The Language of Intention: Intentionally- and Morally-Laden Verbs Facilitate Young Children's Moral Reasoning

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Introduction

A substantial literature has demonstrated that preschoolers' **ascriptions of intention** and **moral judgments** are initially more heavily influenced by **outcome**, and that they begin to consider characters' **intentions** as they mature.

The language of intention - **on purpose** vs. **by accident** - may be a barrier to younger children's performance on some of these measures.

There are many English verbs that **implicitly mark intention** and include mental state information in their definitions. Some of these verbs have strong **moral connotations** and others do not: **lie** & **steal** vs. **copy** & **hide**

Purpose

We explored whether intentionally- and morally-laden verbs scaffold children's ascriptions of intention and moral judgments.

Method

Participants

- 4- to 7-year-old children (N = 90, M = 72.53 months)
  - 43 Younger (M = 60.27 months) & 47 Older (M = 83.59 months)

Procedure

- Children heard stories about two characters who brought about the same outcomes:
  - Intention: **Knowing** vs. **Unknowing** - across characters
  - Moral Valence: **Negative** (lie & steal) vs. **Neutral** (copy & hide) - across stories

Dependent Measures

- **Implicit** intention: Did Holly/Leo **steal** the game?
- **Explicit** intention: Did Holly/Leo **take the game on purpose or by accident**?
- **Moral Judgment:** Was it good/bad that Holly/Leo did that? How good/bad - a little or a lot?
- **Punishment:** Should Holly/Leo get in trouble for doing that? How much trouble – a little or a lot?

Example:

