

BRIEF REPORT

Children's Moral Evaluations of Reporting the Transgressions of Peers: Age Differences in Evaluations of Tatting

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The way children evaluate the reporting of peers' transgressions to authority figures was investigated. Participants, ages 6–11 years ($N = 60$), were presented with a series of vignettes, each of which depicted a child who committed either a minor transgression (such as not finishing the vegetables at lunch) or a more serious transgression (such as stealing from a classmate). Participants were asked to evaluate the decision of a child observer who either did or did not report the transgression to a teacher. Younger children considered reporting to be appropriate for both types of transgressions, but older children considered reporting to be appropriate for major transgressions only. Results are interpreted with reference to (a) a changing peer culture in which the social cost of reporting transgressions increases and (b) a developmental change in children's cognitive capabilities.

Keywords: tattling, truth-telling, moral evaluation, honesty

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From an early age, children are taught that it is important to tell the truth (Bussey, 1992). However, telling the truth sometimes comes into conflict with other social values, such as protecting people's feelings (Bussey, 1999; Ma, Xu, Heyman, & Lee, 2011). The present research focuses on another context in which truth-telling can conflict with other social values: when reporting the transgressions of peers to authority figures.

The reporting of transgressions can have consequences for a number of individuals, including those who make the reports, authority figures who receive the reports, individuals who are

accused, and peers who observe. For example, classmates might be grateful to a student who helps to enforce rules that promote fairness, or they might consider such reporting to be disloyal. Reporting on transgressions also has broader societal implications, such as in promoting efforts for harm prevention (Brank et al., 2007; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009).

Children engage in *tattling behavior*—defined as the reporting of another person's violation of a normative expectation to a third party—starting as early as 18 months of age (Dunn & Munn, 1985). In preschool and early primary school-age children, tattling is prevalent and does not generally carry negative consequences (den Bak & Ross, 1996; Ingram & Bering, 2010; Ross & den Bak-Lammers, 1998). In contrast, in adolescence there can be substantial negative consequences (Friman et al., 2004), such as being labeled as a “snitch” or “narc” (Syvertsen et al., 2009). Even without an objective increase in the social costs of tattling, older children may worry more about potential costs as they become increasingly aware of how they are likely to be perceived by others (Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990; Gee & Heyman, 2007; Heyman, Fu, & Lee, 2007; Juvonen & Murdock, 1995; Vasey, Crnic, & Carter, 1994).

Evaluations of the reporting of transgressions may depend upon the type of transgression involved (Nucci, 1981, 2001; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2008). For example, children as young as 3 years of age tend to view violations of moral rules, such as treating some-

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one unfairly, as more serious and more generally wrong than violations of social conventions, such as using inappropriate table manners (Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Smetana, Schlagman, & Adams, 1993). Furthermore, even young children show some context sensitivity when reasoning about disclosure (Fu, Evans, Wang, & Lee, 2008; Gee & Heyman, 2007; Ma et al., 2011; Ross, Smith, Spielmacher, & Recchia, 2004; Stipek, Recchia, & McClintic, 1992; Xu, Bao, Fu, Talwar, & Lee, 2010). Most relevant to the present research, Ingram and Bering (2010) found that preschool children are more likely to report transgressions directed against themselves than against a third party. These results suggest that young children might also distinguish between major and minor transgressions when making decisions about disclosure.

It is also possible that young children would endorse the reporting of all transgressions to authority figures. In support of this possibility is evidence that 5-year-olds do not differentially apply justice principles based on situation needs (Sigelman & Waitzman, 1991). Also, preschool-age children actively police others who violate social conventions (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009), and often focus on social norms (Kalish & Shiverick, 2004). This raises the possibility that children may start off with the view that reporting on transgressions is always good, but eventually they learn otherwise. This possibility is consistent with Piaget's (1932/1965) finding that older children judged tattling on a sibling to a parent to be less appropriate than younger children.

In the present research, we examined how 6–11-year-old children (Grades 1–6) evaluate third-party reports of major and minor peer transgressions to authority figures. The elementary-school age range was selected because we expected to find differences within this period. We expected that participants in all age groups would positively evaluate the reporting of major transgressions and respond that they would report major transgressions, but that only participants in the younger age groups (Grades 1 and 2) would positively evaluate the reporting of minor transgressions.

