We know about sticks and stones but is it true what they say about words?

Children’s understanding of moral transgressions

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Distinguished Majors Thesis

May 2011

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Abstract

Moral transgressions are defined as behaviors or actions that negatively impact the welfare of others. We examined whether children are able to differentiate between psychological transgressions (e.g., calling someone a mean name) and physical transgressions (e.g., hitting someone) when deciding how mean a character is and how much punishment s/he should receive. Five-to seven-year-olds heard six vignettes about different characters who were either nice, or had committed a psychological or physical transgression. Children rated characters who had committed moral transgressions of any kind as meaner and as deserving more punishment than the nice characters. In addition, they rated characters who had committed physical transgressions as meaner and deserving of more punishment than characters who had committed psychological ones. Thus, at least by five years of age, children are able to differentiate between different forms of moral transgressions, and they formulate opinions about appropriate punishments based on the severity of the moral transgression committed.
We know about sticks and stones but is it true what they say about words? Children’s understanding of moral transgressions

You are watching two children argue on the playground. One child calls the other “stupid,” and the other hits the name-caller. How do you discipline them? Do you only reprimand the child who used physical force? Assigning a punishment that adequately “fits the crime” can be difficult. This is especially true when the guilty party is a child. Parents often struggle to ensure that their children sense their affection and support while providing appropriate discipline. In order to understand what might constitute this balance, it is important to explore how children themselves understand punishment.

Many preschoolers believe that people who have done just one or two bad things in the past will continue to do bad things in the future. Giles and Heyman (2003) have shown that by 3- or 4- years of age children are developing beliefs about the stability of traits, and those who believe traits are unlikely to change engage in less prosocial behavior with peers they have witnessed misbehaving. Children also make generalizations about behavior across domains: they are less likely to choose peers who misbehave to be on their sports team and more likely to rate those “mean” peers as less academically intelligent (Cain, Heyman & Walker, 1997).

These expectations can contribute to social exclusion, and this in turn contributes to negative behavioral cycles for those excluded children. By being excluded, these children have fewer opportunities to practice more positive social skills and in turn become more aggressive with age (Dodge et al., 2003). Clearly, an important question is how one might break this negative cycle. For example, if a child is appropriately reprimanded for their misbehavior, would her peers be more likely to change her behavior?

Before we can answer this question, we must first understand more about what children know about punishment. Do children realize that punishment is intended to decrease undesirable
behaviors? What do children believe is "appropriate" punishment, and how would a child differentiate a more serious from a less serious offense?

Both psychological and physical violations are categorized as moral transgressions because they directly pertain to the rights and welfare of others (Smetana 1984). A psychological transgression can include arbitrarily calling someone a mean name, for example, calling someone “booger-breath.” This form of insult is seemingly baseless, as it is unlikely that the recipient’s breath actually does smell like boogers, and can be seen as an abstract comment intended to harm the recipient. Psychological violations can also be displayed as a harsh critique of another person’s performance, for example, telling someone “they have the dirtiest hair you have ever seen.” This form of transgression is directly linked to some aspect of another person, in this example, appearance and cleanliness.

A second form of moral transgression involves physical harm. Physical violations can be committed as seemingly random acts of aggression, for example, pushing someone down the slide. Physical transgressions though can also be committed in order to directly benefit the aggressor, for example, pushing someone out of the lunch line in order to advance.

Children find moral violations (physical or psychological transgressions) more egregious than violations related to safety or social conventions. In a study by Stern and Peterson (1999), for example, 4- to 11-year-olds heard a story about a character who hit another child (a moral transgression), a character who did not wear their helmet while riding their bike (a safety violation) and a story about a character who did not wear clothes to school (a social conventional violation). After hearing the stories, children were asked several open-ended questions about what form of punishment would be appropriate for the transgressor as well as how intensely the specific punishment that they chose should be applied. Children consistently assigned the most
severe punishment to characters who had committed moral errors, followed by safety-related errors and finally those transgressions that related to social-conventional errors.

Although this research suggests that children do discriminate between different classes of violations, relatively little is known about how they judge the relative seriousness of violations within the moral domain. For example, do they see psychological transgressions (e.g., calling someone a name) and physical transgressions (e.g., hitting) as equivalent in terms of their seriousness?