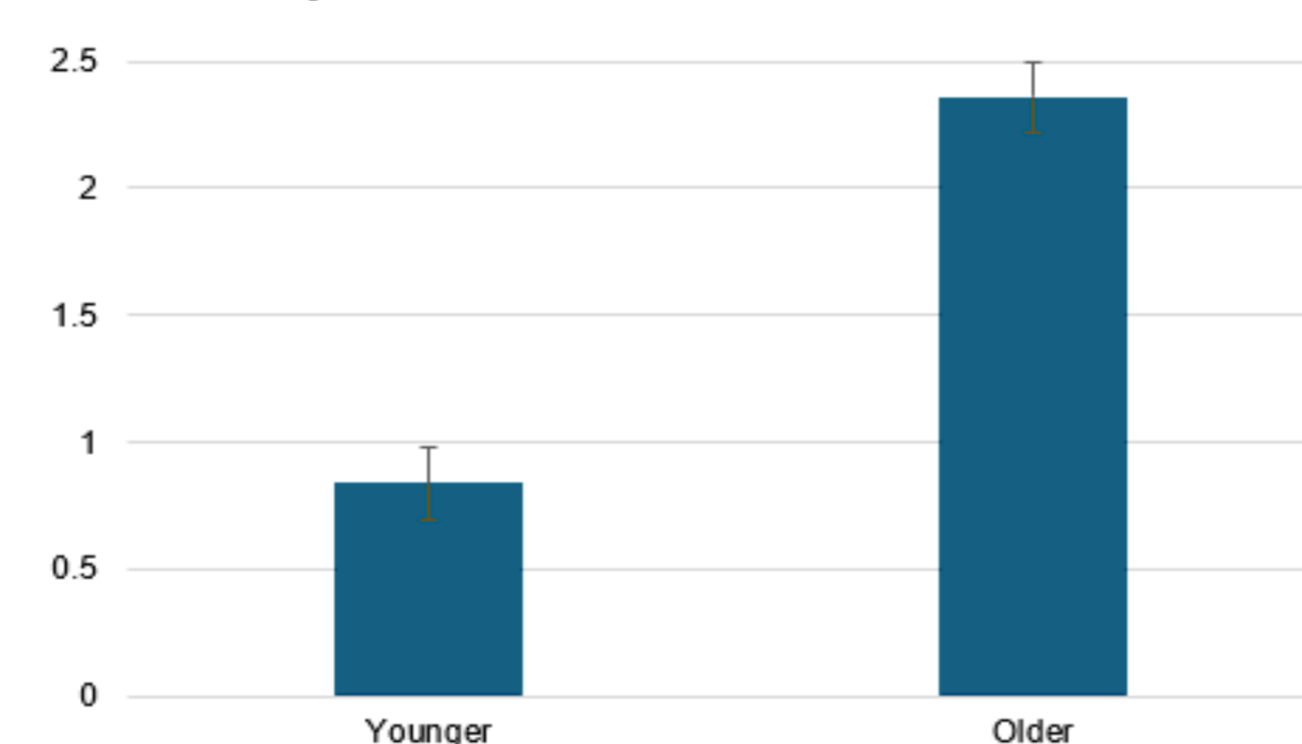**Steal -** Morally Negative

- Holly and Leo are playing video games at Sarah's house after school.
- They finish playing games, and Sarah puts the games on the table near Leo and Holly's school bags.
- It's time for Leo and Holly to go home. Sarah bumps into the table, and the video games fall. One game falls into Holly's bag, and the other game falls into Leo's bag.
- Leo is not looking and does not see the games fall into the bags.
- Holly is looking and sees the games fall into the bags. Holly doesn't say anything about what she saw because she wants to keep the game.
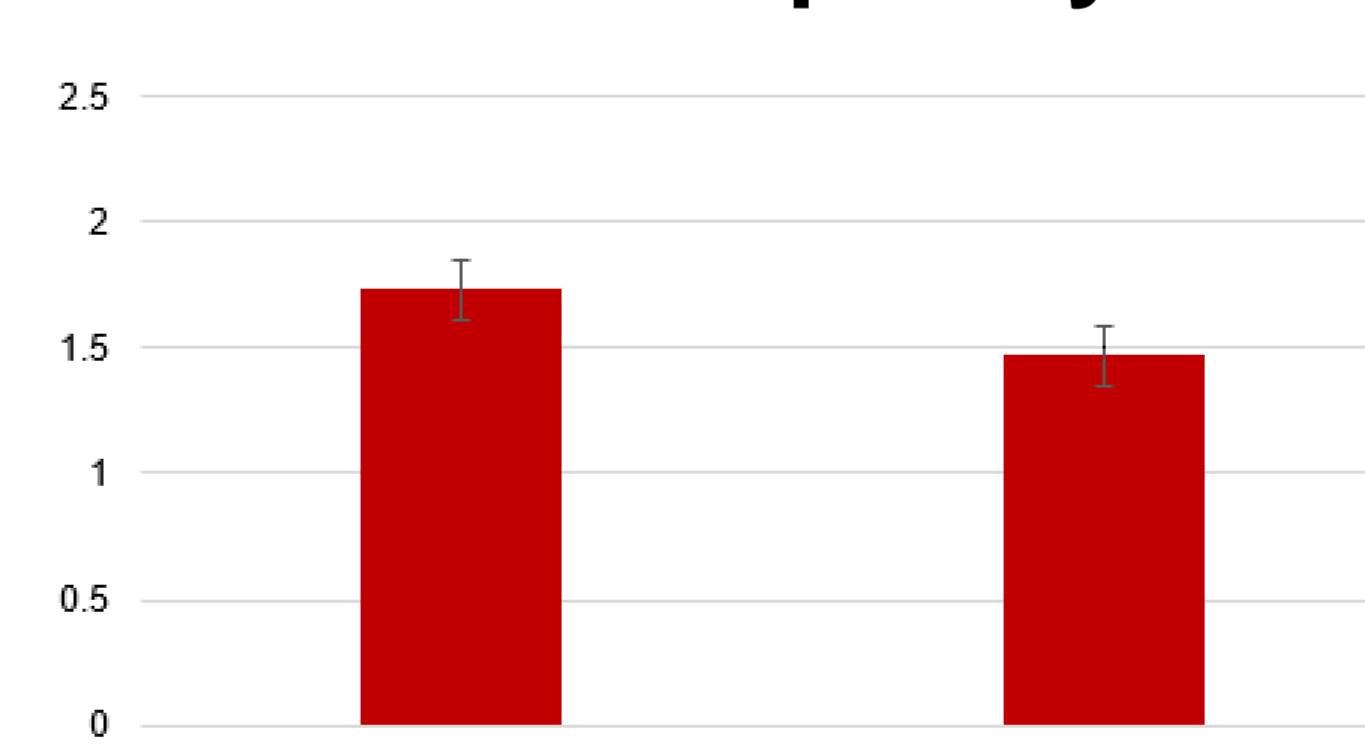- Leo and Holly both left Sarah's house with the video games in their bags

