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The relation between having siblings and children's cheating and lie-telling behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated how having at least one child sibling influenced children's dishonest behaviors. Furthermore, for those children with a sibling, we examined whether having a younger or older sibling and the age difference between siblings influenced deceptive acts. Children between 3 and 8 years of age (N = 130) completed the temptation resistance paradigm, where they played a guessing game and were asked not to peek at a toy in the experimenter's absence. Children's peeking behavior was used as a measure of cheating, and children's responses when asked whether they had peeked were used as measures of lie-telling. Results demonstrate that siblings do indeed influence children's deceptive behaviors. First, children with a sibling were significantly more likely to cheat compared with children without any siblings. Next, for those with a sibling, children with a larger age difference with their younger sibling(s) were significantly more likely to lie compared with children closer in age, and children with a younger sibling were significantly more likely to maintain their lie during follow-up questioning compared with children with an older sibling.

Introduction

A child's family context can play an important role in shaping development (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993; Dunn, 2002; Dunn, 2006). It is within one's family where children form their first relationships,

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begin to learn about the world, and begin to learn about themselves. More specifically, while growing up, children endure most of their social experiences with their siblings (Dunn, 1985; Foote & Holmes-Lonergan, 2003; Perner, Ruffman, & Leekam, 1994). The sibling context is a social space where children have frequent access to play with other children and engage in child conservations. These child–child relationships provide children with a unique space to learn and tackle moral issues in an environment different from the adult–child context (Dunn, 2006). In fact, most children spend more time with their siblings compared with any other group, including their parents (Dunn, 2002; Larson & Verma, 1999).

There can be many benefits to growing up with siblings. For example, with such extensive time spent together, children learn prosocial behaviors such as sharing, helping, and caring for one another (Abramovitch, Corter, & Pepler, 1980; Dunn, 2006; Dunn & Munn, 1986; Hastings, Utendale, & Sullivan, 2007). For example, Dunn and Munn (1986) followed young children for 6 months and found that more prosocial behaviors by one sibling predicted greater prosocial behaviors in the other sibling. Furthermore, it has been well established that having siblings can help to advance children's cognitive development such as theory of mind (ToM). ToM is the ability to mentally understand others' perspectives and realize that others hold different information in their minds. It has been found that young children with more siblings and young children with older siblings have superior ToM skills (e.g., Devine & Hughes, 2016; Foote & Holmes-Lonergan, 2003; McAlister & Peterson, 2006; McAlister & Peterson, 2007; McAlister & Peterson, 2013; Perner et al., 1994). Overall, it has been suggested that having other siblings promotes opportunities for children to think about others' mental states because this is a main component in playing and sharing (Slaughter, 2015).

While this research sheds light on how siblings can encourage prosocial behaviors and healthy cognitive development, the sibling context can also consist of conflict and competition, which can foster antisocial behaviors such as arguing, cheating and stealing, and lie-telling (Dunn & Munn, 1986). For example, within the adolescent literature, siblings' delinquent behavior (e.g., getting into fights, committing crimes) is highly correlated, such that one can predict a younger sibling's delinquent behavior from an older sibling's delinquency (Craine, Tanaka, Nishina, & Conger, 2009; Dunn, 2005; Lauritsen, 1993; Rowe & Farrington, 1997; Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simons, & Conger, 2001). It has been argued that this relationship could be due to younger siblings modeling the behavior of their older siblings (Craine et al., 2009; Patterson, 1984; Slomkowski et al., 2001).

During childhood, antisocial behaviors are often measured in terms of cheating and lie-telling rather than physical violence and criminal acts. Cheating and lying can be normative and frequent parts of a child's development. One method often used in experimental studies for examining children's cheating and lie-telling is the temptation resistance paradigm (e.g., Lewis, Stranger, & Sullivan, 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2002). In this paradigm, children play a guessing game and are asked not to peek at a toy while the experimenter is out of the room. Across a wide range of studies, a consistent pattern of high cheating rates (often upward of 75%) has been found, where majority of children break the rule by peeking at the toy (e.g., Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2002; Talwar & Lee, 2008). It has been found that once children transgress, they will lie to conceal their transgression as early as 2 or 3 years of age, and by 4 years of age lie-telling rates are high (~80%) and remain high throughout childhood (for a review, see Lee, 2013). In addition, children become more sophisticated lie-tellers with age by successfully maintaining their lie when their executive functioning skills become more advanced (Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2008; Walczyk, Roper, Seemann, & Humphrey, 2003).

Despite the breadth of research examining the development of dishonest behaviors, there is less work examining the nature of one's social environment and how this can contribute to dishonesty rates throughout childhood. This is somewhat alarming given that lies are social acts predominantly told for social purposes (Lee, 2013; Popliger, Talwar, & Crossman, 2011; Talwar & Lee, 2008; Wilson, Smith, & Ross, 2003); therefore, dishonesty could be influenced by one's daily social environment. For example, Talwar and Lee (2011) used the temptation resistance paradigm to examine how children's social environment (attending a punitive school that used corporal punishment vs. attending a nonpunitive school) influenced transgression and lie-telling rates in young children. Although there were no differences in the rate of transgressions between the two environments, children from the punitive environment were significantly more likely to lie and told more sophisticated lies compared with those from the nonpunitive environment. It was suggested that the social context within a punitive environ-