Adults tend to allocate punishment based on the perceived severity of the transgression. Darley and Robinson (2000), for example, asked adults to read a series of ten criminal cases, and to evaluate the severity of a crime (crimes ranged from stealing a CD to murder) and the likelihood that the criminal would commit another offense. Adults tended to mete out more punishment to those who had committed more severe crimes, and they did not factor in recidivism into their recommendation for punishment unless the perpetrator was afflicted with a biological disorder that made it likely he would cause further harm. For example, participants considered recidivism if the perpetrator had a brain tumor that made it likely the crime would be recommitted in the future. Thus it seems that adults assign punishments based on “just desserts,” or what they feel is warranted by the particular crime committed. This is relevant for the current work, which assesses whether or not children assign punishment based on how mean they judge a character to be. If children assign the most punishment to characters they also find to be the meanest, it may suggest that children, like adults, assign punishment based on “just desserts.”

In one study that touched on children’s understanding of punishment, Hester and Tian (2009) asked Chinese college students to describe the kinds of punishment they received as children, on what occasions punishment had been used, and the severity of that punishment. Over half of the respondents reported that “hitting” was the primary form of punishment that
they were exposed to, and over two-thirds believed that they would use physical punishment to discipline their own children. However, many of the participants voiced a concern about how severely children are punished and suggested that they would use less force than is typical. This finding is important for the current research, as we are also interested in whether or not children assign punishments similar to what their parents find appropriate. If parents and children do assign similar punishments, it might provide information on how children develop their opinions about the severity of certain behaviors.

There is some reason to believe that children can differentiate violations within the domain of moral transgressions. In Kondrad, Galdun & Jaswal (in prep), 5- to 7-year-olds heard a series of six vignettes in which a character was either nice (i.e. told someone they built the best sandcastle they have ever seen), committed a psychological transgression (i.e. told someone that they stink at crossing the monkey bars) or a physical transgression (i.e. pulled someone off of the monkey bars). Children were then asked which of the characters would be more likely to help a new student at their school (e.g., show a child new to the school where to sit at story-time). Children were also asked which character should get in trouble for their behavior. Finally, children were asked which character was mean.

When comparing the nice character to the psychologically or physically mean one, children consistently indicated that the nice character would be more likely to help and was less mean than either of the transgressors. When comparing the character who committed the psychological transgression to the one who committed the physical one, children indicated that the one who committed the psychological error would be more likely to help and should get into less trouble than the character who committed the physical error. As early as five years of age, then, children understand that some kinds of transgressions are worse than others and use that information to make judgments about future behavior.
These results set the stage for the current investigation of whether children will assign punishment differentially depending on the type of transgression committed. To address this question, we used a method similar to Kondrad, Galdun & Jaswal (in prep) 5- to 7-year-olds heard six sets of stories involving characters that engaged in nice behaviors or physically or psychologically mean behaviors. After hearing each story, children were asked which character should get in trouble and they were asked to assign each character a length of time in time out as punishment. We chose time out as our measure for punishment because the most popular parenting books today, such as Phelan’s (2004) book 1-2-3 Magic, suggest time out is the most effective tool for discipline. Because of its current popularity among parents, we assumed that time out was the disciplinary method that the majority of children would be familiar with.

Consistent with the results of Kondrad et al. (in prep), we expected children to rate characters that committed physical violations as more likely to get in trouble than characters who committed psychological violations. We also predict that children will assign physical violators more time in time out than those who committed psychological transgressions. Additionally, we expect children to rate transgressors as both more likely to get in trouble and deserving more time in time out than nice characters. Finally, we predict that characters who committed physical errors will be judged as meaner than those who committed psychological errors.

Method

Participants

Sixteen 5-year-olds (M = 5 years; 6 months; range = 5;0 to 5;11; 8 males), sixteen 6-year-olds (M = 6 years; 4 months; range = 6;0 to 6;11; 8 males), and sixteen 7-year-olds (M = 7 years; 7 months; range = 7;0 to 7; 11; 8 males) participated. Children in this study were primarily white, and from middle-class backgrounds.

Materials
Materials included 12 headshots of smiling boys and 12 headshots of smiling girls who looked to be about 5- to 7-years of age (shown in Appendix B). The headshots were printed in color on equally sized 3 x 3-inch cards. The photographs were all obtained from a commercial photo-object software program (Hemera Technologies, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada). For the task involving the assignment of time outs, children used a number line, 24 inches in length, with zero through ten shown in numerical order. The numbers were listed in ascending order and were evenly spaced, separated by 3 inches.

