



On the trail of children's cheating behaviour

Blogpost on

"The role of theory of mind and social skills in predicting children's cheating" by Alison M. O'Connor and Angela D. Evans (2019)

Previous studies have shown that improved social skills (e.g. empathy, emotional self-control) let children more easily create and maintain social relationships and support peer acceptance (Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Bierman et al., 1987), to name but a few.

Lie-telling and Theory of Mind

In the recent years, research focused more on the deceptive part of child behaviour like lie-telling or cheating. This research most commonly based on the concept of the Theory of Mind (ToM).

Theory of Mind describes the ability to understand the counterparts thinking and perspective (e.g. "He doesn't know what's in my hand because it's behind my back"). A key aspect of ToM related to deceptive behaviour is the false-belief understanding – the ability to understand that other people can hold different beliefs which may or may not be true.

And while studies found a positive relation between ToM and lie-telling (Ding et al., 2015; Talwar & Lee, 2008), the same studies failed to find any relation between ToM and cheating. "What a pity" some parents probably thought. And so did Alison M. O'Connor and Angela D. Evans from the Department of Psychology at Brock University.

In 2018, they examined the relation between children's cheating behaviours and their socio-cognitive development, including the Theory of Mind and social skills.

But what about ...?

O'Connor and Evans hypothesised that with either increased ToM scores or increased social skills or both, children are significantly less likely to cheat. They assume that children with increased ToM understanding are well aware of the unfair advantage and consequences of their cheating behaviour. Social skills on the other hand, encourage socially acceptable behaviour and thereby improve social acceptance (Asher & Renshaw, 1981). Therefore, the authors supposed that improved social skills could reduce cheating behaviour seeing that deceptive behaviour can harm relationships.

In addition to their hypothesis, O'Connor and Evans wanted to spot the most qualified social skill to predict children's cheating. "Two social skills may be important when examine cheating behaviours", they assume. First: responsibility. "Given that increasing children's social obligation to be honest reduces cheating, those who are more responsible may be more sensitive to fulfilling obligations." Second: cooperation, which is based on the promotion of fair and harmonious interactions.

Temptation Resistance Paradigm

The final sample size consisted of 295 children aged 3 to 8. The participants were from middle- to upper-class families, resided in a mid-sized city in Canada. Consistent with previous studies, the temptation resistance paradigm (TRP) was used to examine children's cheating behaviour.

In this case, the TRP was a game, where the children were asked not to peek at a toy while the experimenter is absent. Rated as cheater was any child who peeked at the toy. The children also finished multiple measures of ToM understanding (see link for more information).

To determine the children's social skills, O'Conner & Evans asked parents to fill out a questionnaire that gathers a variety of social skills (e.g. cooperation, communication, responsibility etc.).

Higher social skills, less cheating

O'Conner & Evans found, that with both increased ToM and social skills, children were less likely to cheat. Corresponding to their hypothesis, the results specifically revealed that only children who were high in ToM as well as responsibility showed less cheating behaviour.

These results contrast with previous studies that found a positive relation between ToM and lie-telling. The authors assume different motivation behind each deceptive behaviour. "Higher ToM skills", the authors say, "aid in the reduction of initial transgression" - because the children are aware of the consequences - "but after the transgression occurred, children's superior ToM skills then aid in more cognitively complex lies to conceal this act".

Beside this, O'Conner & Evans are sure that "instilling responsibility in children appears to be a key factor associated with children behaving according the rules."



Young children with higher ToM and social skills cheat less.

One key issue remains; the study's design captured children's cheating behaviour with an unfamiliar experimenter. And of course, children's behaviour changes based on who they interact with. Further research has to be done to examine children's cheating behaviour in context of different social figures (e.g. parents, teachers, etc.).

How to improve Theory of Mind

But so far, they're absolutely right when claiming, "This information is valuable for parents and teachers who strive to promote positive social functioning in children"! For more information and some easy everyday exercises to increase children's ToM understanding and responsibility, see selective links below.

This blogpost was written by Manuel Greiner, master student at the University of Zurich.

Resources:

- First-order ToM understanding:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41jSdOQQpv0>
- Activities to promote ToM skills:
<https://blog.medel.com/develop-childs-theory-of-mind-skills/https://blog.medel.com/5-strategies-develop-theory-of-mind-1/>
- Activities to teach responsibility:
<https://blog.himama.com/4-activities-to-teach-responsibility-in-preschoolers/>

Mentioned literature:

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- Bierman, K.L., Miller, C.L., & Stabb, S.D. (1987). Improving the social behavior and peer acceptance of rejected boys: Effects of social skill training with instructions and prohibitions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 55*, 194-200.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.55.2.194>
- Ding, X., Wellman, H., Wang, Y., Fu, G., & Lee, K. (2015). Theory of mind training causes honest young children to lie. *Psychological Science, 26*, 1812-1821.
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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2018.11.018>
- Talwar, V., & Lee, K. (2008). Social and cognitive correlates of children's lying behaviour. *Child Development, 79*, 866-881.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01164.x>