Results

Intention

Age

Older children outperformed younger children
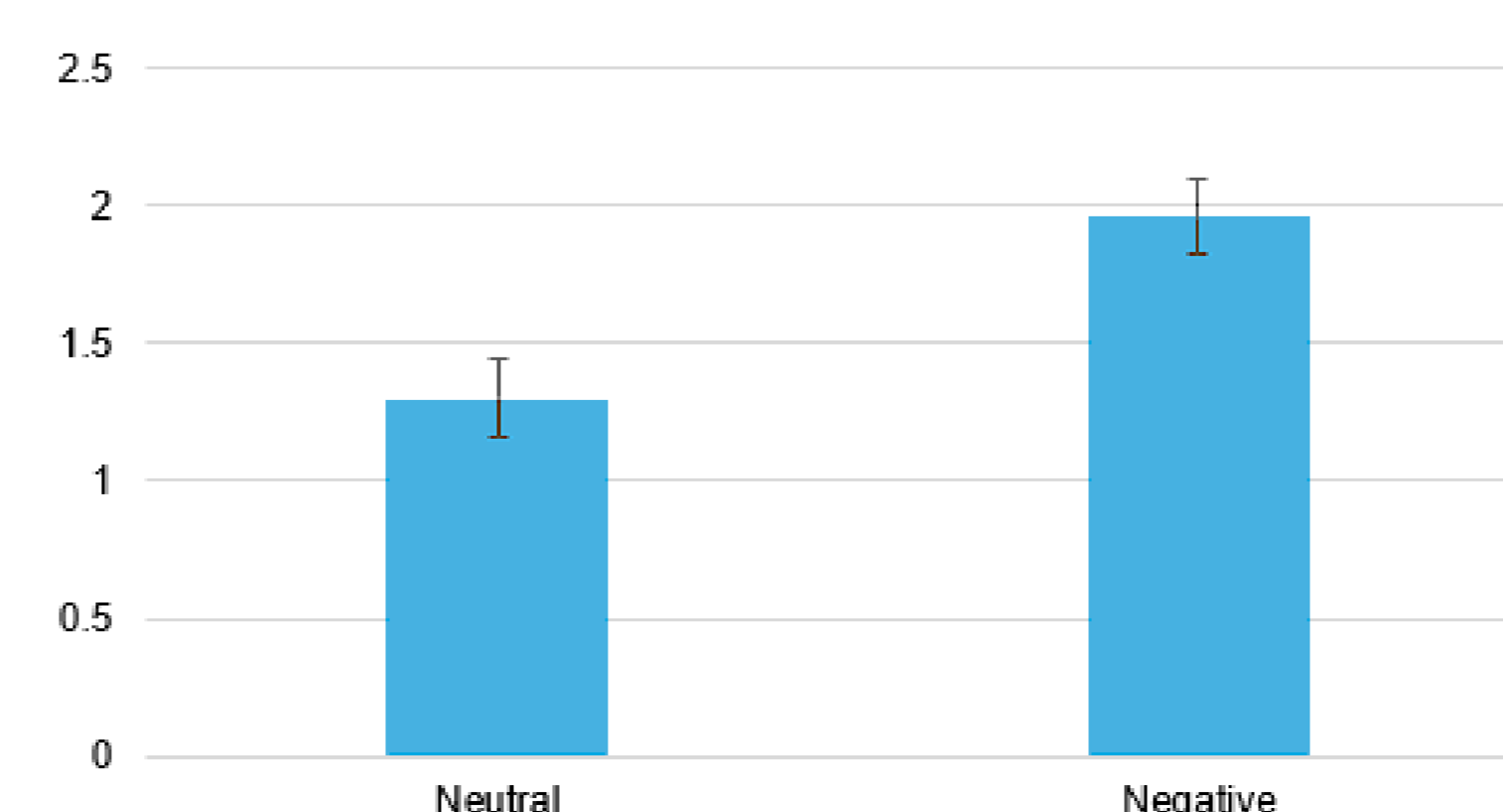