Method

Participants

Participants were a total of 60 children (29 females) in six age groups: Grade 1 ($M = 6.6$ years, $SD = 0.37$), Grade 2 ($M = 7.6$ years, $SD = 0.33$), Grade 3 ($M = 8.5$ years, $SD = 0.39$), Grade 4 ($M = 9.6$ years, $SD = 0.30$), Grade 5 ($M = 10.7$ years, $SD = 0.38$), and Grade 6 ($M = 11.7$ years, $SD = 0.43$). The sample was 98% Caucasian. All participants attended schools in a predominantly middle-class community in southeastern Canada in which the median family income is \$69,781 and 45% of adults have some post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Parental consent was requested via letters that teachers asked students to take home. The return rate for the letters was 27%, and 96% of the returned letters granted permission for the child to participate. All of these children assented to participate in the study.

Procedure

Children were seen individually in a quiet area of their school, and they were presented with a series of eight two-part vignettes. The first part of each vignette describes a single protagonist *or* group of

protagonists who engage in a relatively major *or* minor transgression that is witnessed by a peer observer. The second part of each vignette describes whether the observer reports *or* does not report the transgression. The parts of the vignettes were separated to minimize the potential confusion between evaluating the transgression itself and evaluating the third-party report of the transgression.

Vignettes were developed in an iterative process. Because the primary aim of the study was to compare children's evaluations of peer reports of major versus minor transgressions, the key dimension that was manipulated in the design of the vignettes was the seriousness of the transgressions. An initial set of scenarios was developed in collaboration with several teachers and school principals. Those scenarios were then discussed in focus groups with parents and children to ensure that they were clearly major or minor transgressions, were realistic, and were easy to understand. The vignettes were also piloted with 20 children between 4 and 11 years of age, and were excluded or revised based on the children's ratings of incident severity. Vignettes included as major transgressions (e.g., a protagonist pushes a classmate to the ground) received evaluations of *bad*, *very bad*, or *very, very, bad*. Vignettes included as minor transgressions (e.g., a protagonist accidentally causes a small amount of a classmate's juice to spill) received evaluations of *neither good nor bad* (see the Appendix in the online supplemental materials for the full set of vignettes).

After hearing the first part of each vignette, participants were asked an *evaluation of transgression question* in which they were first asked whether the protagonist's action was good, bad, or not good/not bad. The purpose of this question was to be able to separate out evaluations of transgression severity from evaluations of reporting on transgressions and to assess the validity of this study's transgression type distinction. Participants responding that the action was good or bad were then asked to rate how good or bad (e.g., *good*, *very good*, or *very, very good*) and responses were scored on 7-point scale (Lee, Cameron, Xu, Fu, & Board, 1997) in which the response options ranged from -3 (*very, very bad*) to 3 (*very, very good*). Next, participants heard the second part of the vignette in which the observer was described as either reporting or not reporting the transgression to a teacher, which was followed by an *evaluation of telling question* and an *evaluation of not telling question*, with the order of these questions counterbalanced. The response scale was the same as the evaluation of transgression question.

Next, children were asked an *obligation to tell question* that concerned what the observer should have done in the situation ("What should Megan have done? Should she have told the teacher what Erica did, or not told?"). Responses to this question were made on a 3-point scale with the following response options: -1 (*not tell*), 0 (*other*), and 1 (*tell*). The same scale was also used for the *personal tendency question* ("What would you do?").

Results

Preliminary analyses showed no effects of whether the protagonist was a single peer, the gender of participants, or question order, so these factors were omitted from subsequent analyses.

Evaluation of Transgressions

Paired *t* tests on the grand means for the evaluation of transgression question for major and minor transgressions for all grades with Bonferroni adjustments ($\alpha = .05/28 = .0021$; see Table 1)

Table 1
Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) of the Evaluation of Transgression Measure for Each Vignette and Significance Values (p) of Paired t -Test Comparisons of All Vignettes Across All Grades