Finally children used a series of six cartoon faces to indicate how mean they felt the characters were. Starting with a smiling face on the left, each face became progressively meaner (as depicted by a frown) and red.

Procedure

Children were tested individually in the laboratory in one 30-minute session. They were seated at a table across from the researcher. Children participated in a warm-up phase and a test phase.

Number Line Warm-up. Children were first trained to use the number line, which they needed for assigning time outs in the experimental task. The researcher showed the number line and counted the numbers aloud from zero to ten. Children were then asked to count the numbers, pointing to the corresponding numbers as they did so. At this point, the researcher explained that the number line could be used to indicate how much time in time out they wished to give another child, with zero representing no time in time out, one representing one minute in time out, and so on, up to a maximum of ten. To verify their understanding, children were asked to point to the number corresponding to eight minutes in time out, zero minutes, four minutes, and the “most time out that you can give someone” (i.e., 10).

Faces Scale Warm-up. The researcher next introduced the faces scale, explaining that
the first face (the happiest face with the largest smile) was not mean at all, the next face was a little bit mean, the next face a little bit meaner still, and so on until they reached the sixth and final face, described to be as mean as they could possibly imagine. The researcher asked them to point to the face representing not mean at all, the meanest that they could imagine, a little bit mean and then a little bit meaner than that in order to verify that the children understood the scale.

Test Trials. Next, children heard a series of six vignettes that described two characters’ actions towards other children. For each character, we included two instances of past behavior because we wanted to make it clear that this was not a “fluke”, but rather a persistent behavior. The stories make this clear because the behaviors occurred more than once, with different children, and was always within one category of behavior (i.e. either a character made a physical transgression or a psychological transgression but not both). This decision was important for the current study because we wanted to address the question of whether children recognize that one form of transgression is different from another. We also wanted to avoid any confusion about the character’s intentions, which might have been possible if the misbehavior occurred just once. Children might have perceived a single act as a random occurrence.

As the stories were being told, the experimenter placed photos of two children on the table about shoulder-width apart to represent the two characters. Characters in the vignettes matched the gender of the participant, and different pairs of characters were used for each of the six vignettes.

The first four vignettes represented our primary question of interest and paired a psychologically mean character with a physically mean one (Psych vs. Phys). For example, in one of the vignettes, the psychologically mean character called someone the slowest runner in the whole class AND the worst jump roper they had ever seen, while the physically mean one
kicked someone AND pulled someone else off the monkey bars. All vignettes are shown in Appendix C.

The fifth and sixth vignettes were included to investigate how children compare nice characters and those who have committed moral transgressions. The fifth paired a character who behaved nicely with one who behaved in a psychologically mean way. For example, the nice character offered praise to someone while the psychologically mean one offered insults (*Nice vs. Psych*). The sixth vignette paired a nice character with a physically mean one (*Nice vs. Phys*). The nice character acted affectionately toward someone while the physically mean one was aggressive. These last two vignettes were included to ensure that in fact, all children understood the easiest comparison. That is, they were able to determine who is mean between a character who has committed a moral transgression and one who was nice.

Children were asked seven test questions after each story:

1. Memory Check: They were reminded of the actions of one of the characters, and they had to indicate which character had committed that act. Regardless of how they responded, children were reminded of how each character had behaved in the story.

2. Explicit Judgment Trouble: The experimenter first asked, “Which one of these children should get in trouble?”

3 and 4. Number Line: The researcher then explained that sometimes people are placed in time out when they misbehave and asked, “Using our number line can you show me how much time out this child should get?” while pointing to one of the two characters. She then asked the same question while pointing to the other character. The order that the characters were pointed to was counterbalanced across children.

5. Explicit Judgment Mean: The researcher asked, “Which one of these children is mean?” We included this question because we were interested in whether or not children
believed that someone who is meaner also deserves more punishment.

6 and 7. How Mean?: The researcher prompted children to use the face scale to rate how mean each character was. The order that the characters were asked about in was counter balanced across participants.

