



“But he didn’t mean to do it”: Preschoolers correct punishments imposed on accidental transgressors



Nadia Chernyak^{a,*}, David M. Sobel^b

^a Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Boston University, United States

^b Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences, Brown University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 September 2015

Received in revised form 26 January 2016

Accepted 5 March 2016

Keywords:

Preschoolers

Punishment

Intentionality

Prosocial behavior

ABSTRACT

Preschoolers have a sophisticated understanding of reward and punishment. Here we investigated whether children spontaneously correct unfair punishments. Across two experiments, 3- and 4-year-olds engaged in a block-tower building task with a puppet in order to receive a reward (four stickers to be shared between the puppet and the child). The puppet then either accidentally or intentionally knocked over the tower. In both cases, an adult, who did not observe the intentionality of the outcome, punished the puppet by giving all the stickers to the child. After hearing the puppet protest, children were more likely to correct the adult’s punishment (i.e., share stickers with the puppet) when puppet’s actions were accidental rather than intentional. Our results suggest that rather than passively accepting rewards and punishments imposed by authority figures, young children spontaneously correct situations they potentially believe are unfair.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

A wealth of research has documented young children’s resistance to adults’ rules and suggestions. Indeed, few people have met a child who always followed rules, who never talked back to authority figures, or who always believed her parents and teachers. Recent work suggests that young children’s occasional inability to follow adults’ rules and directions reflects a remarkable rationality. Children reject nonsensical facts and explanations from adult authority figures (Corriveau & Kurkul, 2014). They choose not to emulate those who are unsuccessful or otherwise unknowledgeable (e.g., Zmyj, Buttelmann, Carpenter, & Daum, 2010); and they spontaneously correct others when they make mistakes (e.g., Koenig & Echols, 2003).

Children’s rejection and correction of adults’ rules may also have prosocial motivations. Indeed, preschoolers have a sophisticated understanding of fairness that goes beyond the norms articulated to them by their group members (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013) or adult authorities (Killen & Smetana, 2005; Smetana, 1983; Turiel, 1983). They intervene in situations when someone else is being harmed (Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011) and punish those who are behaving unfairly towards others (e.g., McAuliffe, Jordan, & Warneken, 2015). One possible motivation of these proactive interventions is the child’s desire to correct perceived injustices. For instance, Schmidt, Rakoczy, and Tomasello (2012) showed that young children protest and correct the immoral behaviors of others. Children not only recognize the relevant moral norms of their social worlds, but also act in ways that maintain them.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: chernyak@bu.edu, nadia.chernyak@gmail.com (N. Chernyak).

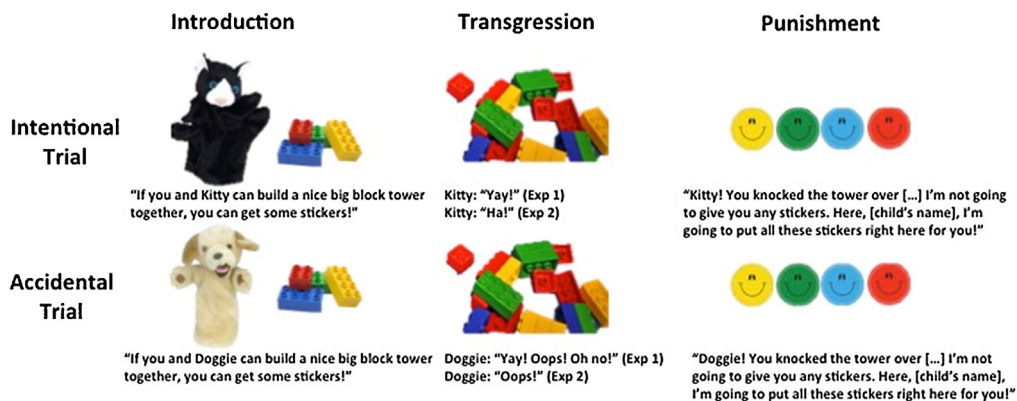


Fig. 1. Schematic of materials and procedure of the two test trials.

Note. Puppet and presentation order of intentional vs. accidental trial was counterbalanced.

Here we investigated whether young children also correct others in the context of unfairness. There is evidence that children intervene in third-party situations in which they witness unfairness: Recent work has documented that preschool-aged children sympathize with those who are harmed by others (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009), correct others when they break rules (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2013), and proactively correct situations in which someone else is being harmed (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010; Riedl, Jensen, Call, & Tomasello, 2015). Therefore, there is reason to believe that at least in third-party contexts, young children rectify situations that they perceive to be unfair.

How children react to *first-party* unfairness (unfairness in which they themselves are the beneficiaries) however, remains an intriguing empirical question. Prior work has found that not until children are at least 8 years old do they reject allocations that are advantageously unfair (e.g., Blake & McAuliffe 2011; Blake et al., 2015). In these studies, children may elect to either accept or deny an unfair split (e.g., 4 resources for the child, 1 for another person) proposed by an adult experimenter. Such a situation typically examined sharing with peers, and not in the context of punishment. Moreover, such a situation typically involves children either accepting or rejecting the proposed split—not proactively intervening and correcting it.

To examine younger children's motivation to reject first-party unfairness, we took advantage of at least three documented effects in preschoolers' moral cognition: First, prior work has found that children are more likely to share with collaborators (Warneken, Lohse, Melis, & Tomasello, 2011; Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, & Tomasello, 2011). For example, in an important study by Hamann et al. (2011), dyads of three-year-olds tended to spontaneously correct inequities (i.e., correct a 3/1 split into a 2/2 split) when they had worked together, but not when they had worked separately. This study suggests that children may be willing to give up desirable rewards when those rewards are "unfairly" attained. Second, even toddlers show signs of empathic concern by sharing with those who are in distress (Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Vaish et al., 2009). Finally, preschoolers show sensitivity towards, and judge less harshly, those who transgress by accident (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Nelson, 1980; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Vaish et al., 2010; Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996; but see also Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013; Karniol, 1978; Leon, 1982).

In the present studies, preschoolers watched an adult punish an intentional or an accidental transgressor. This resulted in an advantageous inequity for the child (the adult experimenter gave the child stickers that were originally meant to be split between the child and the transgressor). The procedure began with the child and puppet collaborating by building a block tower together. After completing this task, the puppet knocked down the tower intentionally or accidentally (manipulated within-subjects). The experimenter, who only witnessed the final outcome and not whether the puppet's actions were intentional, imposed a punishment by refusing to give the puppet any stickers. Children thus received a windfall of stickers. The puppet then expressed dissatisfaction towards the outcome of the punishment. Our critical question was whether children would share with the puppet spontaneously despite the experimenter's intended punishment.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Twenty-four (14 female, 10 male) preschoolers were tested at either a children's museum or in the laboratory (*Mean age* = 4.00 years, *SD* = 0.48 years; range: 3.03–4.91 years). Three additional children were tested but replaced due to protocol error ($n = 1$), parental interference ($n = 1$), or refusal to build the block tower with the puppet ($n = 1$). One additional child was tested after we had achieved counterbalancing and therefore not included in the sample, but results remain identical when including this child's data.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7272394>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7272394>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)