Vignette	Major transgression				Minor transgression			
	Cheat	Steal	Push	Worm	Veggie	Poster	Paper	Drink
Grade 1	-2.40 (0.70)	-2.90 (0.32)	-2.80 (0.42)	-2.50 (0.53)	-1.40 (1.07)	-1.00 (1.15)	-1.30 (1.34)	-1.10 (1.20)
Grade 2	-2.10 (0.57)	-2.80 (0.42)	-2.80 (0.63)	-2.40 (0.70)	-0.50 (0.53)	-0.20 (0.42)	-0.30 (0.48)	-0.40 (0.52)
Grade 3	-2.20 (0.63)	-2.40 (0.70)	-2.30 (0.82)	-2.10 (0.57)	-0.10 (0.32)	0.00 (0.47)	-0.20 (0.42)	-0.10 (0.32)
Grade 4	-2.00 (0.82)	-2.40 (0.70)	-2.30 (0.82)	-2.10 (0.74)	-0.30 (1.16)	-0.20 (0.42)	0.20 (0.42)	-0.20 (0.42)
Grade 5	-1.80 (0.42)	-2.40 (0.52)	-2.80 (0.42)	-2.00 (0.67)	-0.10 (0.32)	0.00 (0.00)	0.10 (0.32)	0.00 (0.00)
Grade 6	-1.50 (0.53)	-2.40 (0.52)	-2.70 (0.48)	-2.30 (0.67)	-0.20 (0.63)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.10 (0.32)	-0.10 (0.32)
Total	-2.00 (0.66)	-2.55 (0.57)	-2.62 (0.64)	-2.23 (0.65)	-0.43 (0.85)	-0.23 (0.65)	-0.27 (0.80)	-0.32 (0.68)
Cheat		<.0001*	<.0001*	.038	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*
Steal			.521	.005	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*
Push				.003	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*
Worm					<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*	<.0001*
Veggie						.051	.058	.266
Poster							.659	.096
Paper								.517

Note. Single asterisks indicate significance at $\alpha = .002$ (Bonferroni adjusted).

confirmed that major transgressions were consistently viewed as more severe. Also, all minor transgressions were rated similarly, and all major transgressions were rated similarly except for the "cheat" vignette, which was rated slightly less negatively than two other major transgression vignettes. Thus, composite scores were created and used for all analyses.

The mean ratings for the evaluation of transgression question are presented in Table 2. An analysis of variance was conducted

Table 2
Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) of Evaluation of Transgression, Evaluation of Telling, and Evaluation of Not Telling Measures

Grade	Major transgression	Minor transgression
Evaluation of transgression		
1	-2.65 (0.32)	-1.20 (1.08)
2	-2.53 (0.46)	-0.35 (0.43)
3	-2.25 (0.24)	-0.10 (0.21)
4	-2.20 (0.44)	-0.13 (0.29)
5	-2.25 (0.26)	0.00 (0.12)
6	-2.23 (0.18)	-0.10 (0.13)
Evaluation of telling		
1	2.53 (0.49)	2.10 (0.49)
2	2.23 (0.52)	1.23 (1.19)
3	2.23 (0.40)	-0.03 (0.99)
4	1.88 (0.52)	-0.43 (0.90)
5	1.65 (0.27)	-1.55 (0.47)
6	1.68 (0.44)	-1.80 (0.63)
Evaluation of not telling		
1	-2.38 (0.66)	-1.93 (0.49)
2	-2.10 (0.53)	-0.88 (1.18)
3	-2.25 (0.31)	0.00 (0.90)
4	-1.95 (0.54)	0.25 (0.84)
5	-1.68 (0.35)	0.95 (0.56)
6	-1.68 (0.51)	1.53 (0.70)

for the evaluation of transgression question with transgression type as the within-subjects factor and grade as the between-subjects factor. Results showed that in addition to the effect of transgression type, $F(1, 54) = 813.03$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .94$, there was an effect of grade, $F(5, 54) = 9.33$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .46$, and an interaction between transgression type and grade, $F(5, 54) = 2.81$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$. Simple effects analyses (Bonferroni) revealed no significant grade differences in the evaluations of major transgressions and only one significant grade difference in the evaluations of minor transgressions: Children in Grade 1 evaluated minor transgressions more negatively than children in other grades.

Evaluations of Telling and Not Telling

Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for children's evaluations of telling and their evaluations of not telling about major and minor transgressions. A 6 (grade) \times 2 (transgression type) mixed-factor analysis of covariance was conducted using evaluations of telling about major transgressions and about minor transgressions as repeated design dependent variables. Evaluations of major transgressions and of minor transgressions were used as covariates in light of the previously noted grade differences in evaluations of transgressions. Significant main effects of grade, $F(5, 53) = 15.71$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .57$, and of transgression type, $F(1, 53) = 24.56$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$, were found. Planned contrasts ($p < .05$) revealed that independent of their evaluations of transgressions, children rated telling about major transgressions more positively than telling about minor transgressions. Also, younger children rated evaluations of telling more positively than older children (see Figure 1a). There was also a significant interaction between grade and transgression type, $F(5, 53) = 24.07$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .60$. Planned contrasts ($p < .05$) showed that independent of children's evaluations of transgressions, the oldest children showed the most differentiation between major and minor transgressions in their evaluations of telling (see Figure 1b).