The responses were coded twice- once by the experimenter during the session, and independently by a coder from videotape. Reliability was excellent, with the coders agreeing on 99% of the trials. The few discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Results

Analyses did not find any main effects involving age, gender, or order of vignettes, so results were collapsed across these factors.

Who should get in trouble?

Figure 1 shows which character children indicated should get in trouble as a function of the comparison they were asked to make.

Physical vs. Psychological: As the figure shows, children believed characters who committed physical transgressions should get in more trouble than those who committed psychological ones, $t(47) = 8.20, p < .001$.

Nice vs. Psychological & Nice vs. Physical: Also displayed in Figure 1, 47 of 48 (98%) children believed that the character who committed the psychological transgression should get in trouble rather than a character who had behaved nicely. Similarly, when asked whether a character who committed a physical transgression should get in trouble versus a character who was nice, all 48 children indicated the physical character. Clearly, children believe nice characters should get in less trouble than any character who commits a moral transgression.

How much time in time out?
Figure 2 shows how much time children indicated characters should spend in time out as a function of the comparisons they were asked to make.

Psychological vs. Physical: On average, children assigned 7.51 (SD = 1.66) minutes in time out to physically mean characters and 6.38 (SD = 1.89) minutes to the psychologically mean ones, which is significantly less, $t(47) = 4.45, p < .001$.

Nice vs. Psychological: On average, children assigned 6.38 (SD = 1.89) minutes in time out to psychologically mean characters and .89 (SD = 1.94) minutes to the nice ones, which is significantly less, $t(47) = 13.98, p < .001$.

Nice vs. Physical: On average, children assigned 7.5 (SD = 1.66) minutes in time out to physically mean characters and .89 (SD = 1.94) minutes to the nice ones, which is significantly less, $t(47) = 17.12, p < .001$.

Who is mean?

Figure 3 shows how mean children indicated characters were as a function of the comparisons they were asked to make.

As shown in Figure 3, children selected characters who committed physical transgressions over those who committed psychological ones as the “mean” individual, $t(47) = 6.69, p < .001$.

Nice vs. Psychological: 46 of 48 (96%) of children selected the character who committed a psychological transgression as the mean one when the comparison was the nice character, $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 49.08, p < .001$.

Nice vs. Physical: Finally, all 48 children selected the physical transgressor as the mean one when the comparison was the nice character.

How mean using the five-point face scale?
Figure 4 shows how mean children indicated characters were using the five-point face scale as a function of the comparisons they were asked to make.

Psychological vs. Physical: On average, children assigned characters who committed physical transgressions a meanness rating of 4.69 (SD = .82) on a five-point face scale and 3.92 (SD = .97) for the psychological ones, which is significantly less, t(47) = 8.39, p < .001.

Nice vs. Psychological: On average, children assigned characters who committed psychological transgressions a meanness rating of 3.92 (SD = .97) on a five-point face scale and 1.22 (SD = .61) for the nice ones, which is significantly less, t(47) = 14.49, p < .001.

Nice vs. Physical: On average, children assigned characters who committed physical transgressions a meanness rating of 4.69 (SD = .82) on a five-point face scale and 1.22 (SD = .61) for the nice ones, which is significantly less, t(47) = 20.85, p < .001.

Discussion

Four significant findings emerged from the current project. First, children believed that characters who committed any form of moral transgression were meaner than nice characters. Second, children believed that characters who committed physical transgressions were meaner than characters who committed psychological transgressions. Third, children believe that characters who commit moral transgressions deserve more time in time out than nice characters. Finally, children believe that characters who commit physical transgressions should be punished more severely than characters who commit psychological transgressions. In fact, the meaner a child believed a character to be, the more time in time out they assigned.

The present study’s findings are consistent with, and build upon the results of a study conducted by Kondrad, Galdun and Jaswal (in prep). Kondrad, Galdun and Jaswal (in prep) found that children, at least by the age of five, believe that some transgressions are worse than others. Children it seems are able to judge how mean a particular character is using two reports.
of prior behavior. This assumption is supported by research suggesting that children believe in the stability of behavior related to morality (Dozier, 1991). The results of the current work build upon this finding by suggesting that children use judgments they make about a character’s meanness to assign punishment.

