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# Character Disposition and Behavior Type: Influences of Valence on Preschool Children's Social Judgments

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**ABSTRACT.** The authors studied the influences of valence information on preschool children's ( $n = 47$ ) moral (good or bad), liking (liked or disliked by a friend), and consequence-of-behavior (reward or punishment) judgments. The authors presented 8 scenarios describing the behavior valence, positive valence (help, share), negative valence (verbal insult, physical aggression), and disposition valence (nice or mean) of characters in social interaction with a friend. Overall, character disposition and behavior valence significantly influenced children's judgments. Moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments varied significantly by character disposition for both positive behavior scenarios. In contrast, there were fewer significant findings as a function of character disposition for negative behavior scenarios, suggesting that the negative behavior cue somewhat diminished the effect of character disposition on children's judgments. The authors discuss preschool students' coordination of information about valence of behavior and character disposition and the students' reluctance to judge that misbehavior warrants punitive consequence.

**Keywords:** moral judgment, social cognition, social evaluation

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*The authors appreciate the cooperation of the staff of the participating preschools, the children who participated in the present study, and the parents of the children.*

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YOUNG CHILDREN'S MORAL DEVELOPMENT remains an active research topic (Killen & Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1998). There is now sizable literature on preschool children's understanding of moral concepts (e.g., Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006; Siegal & Peterson, 1998; Smith, 1978; Strichartz & Burton, 1990) and their moral-judgment and social-attribution processes (e.g., Jones & Nelson-Le Gall, 1995; Smetana, 1985; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Researchers (e.g., Berndt & Berndt, 1975; Jones & Nelson-Le Gall; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988; Strichartz & Burton; Wainryb et al.) have noted that children's understanding of moral concepts and the complexity of their moral judgments and social attributions develop beyond the preschool years. Nevertheless, there is evidence that preschool children's moral development is more contextualized and complex than once thought (e.g., Feldman, Klosson, Parsons, Rholes, & Ruble, 1976; Nelson, 1980; Smetana et al., 1999; Sy, DeMeis, & Scheinfeld, 2003). Additional research is needed to further understand preschool students' social cognitive competencies (and limitations), as suggested by their judgments and evaluations given sociomoral events.

In general, research on preschool children's moral judgments and evaluations concerns their (a) understanding and use of features of sociomoral events and (b) emerging coordination of multiple criteria to form moral judgments and evaluations. It is important to note that Piaget's (1965) studies inspired much research on the influences of motive, intentionality, and consequence (outcome) information on preschool children's moral judgments and evaluations of others (e.g., Berndt & Berndt, 1975; Feldman et al., 1976; Irwin & Moore, 1971; Jones & Nelson-Le Gall, 1995; Nelson, 1980). Other researchers have studied topics including factors that influence preschool children's reward allocations (Lane & Coon, 1972; Nelson & Dweck, 1977; Peterson, Peterson, & McDonald, 1975), the influences of outcome foreseeability on preschool children's attributions and moral evaluations of actors (e.g., Nelson-Le Gall, 1984, 1985), preschool children's evaluative judgments within the moral and social-conventional domains (e.g., Smetana, 2006), and preschool children's emotion attributions given moral transgression and rule violation (for an overview, see Arsenio, Gold, & Adams, 2006; Keller, Gummerum, Wang, & Lindsey, 2004; Lagattuta, 2005; Sy et al., 2003).

We investigated the influences of valence (positive and negative) of social behavior and character disposition on preschool children's moral judgments and social evaluations of characters. Studies have suggested that a valence of judgment cue emerges early as a basis upon which moral judgments and social evaluations of others are differentiated. For example, Jones, Parker, Joyner, and Ulku-Steiner (1999) studied preschool children (3-year-old children), first-grade students, and fourth-grade students and found that even among preschool children, actors who engaged in positive behaviors received more favorable moral and liking judgments than did actors who engaged in negative behaviors, but school-aged children's judgments were more differentiated by behavior valence

than were preschool children's judgments. Nelson-Le Gall (1985) found that 3-year-old children, similar to the adults in that study, rated positive events more favorably than negative events. Also, several studies have reported that preschool children can use information about the valence of actor motive and outcome to make moral judgments and evaluations, especially when judgment cue information is explicit and salient (e.g., Berndt & Berndt, 1975; Nelson, 1980; Nelson-Le Gall, 1984).