A second analogous 6 (grade) \times 2 (transgression type) mixed-factor analysis of covariance was conducted to examine differ-

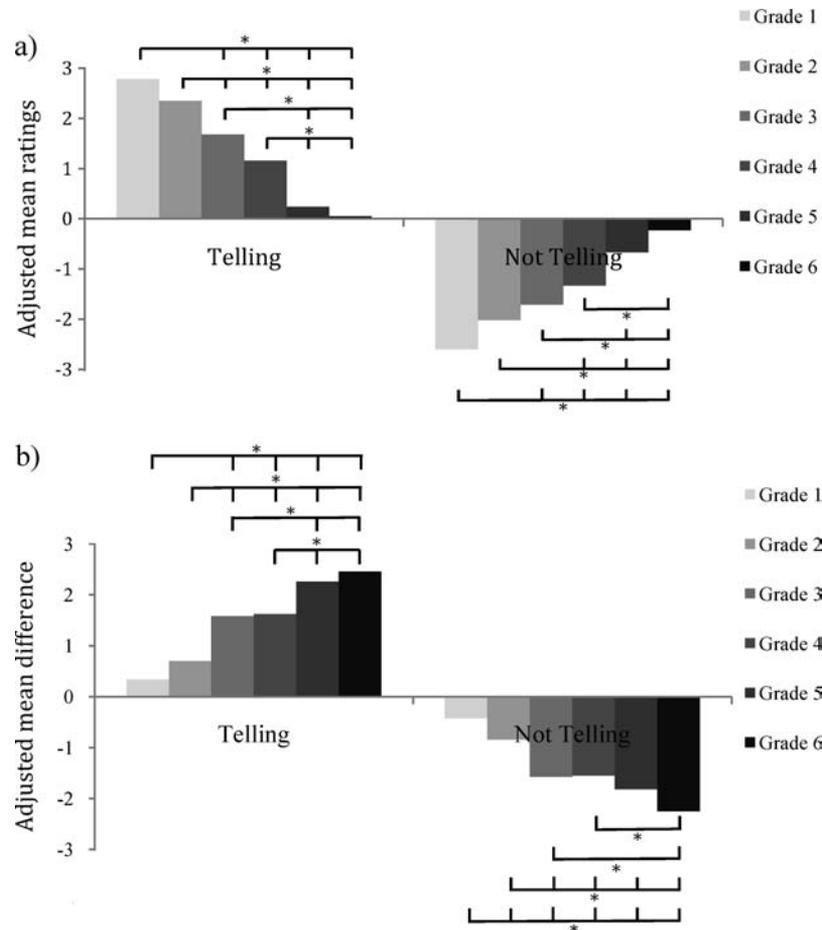


Figure 1. Asterisks show significant differences between grades in (a) children's evaluations of telling and not telling averaged across transgression types and (b) children's differentiation between major and minor transgressions in their evaluations of telling and not telling.

ences in children's evaluations of not telling. There were significant effects of grade, $F(5, 53) = 9.77, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .45$, and of transgression type, $F(1, 53) = 13.92, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .10$. Planned contrasts ($p < .05$) revealed that after controlling for the effect of evaluations of transgressions, children rated not telling about major transgressions more negatively than not telling about minor transgressions. Also, younger children tended to view not telling about both types of transgressions more seriously than older children (see Figure 1a). There was also a significant interaction between grade and transgression type, $F(5, 53) = 13.09, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .49$. Planned contrasts ($p < .05$) showed that independent of evaluations of transgressions, the oldest children showed the most differentiation between major and minor transgressions in their evaluations of not telling (see Figure 1b).

Obligation to Tell and Personal Tendency

Participants' responses to the *obligation to tell* and *personal tendency* questions for major and minor transgressions are shown in Figure 2. As can be seen from Figure 2, results point to similar conclusions as the evaluation of telling and not telling questions. Participants in the younger grades thought that characters were

obligated to tell and that they themselves would tell regardless of transgression type, whereas older children made these evaluations only when transgressions were major. Because these evaluations reached ceiling levels for major transgressions, a one-way analysis of variance was only conducted for minor transgressions. This analysis showed an effect of grade for both the obligation to tell, $F(5, 54) = 45.00, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .81$, and personal tendency questions, $F(5, 54) = 34.96, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .76$, with older children again indicating that they thought reporting was unnecessary.

Discussion

This study investigated developmental changes in the way that 6–11-year-olds evaluate the reporting of peers' transgressions. Participants in all grades approved of the reporting of major transgressions to an authority figure. They also invariably reported that the characters in the vignettes should have told about major transgressions and that they themselves would tell. However, there was a striking age-related shift concerning minor violations in that younger children considered reporting to be appropriate, whereas the older children did not.