The fact that children are able to form opinions about character’s meanness is consistent with work conducted by Giles and Heyman (2003), which found that children endorse the belief that people who have behaved poorly in the past will continue to behave poorly in the future. By assigning a more severe punishment to characters who commit moral transgressions and the most severe punishment to characters who commit physical transgressions, children seem to be demonstrating a belief that physical transgressions are the most threatening form of past behavior. This assumption is also consistent with Darley and Robinson’s (2000) research on adult motivations for punishment. They found that, like children in the present work, adults punish according to the perceived severity of a crime.

The current study’s results have implications for both home and school settings. For example, as was previously mentioned, children who are excluded by peers due to aggressive behavior often become more aggressive (Dodge, Lansford, Burks, Bates, Pettit, Fontaine, & Price, 2003). An understanding that children judge physical transgressions as worthy of the most severe punishment might make it possible to design, or redesign appropriate punishments that adequately comply with children’s views of justice for peers who misbehave. Witnessing this act of justice might cause children to be more inclined to include peers who have misbehaved in the past, reducing the risk that the misbehaving child will continue to act out. Additionally, an investigation into how children perceive the severity of physical versus psychological transgressions and assign punishment for both might provide insight into how to better apply punishment methods such as time out for all children.
There are several potential limitations with the current research. First, it is unclear whether or not children fully understand the value of time. A prerequisite for participation in the study was that children were able to count all of the values listed on the number line and successfully complete all of the tasks for the number line warm up. However, as part of the procedure, we also asked children various questions attempting to address whether or not they understood the value of time.¹ We found that when children were asked to sit quietly for one minute, they could not reliably estimate how long they had been sitting at the end of that period.

Despite the fact that children between 5 and 7 years do not seem to have a grasp of the concept of time, all of those included in the study were able to effectively use the number line, recognizing that a seven on the number line represented a desire to assign seven minutes in time out, for example. Thus, we are confident that they understood the task of differentially assigning timeouts to the characters in our vignettes. That said, their apparent difficulty in estimating how long they have been quietly waiting could have implications for the use of time out itself as a punishment form. Books that focus on methods for disciplining children, such as Phelan’s (2004) 1-2-3 Magic often suggest placing your child in time out for a number of minutes consistent with their age in years. However, this theory on how to assign appropriate amounts of time out might need to be reconsidered if it is discovered that children are not able to assess the amount of time that they spend quietly sitting. It might be the case that children feel one minute in time out is just as severe a punishment as 20 minutes.

In the current study, children were asked both which character should get into trouble and how long each character should spend in time out, according to the teacher. The questions related to punishment were framed in this way due to previous research suggesting that children are hesitant to punish one another (Leman & Björnberg, 2010). However, informing the children that

¹ These data were part of a larger project, which is why they were not included formally here.
they were helping the “teacher to assign punishment to characters” may have invoked expectations based on guidelines in a school setting that influenced their punishment ratings. Although we are unable to rule out this possibility, we do not view it as problematic for our results, as children often acquire their understanding of morality from authority figures such as teachers.

Future research may want to explore how children assign punishment when given the option of three different forms of punishment, such as a stern talking to, a spanking and a time out. This project would be interesting because it would allow researchers to examine what form of punishment children assign to the meanest characters, providing insight into which punishment form children find least desirable. This study would also be interesting because of its potential to provide information on which punishment form children believe would be most effective at modifying a specific form of misbehavior. Perhaps knowledge about what form of punishment children believe will have the greatest potential for changing an undesirable behavior will help in the development of more effective punishment practices.

Another potentially interesting study might investigate how children understand even finer distinctions within both physical and psychological transgressions. So for example, do they feel that psychological insults are meaner when focused on someone’s physical appearance (i.e. you have the dirtiest hair I have ever seen) or on an object that someone else has created (i.e. that is the worst sandcastle I have ever seen)? Additionally, would children find physical violations that harm someone else directly (i.e. pushing someone off of a swing) meaner than general acts of aggression (i.e. breaking someone else’s favorite toy)? This study has the potential again to explore what kinds of offenses children find meanest. Once it is better understood how children rate various transgressions, it will be easier to develop effective punishments. This research also has the potential to ensure that children who frequently engage in these specific types of
transgressions do not become isolated by their peers, or categorized as antisocial, as it has been shown that aggressive children who are isolated by their peers become more aggressive with age (Dodge, Lansford, Burks, Bates, Pettit, Fontaine, & Price, 2003).

