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Promoting honesty in young children through observational learning

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ABSTRACT

The observational learning approach, developed more than a half century ago, suggests that it is possible to promote desirable social behaviors through peer observation. However, this idea has yet to be put to a rigorous empirical test. The current research sought to fill this gap by examining whether honesty can be promoted in children by allowing them to observe a peer's display of honest behavior. The dependent measure was whether 5-year-old children who had cheated by peeking in a guessing game would confess to it. Study 1 showed that simply observing a classmate confess to peeking did not promote honesty. However, children who observed a classmate confess to peeking and receive praise and a small prize from an experimenter did become more honest. Study 2 replicated the effect with a weaker manipulation that involved praise for the confessing peer but no prize, which suggests that verbal feedback alone was a sufficient benefit. These findings point to new strategies for promoting honesty in young children and demonstrate that young children's observations of the social consequences of others' sociomoral behavior can help them to guide their own behavior.

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Introduction

Across societies, promoting honesty is a major goal of the socialization process (Heyman, Luu, & Lee, 2009; Lewis & Saarni, 1993; Talwar & Crossman, 2011). However, there has been only limited empirical research to determine which methods are effective (Lee, 2013). In the current research, we assessed the effectiveness of a method based on the social learning approach. This method is based on children's well-documented capacity to learn by observing others (Feiring, Lewis, & Starr, 1984; Floor & Akhtar, 2006; Legare & Nielsen, 2015; Meltzoff, Waismeyer, & Gopnik, 2012; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Repacholi & Meltzoff, 2007; Tennie, Greve, Gretscher, & Call, 2010). Specifically, we examined whether children who are given an opportunity to observe a peer confessing to a transgression will behave more honestly themselves as compared with when there is no such opportunity. Also of interest was whether any such effect would depend on the consequences of the peer's confession.

Promoting honesty can be viewed as part of a broader socialization process in which adults encourage children to acquire desirable sociomoral behaviors. Sociomoral behaviors have implications for the two most widely agreed-on moral foundations: harm/care and fairness/reciprocity (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). The standard approach to improving sociomoral behavior has typically involved adults directly teaching children how to think and respond in situations that pose sociomoral dilemmas. For example, adults can teach children to avoid inferring hostile intent when there is no clear evidence to support it as part of a strategy to reduce aggression (see Dodge, 2006) or can point out how one individual's behavior can affect others (see Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). However, such direct approaches to promoting prosocial behavior may backfire if material rewards are involved. For example, Warneken and Tomasello (2014) found that 20-month-old children who received a material reward for helping were less likely to engage in future helping behavior than children who received no reward for helping or were simply thanked and told "that's really nice."

Although most work aimed at socializing children to acquire desirable sociomoral behaviors has focused on adults' direct attempts to shape the thoughts and behaviors of the targets of the intervention, a small number of studies have used less didactic approaches. One such approach involves cooperative activities with peers; Kirschner and Tomasello (2010) found that 4-year-old children who engaged in joint music-making activities were more likely to spontaneously help than children in a control condition that was matched for social and linguistic interaction but involved no joint music making.

Another non-didactic approach for promoting sociomoral behavior derives from the social learning framework, which focuses on learning through observation (Bandura, 1977). Much of the relevant experimental work was conducted during the 1960s and early 1970s, beginning with Bandura (1965). In his seminal work, Bandura showed that when 3- to 6-year-old children observed acts of aggression by others and the ensuing consequences, they became more aggressive. Elliott and Vasta (1970) extended this approach to the promotion of prosocial behavior. They found that 5- to 7-year-olds who observed a model sharing were more likely to share themselves, and the effect did not depend on whether the model had been offered a reward for sharing. In addition, recent findings suggest that modeling may be an effective way to promote politeness (Warneken & Orlins, 2015).

The current study

Of interest in the current study was whether we could promote honesty in young children through observational learning. This possibility is suggested by previous research showing that children can learn by "observing" story characters who face dilemmas about whether to tell the truth (Lee et al., 2014). We focused on children's observations of their peers' honesty and the associated consequences. Although theorists have long argued that peers play a special role in moral socialization (Carlo, Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, 1999; Hoffman, 2001; Piaget, 1932/1997), experimental work is needed to assess the nature of this role. Because peers are likely to be viewed as in-group members within school set-

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