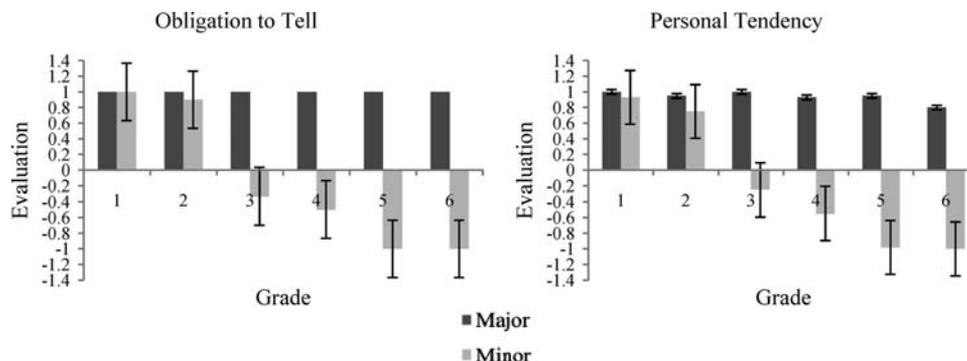


Figure 2. Responses for the *obligation to tell* and *personal tendency* measures were made on a 3-point scale ranging from -1 (*should not tell or would not tell*) to 1 (*should tell or would tell*). Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean.

The developmental change in the moral evaluation of reporting minor transgressions cannot be explained by a failure on the part of young children to differentiate between major and minor transgressions because children clearly differentiated between these transgressions in their ratings for all the measures. These findings build on other research (e.g., social domain theory) suggesting that even young children understand that some rule violations are more morally problematic than others (Turiel, 2008).

One factor that may have contributed to the age-related differences is the role of social experience (Friman et al., 2004). It may be that through experiences, such as observing retaliation against children who have reported transgressions, children begin to interpret the reporting of minor transgressions as signifying an allegiance to authority figures at the expense of an allegiance to peers. It may also be that even before children experience negative social consequences from tattling, they begin to experience a feeling of group alliance that prevents them from wanting to reveal information about peers' minor transgressions to authorities.

A second factor concerns children's developing cognitive capacities. Prior work has documented that as children get older they tend to get better at anticipating the responses that specific statements or actions are likely to elicit from different individuals (Banerjee, 2000; Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990; Gee & Heyman, 2007; Heyman et al., 2007; Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Also, with improving executive functions, such as inhibitory control and working memory (Beveridge, Jarrold, & Pettit, 2002), older children may be better at inhibiting the desire to tell the truth and at considering the perspectives of a range of individuals as they evaluate the appropriateness of reporting a peer's transgression. This may include considering long-term consequences, such as the implications for other children if a transgressor's behavior is allowed to continue. Further, it is possible that older children are better able to interpret the multiple informational components that compose the situation, including the intentions and actions of the individuals in the situation (Wainryb, 1991).

A third factor that may play a role in the age-related differences in the present research is young children's interest in transgressions (Dunn & Munn, 1985; Kalish & Shiverick, 2004; Rakoczy et al., 2008; Wyman et al., 2009). It is likely that by closely observing these incidents and their consequences, children acquire information about how to gain the approval of their caregivers and other

authority figures. It is also likely that many children view reporting on the transgressions of others as a means to demonstrate their knowledge of social rules, to form alliances with authority figures, and perhaps to experience a feeling of moral superiority.

Further research will be needed to examine the generalizability of the present findings. It will be important to examine gender effects, given that it may be considered more normative for girls to tattle than for boys (Giles & Heyman, 2005), and to investigate older children's beliefs in light of evidence that high school students are less likely than middle school students to report that they would inform a school official if they discovered that a classmate was planning to do something dangerous (Syvertsen et al., 2009). In addition, it will be important to follow up on evidence suggesting that stated beliefs predict actual reporting behaviors (Fu et al., 2008) and to investigate the social and cognitive factors that might contribute to the developmental differences observed in children's evaluations of tattling.

Given that our sample was from a primarily middle-class, Caucasian neighborhood, further research will be needed to replicate the findings with a broader sample and with qualitative measures that allow for a more comprehensive view of children's reasoning processes and its correlates. Also, distinctions such as moral transgressions versus social rule violations that may influence children's evaluations should be systematically examined.

The present findings suggest a developmental picture in which young children are eager enforcers of social rules, even regarding transgressions that they consider to be minor. This experience may help prepare children to become participants in broader systems of social order (Wyman et al., 2009). Over time, children become more selective in the types of actions they believe should be reported and consider reporting to be justified only for transgressions that they perceive to be significant.

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