Children’s understanding of punishment is influenced by a variety of factors. However, a major component of how severely children believe that someone should be punished seems to be related to how mean they perceive a character to be. For the current study, children rated characters who committed any form of moral transgression as meaner than a nice character. Children also rated characters who committed physical transgressions as meaner than characters who commit psychological transgressions. Results indicated that children then used this “meanness” score to assign punishment, believing that characters who committed physical transgressions deserved the most time in time out, followed by characters who committed psychological transgression, followed by nice characters. Clearly then, knowledge about the severity of prior acts greatly impacts children’s punishment ratings, such that characters who are thought of as the meanest are given the most severe punishment.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the families and children who participated in my research. I would also like to thank Robyn Kondrad who encouraged my interest and investigation of morality. Next, I would like to thank Carrie Palmquist, for her help with editing and data analysis. Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Vikram Jaswal, for his encouragement and tireless assistance during the editing process.
References


Appendix A

**Parent/Guardian Informed Consent Agreement (Children < 7 Years)**

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this research study is to investigate what children think about people who misbehave, and whether those beliefs change depending on how serious someone’s misbehavior is. For example, do children think hitting is worse than teasing, and if so, do children think that someone who teases others is less likely to be nice in the future than someone who breaks a classroom rule? Another question we hope to address is what children understand about punishment. How much punishment would children think is enough to positively change someone’s behavior, and would this change depending on the seriousness of the misbehavior?

**What your child will do in the study:** Your child will be invited to play a game that involves looking at pictures or objects and learning information about them. For example, your child may see a picture of one child teasing another child, and another picture of a different child who breaks a playground rule. Later, we will ask your child questions designed to see how the misbehaviors made by the characters was interpreted, and what kinds of predictions children might make about them.

**What you will do in the study:** You may be asked to complete a survey about your child’s vocabulary development. This form takes about 15 minutes to complete, and the researcher will provide instructions about how to answer the questions. Additionally, you may be asked to complete a survey about your child’s vocabulary development, their temperament, behavior, or your beliefs about discipline. These forms take about 15 minutes to complete, and the researcher will provide instructions about how to answer the questions. Please answer as honestly as possible, and if you have questions please ask the researcher.

**Time required:** The time required for you and your child’s participation will be one or two (on a different day) 10-15 minute sessions, for a maximum total time of 30 minutes.

**Risks:** There are no risks to your child from participating in this study, other than the very minor one of hearing about a child misbehaving. At the end of the session, the researcher will thoroughly and carefully explain that sometimes people behave in unexpected ways and that saying “I’m sorry” is a good thing to do if someone misbehaves. In our experience and review of literature, any confusion about the unexpected behavior is very short-lived and does not lead to any bad behavior on the part of the participants.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you or your child for participating. The study may help us understand how children make sense of others’ behaviors.

**Confidentiality:** The information that your child provides in the study and his/her videotape will be kept completely confidential. Each child will be assigned a code number, and the list connecting his/her name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. The videotapes will be archived for later analysis, and will be viewed only by trained research assistants unless you have given
Voluntary participation: You and your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You and/or your child have the right to stop the study and/or withdraw from it at any time without penalty. If you or your child chooses to withdraw from the study, all video and data from your child’s session will be destroyed.

How to withdraw from the study: If at any point you or your child want to stop participating or to withdraw from the study, simply tell the researcher and the session will be ended immediately. There is no penalty for withdrawing. You and/or your child will still receive a small gift for the study.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study. Your child will receive a small gift. If your child is participating at a school that does not allow children to receive gifts for participation, your child will be thanked but will receive no gift.

If you have questions about the study, contact:
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If you have questions about your rights in the study, contact:
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Agreement:
I agree to allow my child, ______________________________________ to participate in the research study described above. I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Child’s Birthdate (Month/Year): ______________________________________

Teacher’s Name (if applicable): ______________________________________
You will receive a copy of this form for your records. Thank you for your participation in this project!

If you would like to receive occasional newsletter from our laboratory, including summaries of the results, please provide your email or postal address by email at childlearninglab@virginia.edu, or by phone at (434) 924-3986.

**Video Release Form**

During this study, we videotape your child’s behavior. With your consent, we would like to be able to use clips of your child’s video for various educational purposes. Your child’s name would never be associated with any of these uses.

