Although Talwar et al. (2002, Experiment 3) found a significant main effect of promises on reducing lying behavior for 3- to 7-year-olds, closer inspection of the data shows that the lying rates decreased only marginally for 3- and 4-year-olds (3-year-olds: promises vs. discussion—47% lying vs. 50% lying; 4-year-olds: promises vs. discussion—67% lying vs. 71% lying).

The above findings suggest that from 4 to 5 years of age, children produce promises and start to keep their own promises, yet their abilities to correctly reason about promises have been found to develop later. Studies have shown that younger children do not distinguish between the speech act of promising (or committing) and the performance of the act, and younger children often prioritize outcomes when judging others’ behavior (e.g., Astington, 1988c; Kalish & Cornelius, 2007; Rotenberg, 1980). From 7 years of age, children reason that speakers are responsible for fulfilling what they promised (Astington, 1988c; Maas & Abbeduto, 1998) and take into account whether someone broke a promise (or a commitment) intentionally or accidentally (Maas & Abbeduto, 2001; Mant & Perner, 1988). But it is not until their teens that (English- and French-speaking) children begin to distinguish promises (“I promise I will play with you”) from other types of speech acts such as predictions (“I promise it will rain”) and assertions (“I promise, it rained”) (Astington, 1988b; Bernicot & Laval, 1996).

The overall developmental picture based on the findings to date is that children under 5 years of age mostly fail to keep their own promises and do not reason that others ought to keep their promissory obligations. However, two lines of evidence challenge this view: (a) studies on young children’s understanding of joint commitments in collaborative social activities and (b) studies on young children’s understanding of normativity.

First, recent work on children’s behavior in collaborative social activities has shown that 3-year-olds already behave in a committed manner and expect others to be committed to a joint endeavor. Specifically, 3-year-olds will reengage an adult when she stops to participate in a joint activity, will acknowledge their own leaving of a joint play activity, and will wait, help, and take over the partner’s role after collaboration (Gräfenhain, Behne, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009; Gräfenhain, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2013). However, these studies elicited an explicit (verbal or nonverbal) agreement from children to collaborate, engaged the children in a collaborative activity, and compared this collaboration condition to a condition with individual activity (and no agreement). Thus, it is unclear whether the increased commitment in the collaboration condition (as compared with the individual condition) resulted from the explicit agreement, the collaborative activity, or both. In fact, other work has shown that collaboration by itself (without verbal agreements) makes preschoolers more committed to finishing a task—both when the partner is present (Hamann, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2012) and when the partner is absent (Butler & Walton, 2013). In our studies, we wanted to focus exclusively on the effect of verbal agreements (i.e., promises) on young children’s behavior. In each study, therefore,

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