It is important to note that there is some evidence that preschool children's moral judgments and evaluations tend to be especially influenced by negative valence so that negative cue information diminishes the effect of other relevant cues within the sociomoral event. For example, Lyons-Ruth (1978) found that perceived negative behavior diminished preschool children's use of motive information in moral evaluations of characters. Likewise, Nelson (1980) studied preschool and second-grade children's moral judgments (i.e., whether character is good, bad, or neither good nor bad) and found that negative cue (e.g., motive or outcome) information diminished preschool children's use of the other cue presented in the sociomoral scenario. Such findings suggest that negative valence is a salient cue, and young children tend to place fairly strong emphasis on the negative valence of judgment cues when making judgments and social evaluations of others.

We presented preschool children with information about different characters engaged in social interaction with a friend. We assessed the children's evaluative judgments—specifically moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments—across positive-valence behaviors (i.e., helping and sharing) and negative-valence behaviors (i.e., verbal insult and physical aggression). Typically, studies that assess children's liking judgments ask how much the child likes the characters (e.g., Jones et al., 1999; Lyons-Ruth, 1978; Steinberg & Hall, 1981). In the present study, we asked children their perception of how much the friend likes the character. In the scenarios, a friend is the target of the characters' behavior, and, thus, observers of the behavior may think about or perceive how the friend feels—in this case, liking for the character. Such a judgment encourages children to think about how others feel in a given situation. The consequence-of-behavior judgment assessed children's ratings of the magnitude of reward or punishment that characters should receive. We expected children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments to differ significantly between positively behaved characters and negatively behaved characters. Specifically, we expected the children's judgments of positively behaved characters to be more favorable than their judgments of negatively behaved characters.

The scenarios also varied information about character disposition (statements of likes to be nice or mean to a friend) to study children's use of information about character disposition given behavior that differs by valence. Young children are familiar with the behavioral implications of being nice or mean. However, it is not clear whether the dispositional attributes would influence children's

judgments of characters engaged in behaviors that differ by valence. Conceptually related studies have reported age-related changes in children's trait attributions or predictions of cross-situational behavior when given information about past behavior (e.g., Bennett, 1985; Ferguson, Olthof, Luiten, & Rule, 1984; Jones & Nelson-Le Gall, 1995; Rholes, Newman, & Ruble, 1990; Rotenberg, 1980; Yuill, 1992). Studies have reported important age-related changes, with some 5-year-old children capable of making trait attributions that reflect stable personality characteristics of others (e.g., Ferguson et al.), and researchers have found preschool and young elementary school children to be less likely than older children (typically third grade and beyond) to predict cross-situational behavior from a person's past behavior (e.g., Bennett; Ferguson et al.; Jones & Nelson-Le Gall; Rotenberg). The present study explicitly stated and illustrated character disposition to begin to explore conditions under which preschool children use such information in their evaluative judgments of characters.

Studies that researchers have conducted among preschool children have reported that negative cue information diminishes the effect of other relevant judgment cues and features of the sociomoral event. For example, Lyons-Ruth (1978) found that the influence of motive information on young children's moral evaluations was diminished given information about negative behavior. Nelson (1980) found that the influence of either motive or outcome information on preschool children's moral judgments was diminished because of the negative valence of the other judgment cue. Given these findings, it may have mattered less to children in the present study whether a person is typically nice or mean when the person engages in negative behavior. In the present study, we expected that if negative-valence information (e.g., negative behavior) diminished the effect of other information (e.g., character disposition), then there would be less effect (or fewer significant findings) of character disposition in children's judgments of the two negative behaviors compared with the two positive behaviors.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 47 children (23 girls, 24 boys) who attended private preschools in an urban metropolitan area. The children ranged in age from 4 years, 4 months to 5 years, 11 months ( $M$  age = 4 years, 10 months). The majority of the sample were European American (60%) or African American (34%) children, with the remaining 6% comprising 1 Latino American child, 1 Asian American child, and 1 biracial child. Children were from working-class and middle-income families. We obtained informed written consent from participants' parents or legal guardians. We also obtained verbal consent from all participating children.