Implicit vs. Explicit

Children were more accurate when asked **implicitly**

Morally Negative vs. Neutral

Children were more accurate for **morally negative verbs**

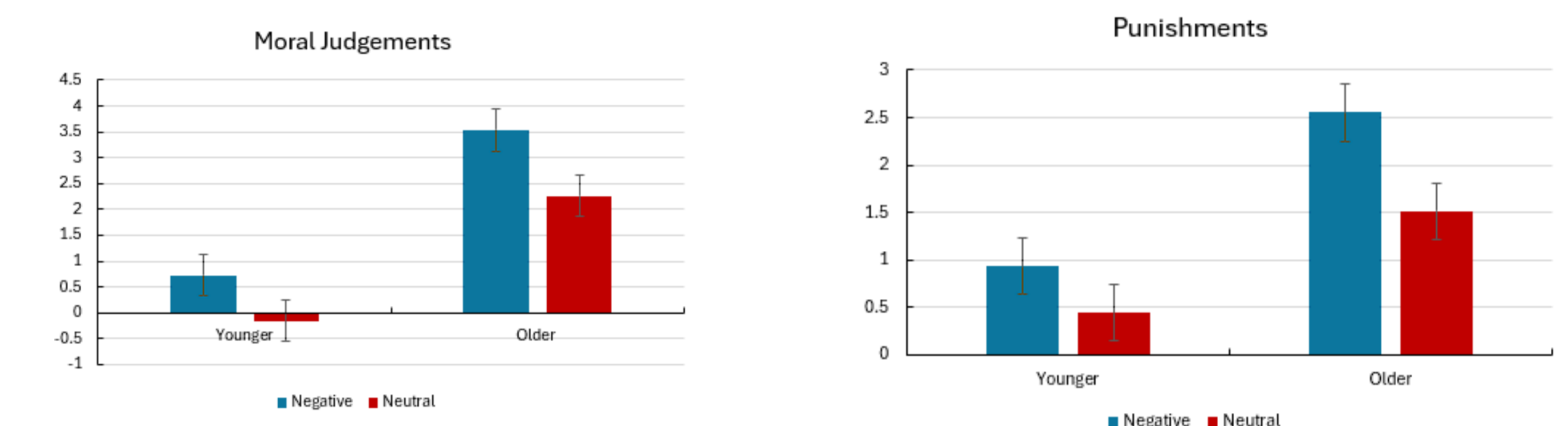## Moral Judgment & Punishment

Difference scores were calculated to capture children's discriminations between the **knowing** and **unknowing characters**

Older children made greater distinctions between between knowing and unknowing characters

All children made greater distinctions for **morally negative** verbs than neutral ones

Discussion

Intentionally- and morally-laden verbs facilitated children's performance in reasoning about characters' intentions

- improving their accuracy in **ascribing intention**
- increasing the **moral distinctions** they made between characters who acted knowingly and those who did not

The language that we use may highlight the **intentionality** and **moral implications** of an character's behaviour for children, facilitating their reasoning about these complex concepts.

Future research should explore whether the language of intention facilitates children's performance via linguistic reasoning that highlights intentionality (e.g., if he is stealing, it is intentional by definition) or whether these kinds of verbs lead children to engage in a different kind of moral reasoning (e.g., stealing is bad and when someone does something bad it engages a specific moral reasoning process).

Scan for Supplementary Materials

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