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Elementary school children's cheating behavior and its cognitive correlates



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ABSTRACT

Elementary school children's cheating behavior and its cognitive correlates were investigated using a guessing game. Children ($n = 95$) between 8 and 12 years of age were asked to guess which side of the screen a coin would appear on and received rewards based on their self-reported accuracy. Children's cheating behavior was measured by examining whether children failed to adhere to the game rules by falsely reporting their accuracy. Children's theory-of-mind understanding and executive functioning skills were also assessed. The majority of children cheated during the guessing game, and cheating behavior decreased with age. Children with better working memory and inhibitory control were less likely to cheat. However, among the cheaters, those with greater cognitive flexibility use more tactics while cheating. Results revealed the unique role that executive functioning plays in children's cheating behavior: Like a double-edged sword, executive functioning can inhibit children's cheating behavior, on the one hand, while it can promote the sophistication of children's cheating tactics, on the other.

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Introduction

Cheating is a common practice in our society (Bushway & Nash, 1977; Leming, 1978) that we often read and talk about, observe others doing, and even engage in ourselves in a variety of contexts—sports, academics, politics, finances, and relationships. Cheating is a covert and deliberate way to break a rule in order to gain an advantage (Green, 2004). Cheating not only is common during adulthood but also frequently occurs during childhood. Children's cheating behavior was one of the earliest topics to be studied in developmental psychology because the ability to follow rules while unmonitored is a major milestone in children's social and moral development (Hoffman, 1994; Kochanska, Murray, & Coy, 1997; Kochanska, Murray, Jacques, Koenig, & Vandegest, 1996). Hartshorne and May (1928) conducted the first systematic investigation of children's cheating behavior through a series of studies in which participants were given the opportunity to cheat in a variety of naturalistic test-taking situations. For example, in the circle task, children were required to write specific numbers within small circles on a page with their eyes closed while alone in a room. Children were told that they would receive a prize if they succeeded on the task, thereby providing them with the motivation to cheat. Subsequently, the majority of 8- to 16-year-olds cheated on the circle task.

Extensive research on cheating has ensued for nearly a century (Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2011; Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989; Talwar, Gordon, & Lee, 2007; Talwar & Lee, 2002, 2008). According to the existing literature, cheating behavior begins during the preschool years (Lewis et al., 1989; Talwar & Lee, 2002), with evidence that even 3-year-old children are capable of engaging in a variety of cheating practices. For example, Talwar and Lee (2002) asked children not to peek at a toy while they were left alone in a room with the toy placed behind them. The majority of 3-year-olds peeked at the toy, and all peekers returned to their original posture either as soon as they finished peeking or when they heard the experimenter opening the door. Furthermore, children's cheating behavior has been found to develop with age (Callender, Olson, Kerr, & Sameroff, 2010; Evans et al., 2011). Evans and colleagues (2011) found that when 3- to 5-year-olds were left alone in a room and asked not to lift a cup to peek at its contents, 5-year-olds tended to peek more than 3- and 4-year-olds.

However, when children enter into late childhood, a developmental decrease in cheating behavior has been identified. Talwar and colleagues (2007) used a modified temptation resistance paradigm to examine 6- to 11-year-olds' cheating behaviors by asking the children not to peek at the answer to a test question and found a developmental decrease in cheating behavior. This trend in cheating behavior has also been confirmed by Kanfer and Duerfeldt (1968), who found that as age increased among 8- to 11-year-olds, children were less likely to cheat on a number guessing game. Correspondingly, Evans and Lee (2011) used a similar temptation resistance paradigm as Talwar and colleagues (2007) and found that children's cheating behavior decreased between 8 and 16 years of age. Taken together, these studies suggest a developmental trend of cheating behaviors from late childhood into early adolescence, specifically a noticeable decrease.

The reasons why children exhibit a decrease in the decision to cheat during their late childhood and early adolescent years remains unknown. However, several individual differences and environmental factors that affect children's cheating behaviors have been examined (e.g., gender, sociometric status, children's beliefs, morality) (Asendorpf & Nunner-Winkler, 1992; Guttman, 1984; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2005; Piazza, Bering, & Ingram, 2011; Rubin & Hubbard, 2003; Silverman, 2003).

In terms of cognitive factors, limited existing research appears to suggest that skills such as children's executive functioning (EF) and theory-of-mind (ToM) understanding may be related to their decision to cheat (Kochanska et al., 1996, 1997; Talwar et al., 2007). EF refers to a set of higher order psychological processes that are involved in goal-oriented behavior (Zelazo & Müller, 2002), including cognitive skills such as inhibitory control, planning, cognitive flexibility, and working memory (Diamond, 2006; Testa, Bennett, & Ponsford, 2012). Previous studies that examined the relationship between the internalization of rules and EF found that preschool children with higher inhibitory control were better at internalizing their caregivers' rules because it is believed that inhibitory control contributes to conscience development (Kochanska et al., 1996, 1997). Furthermore, although preschool children are likely to be aware of moral rules about cheating, they may have difficulty in holding them in mind when faced with a salient temptation to cheat. For older children, it may be that

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