### *Materials*

*Judgment scenarios.* We developed eight scenarios to describe different characters interacting with a friend. Each scenario described the characters' disposition, specifically *likes to be nice or mean when interacting with the friend*. Also, the scenarios varied the valence of the characters' behavior—specifically, positive and negative. The positive-valence behaviors were the following: (a) *helping the friend pick up toys* and (b) *sharing a book with the friend*, whereas the negative valence behaviors were the following: (a) *making a verbal insult when talking to the friend* and (b) *pushing the friend to the ground*. We factorially combined the two character dispositions (nice and mean) and the four behavior types to produce the eight scenarios. The Appendix lists the scenarios that we developed for the present study.

*Illustrations.* An artist created line drawings—one for each scenario—on 45- × 28-cm drawing paper divided into two sides by a dotted line. The left side of each drawing depicted character disposition by illustrating the main character greeting the friend while smiling with outstretched arms (the nice disposition) or while frowning with folded arms (the mean disposition). The right side of the drawings illustrated the characters' behaviors, specifically *helping the friend pick up toys* (help scenario), *sharing a book with the friend* (share scenario), *pointing to the friend's easel and saying a drawing looks bad* (verbal insult scenario), or *pushing the friend to the ground* (physical aggression scenario).

*Rating scales.* We developed three 7-point Likert-type rating scales to assess children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior ratings. We used two interchangeable labels to distinguish the *moral judgment rating scale* (how good or bad is the character) from the *liking judgment rating scale* (how much the friend likes or dislikes the character). Both scales comprised three frowning faces of decreasing diameter—scored 7 (*bad/dislike a lot*) to 5 (*a little bit bad/dislike a little*)—and three smiling faces of increasing diameter—scored 3 (*little bit good/like a little*) to 1 (*very very good/like a lot*). In addition, the scales were anchored by a neutral face—scored 4 (*not good or bad/don't like or dislike*). The consequence-of-behavior rating scale comprised three red circles of decreasing diameter to represent punishment—scored 7 (*big*) to 5 (*small*)—and three yellow circles of increasing diameter to represent reward—scored 3 (*small*) to 1 (*big*). This scale was anchored by a white circle to represent no reward or punishment—scored 4 (*none*).

### *Procedure*

We interviewed the children individually at their preschool. We asked the children to listen carefully to the stories about the characters and to look at the

pictures. We informed the children that they would be asked questions about the characters and that there were no right or wrong answers.

Each child was taught and practiced how to use the three rating scales before hearing the scenarios by answering a set of questions that were unrelated to the scenarios. Children did not receive feedback regarding their responses. For example, children practiced using the moral judgment rating scale by answering questions such as “How good or bad is a child who eats all their vegetables at dinner?” and “How good or bad is a child who breaks their friend’s toy?” Children practiced using the liking judgment rating scale by answering questions such as “How much do you like to lose your favorite toy?” and “How much do you like ice cream?” Children practiced using the consequence rating scale by answering questions such as “How much treat or punishment should a child get if she or he fixes her or his sister’s or brother’s broken toy?” and “How much punishment or treat should a child get if she or he breaks her or his mother’s lamp?”

Four scenarios were read to each child, one for each behavior type: help, share, verbal insult, and physical aggression. Each child heard two scenarios that depicted the nice disposition and two scenarios that depicted the mean disposition. We counterbalanced the order of presenting the four scenarios and line drawings across the four behavior types. An example presentation set is the following: nice—physical aggression, mean—share, mean—verbal insult, and nice—help. Thus, across each presentation set of four scenarios, the character’s disposition matched the behavior valence for two scenarios and mismatched the behavior valence for two scenarios. For each behavior type, half the girls and boys heard the version that featured the character with the nice disposition, whereas the other half heard the version that featured the character with the mean disposition. The accompanying line drawing was left in place while we assessed children’s judgments. We counterbalanced the order of assessing children’s judgments across the presentation of the four scenarios, and we recorded all ratings on paper.