You, of course, have the right to refuse to allow your child’s film to be used in any of these ways. Furthermore, if at any time in the future, you change your mind about granting us permission to use your child’s video for these educational purposes, simply notify us by contacting Dr. Vikram Jaswal (434-243-2409; jaswal@virginia.edu) and we will stop using it (except in the case of photos already published in books or journals).

Please indicate below whether you do or do not give us permission to use your child’s video or still photos made from the video in each of these ways:

- **In presentations to psychology classes at UVA**
  - Yes
  - No

- **In presentations of the research at professional meetings**
  - Yes
  - No

- **In professional publications describing the research**
  - Yes
  - No

- **On Dr. Jaswal’s website at UVA, or on professional websites designed to make research results available for professional purposes only**
  - Yes
  - No

- **In newsletter reports of this research or on bulletin boards in Dr. Jaswal’s laboratory**
  - Yes
  - No

**Signature:** ____________________________ **Date:** ________________

(Parent of ____________________________)  (child’s name)

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.
Informed Consent Agreement (Parents of children >7 years)

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

The purpose of this research study is to investigate what children think about people who misbehave, and whether those beliefs change depending on how serious someone’s misbehavior is. For example, do children think hitting is worse than teasing someone, and if so, do children think that someone who teases others is less likely to be nice in the future than someone who breaks a classroom rule? Another question we hope to address is what children understand about punishment. How much punishment would children think is enough to positively change someone’s behavior, and would this change depending on the seriousness of the misbehavior?

What your child will do in the study: Your child will be invited to play a game that involves looking at pictures or objects and learning information about them. For example, your child may see a picture of one child teasing another child, and another picture of a different child who breaks a playground rule. Later, we will ask your child questions designed to see how the misbehaviors made by the characters was interpreted, and what kinds of predictions children might make about them.

What you will do in the study: You may be asked to complete a survey about your child’s vocabulary development, their temperament, behavior, or your beliefs about discipline. These forms take about 15 minutes to complete, and the researcher will provide instructions about how to answer the questions. Please answer as honestly as possible, and if you have questions please ask the researcher.

The time required for your child’s participation will be one or two (on a different day) 10-15 minute sessions, for a maximum total time of 30 minutes.

There are no risks to your child from participating in this study, other than the very minor one of hearing about a child misbehaving. At the end of the session, the researcher will thoroughly and carefully explain that sometimes people behave in unexpected ways and that saying “I’m sorry” is a good thing to do if someone misbehaves. In our experience and review of literature, any confusion about the unexpected behavior is very short-lived and does not lead to any bad behavior on the part of the participants.

There are no direct benefits to you or your child for participating. The study may help us understand how children make sense of others’ behaviors.

The information that your child provides in the study will be kept completely confidential. Each child will be assigned a code number, and the list connecting his/her name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your child’s name will never be used in any report of this research.

You and your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. You and/or your child have the right to stop the study and/or withdraw from it at any time without penalty. If you or your child chooses to withdraw from the study, all data from your child’s
session will be destroyed. **If at any point you or your child want to stop participating or to withdraw from the study**, simply tell the researcher and the session will be ended immediately. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

You will receive no **payment** for participating in the study. Children may receive a small gift, even if you or they decide to withdraw, unless they are being tested in a school that does not allow us to provide gifts. All children will be thanked for their participation.

**For questions about the study, contact:** Robyn Kondra, Graduate Student; Dept. of Psychology; University of Virginia; P.O. Box 400400; Charlottesville, VA 22904-4400. Phone: (434) 924-3986; Email: rkonrad@virginia.edu or Dr. Vikram Jaswal, Associate Professor; Dept. of Psychology; University of Virginia; P.O. Box 400400; Charlottesville, VA 22904-4400. Phone: (434) 243-2409; Email: jaswal@virginia.edu.

**For questions about your rights in the study, contact:** Dr. Tonya Moon, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences, P.O. Box 800392, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0392. Phone: (434) 924-5999. Email: irbsbshelp@virginia.edu; http://www.virginia.edu/vprgs/irb

**Agreement:**

I give permission______ I do not give permission_____

for my child ____________________________ (Name) to participate in this study.

