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# Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp)



## Brief Report

# Do as I do, not as I say: Actions speak louder than words in preschoolers learning from others

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online xxxxx

### Keywords:

Delay of gratification  
Imitation  
Social learning  
Preschoolers  
Testimony  
Social conventions

## ABSTRACT

To date, no research has examined children's imitative abilities in the context of learning self-regulatory strategies from adults—especially when there is a conflict between communicative intent and later behavior. A sample of 84 4- and 5-year-olds performed a delay-of-gratification task after observing an adult perform the same task. Across four between-participants conditions, the model either did or did not state her intention to complete the task (positive vs. negative communication), modeled self-regulatory strategies, and then either did or did not complete the task successfully (positive vs. negative outcome). Children in the positive outcome conditions were more likely to imitate the novel strategies and successfully wait in both familiar and unfamiliar self-regulation tasks irrespective of the model's communicated intent. We discuss implications for practice and interventions.

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## Introduction

Successful self-regulation of behaviors and emotions is an important developmental milestone (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002) and a powerful predictor of various adaptive competencies across the life span (Moffitt et al., 2011). Although early predispositions such as temperament and gender have been implicated in children's self-regulation abilities, a large body of work has highlighted the importance of social influences (McCabe, Cunningham, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978).

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2015.10.006>

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Research suggests that children initially rely on their caregivers to aid in self-regulation before they acquire the cognitive capacities to develop and employ their own strategies (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). However, this literature has relied almost exclusively on correlational studies documenting the relation between parental characteristics (e.g., sensitivity, responsiveness) and children's self-regulation (Doan, Fuller-Rowell, & Evans, 2012; Lee, Semple, Rosa, & Miller, 2008; Von Suchodoletz, Trommsdorff, & Heikamp, 2011). A few studies have also looked specifically at strategies that children themselves use to self-regulate, concluding that attention deployment is particularly effective (Sethi, Mischel, Aber, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 2000). Building on this work, other research suggests that strategy-focused direct instruction (thinking happy thoughts) influences children's delay-of-gratification performance (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1972; Yates, Lippett, & Yates, 1981). Despite the importance of strategy use and evidence that it can be transmitted, virtually no work has explored the teaching of these strategies and mechanisms by which children learn self-regulation from others (Fox & Calkins, 2003). More important, no research so far has systematically examined the extent to which children imitate modeled strategies based on not only adults' verbal information but also their behavior.

Although no experimental research to date has explored children's imitation of adult behavior when learning self-regulatory strategies, a large body of research has highlighted that children's capacity to learn from adults across a variety of domains is what makes humans unique (e.g., Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich, 2011). Yet, the majority of the research on learning from and imitating adults has focused on learning the conventional nature of tools (e.g., Carpenter, Akhtar, & Tomasello, 1998). Here, we asked whether children's imitation patterns are similar when learning from adults about novel *social conventions* such as those used for self-regulation where the causal relation between regulatory behavior and outcome might be challenging to decipher.

On the one hand, the task of learning social conventions might be regarded as similar to tool use because in both cases children can acquire such information from others via adult "testimony" (e.g., Harris & Corriveau, 2011). Children weight information from adults more heavily in situations where the information to be learned is ambiguous (Jaswal, 2010) or is more easily acquired from an adult than through firsthand experience (Harris & Koenig, 2006). This is the case when learning social conventions such as self-regulatory strategies. Delaying gratification, by engaging in certain activities that are not immediately rewarding (e.g., exercise) or inhibiting certain behaviors (e.g., not eating certain foods), confers benefits that are not immediately salient for young children. Moreover, how to regulate one's behaviors and emotions is not directly intuitive. Thus, it is more feasible and efficient to turn to adult informants to acquire self-regulatory strategies.

On the other hand, looking to adults to learn self-regulatory strategies, in particular, can be difficult for young children. This is because adults may provide conflicting verbal and behavioral information. For example, parents may state the importance of not snacking before meals (the communicative intent) but then contradict their verbal intent by snacking before a meal (the behavioral outcome). Under these situations, it is not clear whether young children prioritize an adult's communicative intent or the outcome of the adult's behavior.

Currently, no research has explored children's acquisition of self-regulatory strategies in situations where verbal information and behavioral information conflict. Moreover, whereas tool use might be constrained to a specific tool, conventional knowledge should generalize beyond a particular situational context. That is, children should be able to extend a strategy to a novel situation.

In the current study, we explored children's use of two cues when learning self-regulatory strategies from an adult: their reliance on an adult's verbal instruction and their observation of outcomes. Children watched a model demonstrate self-regulatory strategies in a delay-of-gratification task. Crucially, the model's communicative intent and successful completion of the task (successful waiting) varied across children. Across four between-participants conditions, the model either did or did not state the intention of waiting (positive vs. negative communication) and then either did or did not succeed at the task (positive vs. negative outcome). We examined the extent to which children would imitate the strategies when engaging in a similar task and when generalizing the strategies to a novel context.

We hypothesized that children would be more likely to succeed at a delay-of-gratification task and imitate the self-regulatory strategies observed when the model's verbal information and behavioral

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