## Results

### *Effects of Valence of Behavior and Character Disposition*

We first examined children’s judgments collapsed across the two positive behavior types and the two negative behavior types to examine the influences of behavior valence and character disposition valence on children’s moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior ratings. Pearson correlation analyses of children’s moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior ratings indicated significant findings for only the positive-behavior valence scenarios. Specifically, children’s moral judgment ratings were significantly correlated with their liking ratings,  $r(47) = .32, p < .05$ , and their consequence-of-behavior ratings,  $r(47) = .45, p < .01$ . For this reason, we conducted a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA)—2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (behavior valence)  $\times$  2 (character-disposition

**TABLE 1. Multivariate Analysis of Variance for Children's Moral, Liking, and Consequence-of-Behavior Judgment Ratings**

Source	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$	<i>p</i>	<i>M SE</i>
Behavior valence				
Moral	23.64 <sup>†</sup>	.33	.0001	
Liking	23.32 <sup>†</sup>	.33	.0001	
Consequence of behavior	52.94 <sup>†</sup>	.53	.0001	
Character disposition				
Moral	75.66 <sup>†</sup>	.62	.0001	
Liking	50.15 <sup>†</sup>	.52	.0001	
Consequence of behavior	52.35 <sup>†</sup>	.53	.0001	
B × C				
Moral	0.29	.006	.59	
Liking	0.79	.01	.37	
Consequence of behavior	2.41	.05	.12	
B × C × S within-group error				
Moral				3.06
Liking				3.24
Consequence of behavior				3.52

*Note.* B = behavior valence; C = character disposition; S = subject. For each *F*, *df* = 1. For B × C × S within-group error, *df* = 46.

<sup>†</sup>*p* < .0001.

valence)—on children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior ratings. We pooled data across girls and boys because there were no significant multivariate main or interaction effects involving gender of participant.

There were significant multivariate main effects of behavior valence,  $F(3, 44) = 23.64$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .61$ , and character disposition,  $F(3, 44) = 36.14$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .71$ . There were significant univariate main effects of behavior valence and character disposition for children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments (see Table 1). There were no significant interactions.

Table 2 shows the mean ratings of children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments as a function of behavior valence and character disposition. As expected, children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments were more favorable for positively behaved characters than for negatively behaved characters. Also, children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments were more favorable for nice characters than for mean characters.

#### *Effects of Valence of Character Disposition at Each Behavior Type*

We conducted the next analyses to examine in which scenarios (i.e., share, help, verbal insult, and physical aggression) character disposition affected the



**TABLE 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Moral, Liking, and Consequence-of-Behavior Ratings as a Function of Behavior Valence and Character Disposition**

Judgment	Behavior valence				Character disposition			
	Positive		Negative		Nice		Mean	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moral	3.44 <sub>a</sub>	1.36	4.81 <sub>b</sub>	1.69	2.84 <sub>a</sub>	1.75	5.40 <sub>b</sub>	1.34
Liking	2.70 <sub>a</sub>	1.40	4.04 <sub>b</sub>	1.86	2.48 <sub>a</sub>	1.43	4.25 <sub>b</sub>	1.74
Consequence of behavior	2.65 <sub>a</sub>	0.91	4.07 <sub>b</sub>	1.15	2.61 <sub>a</sub>	1.14	4.12 <sub>b</sub>	0.99

*Note.* Different subscripts within rows indicate significantly different average ratings for behavior valence and character disposition. Scores ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating less favorable judgments. A midpoint rating score of 4 represented the neutral judgments *not good or bad* for moral judgment, *don't like or dislike* for liking judgment, and *none* (i.e., no reward or punishment) for consequence-of-behavior judgment.

children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments. We first conducted Pearson correlations on children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior ratings in each behavior type, and there were some significant findings (see Table 3). For that reason, we conducted a 2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (character disposition valence) MANOVA on the children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments at each behavior type. For each behavior type, we pooled data across girls and boys because there were no significant multivariate main or interaction effects involving gender of participant. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior ratings as a function of character disposition at each behavior type.