Child's birthdate (month/year): ________________________________

Teacher's Name (if applicable): ________________________________

Parent's signature: _________________________________________

Parent's printed name: _______________________________________

Date: ____________________

If you would like to receive occasional newsletter from our laboratory, including summaries of the results, please provide your email or postal address by email at childlearninglab@virginia.edu, or by phone at (434) 924-3986.

You will receive a copy of this form for your records (this copy is either attached or will be given to you at the end of your visit to the Child Language and Learning Lab).

**Thank you for your participation in this project.**
**Minor Informed Assent Agreement (Ages 7-12)**

Please read this assent agreement with your parent(s) or guardian(s) before you decide to participate in the study. Your parent or guardian will also give permission to let you participate in the study.

Have you ever wondered why people sometimes misbehave? At the University of Virginia, we're trying to find out, and we need your help!

As your teacher, parent/guardian, or someone from our research team has already explained, we want to know if you'd like to play a game. You might be asked to look at some pictures or listen to a story. For example, you might hear a story about how a child acts towards other children on the playground or in the classroom at school. Then we'll ask you some questions about what you saw or heard-questions like, “What did the character do?” or “Why do you think the character acted that way?” You’re not going to be graded on how you answer the questions-we just want to know how kids think. The game will take about 10-15 minutes, and you may be asked to play two different games on different days.

Your teacher and parent/guardian have already said that it would be OK for you to play the game, but you can decide for yourself if you want to or not. Just check the “Yes” or “No” box below, and then sign your name. Also, if you say now that you want to participate and then later change your mind—even if it’s while you’re playing the game—that’s OK. Just tell the researcher, and you can stop right away.

When we stop playing the game, you will be thanked, even if you decide not to finish playing the game. Then you get to go back to doing things with your class.

Thanks for your help!

________ Yes, I want to participate in the study

________ No, I do not want to participate in the study

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

Printed Name: __________________________

Teachers Name (if applicable): __________________________
Appendix B

Characters Faces

Girls:
Boys:
Appendix C

Vignettes

Trial 1:

PHYSICAL: This girl (point character A) *pinched* a child when they said “Hi” to her. Another day, she *pulled* a different child off of the monkey bars when they were trying to cross.

PSYCHOLOGICAL: This girl (point character B) called a child a “booger-breathe!” when they said “Hi” to her. Another day, she told a different child that they *stink* at crossing the monkey bars.

Trial 2:

PSYCHOLOGICAL: This girl (point character B) called a child a *bird-brain* when they asked for a turn on the swings. Another day, she told a different child that their chalk drawing looked like *scribbles*.

PHYSICAL: This girl (point character A) *kicked* a child who asked for a turn on the swings. Another day, she *broke* a different child’s chalk so they couldn’t draw.

Trial 3:

PSYCHOLOGICAL: This girl (point character A) told another child they *couldn’t throw* the baseball very far. Another day, she called a child a *scaredy-cat* when they didn’t want to go down the slide.

PHYSICAL: This girl (point character B) *threw a baseball* at a child when they weren’t looking. Another day, she *shoved* a different child down the slide when they weren’t ready.

Trial 4:

PHYSICAL: This girl (point character B) *tripped* a child when they were playing tag in order to win the game. Another day, she *pulled* a different child’s hair until it hurt.

PSYCHOLOGICAL: This girl (point character A) called a child the *slowest runner* in the whole class when they were playing tag. Another day, she told a different child that they had the *dirtiest hair* she had ever seen.

Trial 5:

NICE: This girl (point character A) told a child that they jumped rope *better than anyone else* she had ever seen. Another day, she told a different child that they had built the *best* sandcastle she had ever seen.

PSYCHOLOGICAL: This girl (point character B) told a child that they jumped rope *worse than anyone else* she had ever seen. Another day, she told a different child that they built the *worst* sandcastle she had ever seen.

Trial 6:

PHYSICAL: This girl (point character B) *stomped* on a child’s hand. Another day, she *pushed* a different child off of the seesaw.

NICE: This girl (point character A) This girl *high-fived* a child’s hand. Another day, she *showed* a different child how to get on the seesaw.
Figure 1. Children’s meanness ratings: Which character should get be punished for their behavior?
Figure 2. Children’s time out ratings: How many minutes do you think each character should spend in time out?
Figure 3. How mean children judged each character type: Which character do you think is meaner?
**Figure 4.** Children’s meanness ratings using the five-point face scale: Can you use the number line to show me how mean each character is?