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## The impact of feedback valence and communication style on intrinsic motivation in middle childhood: Experimental evidence and generalization across individual differences



Elien Mabbe\*, Bart Soenens, Gert-Jan De Muynck, Maarten Vansteenkiste

Department of Developmental, Personality, and Social Psychology, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

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### ABSTRACT

Prior research among adolescents and emerging adults has provided evidence for the beneficial effects of positive (relative to negative) feedback and an autonomy-supportive (relative to a controlling) communication style on students' intrinsic motivation. Unfortunately, similar experimental research in middle childhood is lacking. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the question of whether individual differences in personality and perceived parenting play a role in these effects. In the current experimental study ( $N = 110$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 10.71$  years), children completed puzzles at school under one of four experimental conditions, thereby crossing normative feedback valence (i.e., positive vs. negative) with communication style (i.e., autonomy supportive vs. controlling). Prior to the experiment, children filled out questionnaires tapping into the Big Five personality traits and into perceived maternal autonomy support and psychological control. After the experimental induction, children rated several motivational constructs (i.e., intrinsic motivation and need-based experiences). In addition, their voluntary behavioral persistence in a subsequent challenging puzzle task was recorded objectively. Providing positive normative feedback in an autonomy-supportive way yielded the most favorable motivational outcomes. Both feedback valence and communication style yielded an independent impact on children's experiences of competence and autonomy during task engagement, which in turn helped to explain children's elevated intrinsic motivation, as reflected by their perceived interest and behavioral

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [elien.mabbe@ugent.be](mailto:elien.mabbe@ugent.be) (E. Mabbe).

persistence. A few effects were moderated by children's perceived parenting and personality traits, but the number of interactions was limited. The discussion focuses on the motivating role of positive normative feedback and an autonomy-supportive communication style for children.

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## Introduction

When intrinsically motivated, children are attracted by the content of an activity at hand, thereby finding the activity interesting, enjoyable, and challenging in its own right (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivation has been found to predict manifold beneficial outcomes, including better learning, higher persistence, and improved well-being, a finding that emerged in both middle childhood (e.g., Dishman, McIver, Dowda, Saunders, & Pate, 2015) and adolescence (e.g., Beiswenger & Grolnick, 2010). Given the educational advantages associated with intrinsic motivation, abundant—yet mainly correlational—research has addressed its contextual antecedents. For instance, research has documented beneficial effects of positive (relative to negative) feedback (Deci, 1971; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Sideridis, 2008) and an autonomy-supportive or inviting (relative to a controlling or pressuring) communication style (Ryan, 1982) on intrinsic motivation.

However, most of this research has been conducted in older age groups, that is, among adolescents (De Muynck et al., 2017) and university student populations (Hagger, Koch, & Chatzisarantis, 2015). As a result, there is a paucity of research, and of experimental research in particular, on the contextual determinants of intrinsic motivation in middle childhood. This is unfortunate because middle childhood represents a developmental period in which the acquisition of new skills represents a key development task (Erikson, 1968) that can be spurred by children's intrinsic motivation. Moreover, children's intrinsic motivation has been found to undergo significant declines (Gottfried, Marcoulides, Gottfried, & Oliver, 2009; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). This raises the question of what can be done to preserve their intrinsic motivation. A second issue that has received virtually no attention is the extent to which individual differences play a role in these effects. Do children, regardless of their personality profile and the perceived child-rearing style of their parents, benefit similarly from contextual resources of intrinsic motivation? Or do certain individual differences or perceived environments create a heightened sensitivity to contextual influences on intrinsic motivation?

In light of these lacunae, the current experimental study aimed to contribute to the extant literature (a) by examining the effects of experimentally induced normative feedback valence and communication style on elementary school children's intrinsic motivation, (b) by addressing the mechanisms accounting for these effects, and (c) by addressing the possible moderating role of individual differences in personality and perceived parenting in these effects. In doing so, we used self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017) as a theoretical framework.

### *Intrinsic motivation and psychological need satisfaction*

Because intrinsic motivation comes with a high degree of volition and spontaneity, it represents the hallmark of high-quality motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When intrinsically motivated, enjoyment of and interest in the behavior itself provide the basis for carrying out the activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsically motivating activities serve as 'magnets' in individuals' lives. That is, people spontaneously gravitate to these activities because of their manifold benefits (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Indeed, intrinsic motivation is a powerful resource for learning and development (Larson & Rusk, 2011; Taylor et al., 2014). A recent meta-analysis clearly documented the positive effects of intrinsic

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