*Share scenario.* The multivariate main effect of character disposition was significant,  $F(3, 43) = 17.46, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .54$ . Univariate analyses indicated that the main effect of character disposition was significant for children's moral judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 39.04, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .46$ ; liking judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 12.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$ ; and consequence-of-behavior judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 45.23, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .50$ . As Table 4 shows, the nice character was judged more favorably than the mean character.

*Help scenario.* Children's moral and consequence-of-behavior ratings were significantly correlated. In contrast, children's liking ratings were not significantly correlated with either their moral or consequence-of-behavior ratings (see Table 3). Therefore, we conducted a MANOVA to examine children's moral and

**TABLE 3. Overall Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Each Dependent Variable in Each Behavior Type**

Judgment	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Share scenario					
1. Moral	—	.55**	.79**	3.53	2.63
2. Liking		—	.46**	3.02	2.44
3. Consequence of behavior			—	2.68	1.78
Help scenario					
1. Moral	—	.25	.56**	3.38	2.32
2. Liking		—	.23	2.47	2.78
3. Consequence of behavior			—	2.62	1.81
Verbal-insult scenario					
1. Moral	—	.29*	.43**	4.51	2.49
2. Liking		—	.28*	3.72	2.31
3. Consequence of behavior			—	3.81	1.67
Physical-aggression scenario					
1. Moral	—	.34*	.10	4.98	2.21
2. Liking		—	.38*	4.40	2.36
3. Consequence of behavior			—	4.26	1.75

\* $p < .05$ .\*\* $p < .01$ .

consequence-of-behavior ratings and a separate univariate analysis on children's liking ratings. The multivariate main effect of character disposition was significant,  $F(2, 44) = 5.81, p < .006, \eta_p^2 = .20$ . The main effect of character disposition was significant for children's moral judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 9.73, p < .003, \eta_p^2 = .17$ , and consequence-of-behavior judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 7.80, p < .008, \eta_p^2 = .14$ . Also, the main effect of character disposition was significant for children's liking judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 19.55, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .30$ . As Table 4 shows, participants judged the nice character more favorably than the mean character.

*Verbal-insult scenario.* The multivariate main effect of character disposition was significant,  $F(3, 43) = 6.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$ . The main effect of character disposition fell short of statistical significance ( $p = .07$ ) for children's liking judgments. However, the main effect of character disposition was significant for children's moral judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 14.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$ , and consequence-of-behavior judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 12.92, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$ . As Table 4 shows, children's moral and consequence-of-behavior judgments were significantly more favorable for the nice character than for the mean character.

*Physical-aggression scenario.* The multivariate main effect of character disposition was significant,  $F(3, 43) = 7.85, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .35$ . It is important to

**TABLE 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Judgment Ratings as a Function of Character Disposition at Each Behavior Type**

Behavior type	Character disposition			
	Nice		Mean	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Share scenario				
Moral	1.79 <sub>a</sub>	1.81	5.35 <sub>b</sub>	2.08
Liking	1.92 <sub>a</sub>	1.76	4.17 <sub>b</sub>	2.55
Consequence of behavior	1.46 <sub>a</sub>	1.02	3.96 <sub>b</sub>	1.49
Help scenario				
Moral	2.39 <sub>a</sub>	2.10	4.33 <sub>b</sub>	2.16
Liking	1.48 <sub>a</sub>	0.99	3.42 <sub>b</sub>	1.86
Consequence of behavior	1.91 <sub>a</sub>	1.85	3.29 <sub>b</sub>	1.51
Verbal-insult scenario				
Moral	3.33 <sub>a</sub>	2.29	5.74 <sub>b</sub>	2.09
Liking	3.13	2.30	4.35	2.20
Consequence of behavior	3.04 <sub>a</sub>	1.65	4.61 <sub>b</sub>	1.30
Physical-aggression scenario				
Moral	3.70 <sub>a</sub>	2.32	6.21 <sub>b</sub>	1.17
Liking	3.61 <sub>a</sub>	2.25	5.17 <sub>b</sub>	2.25
Consequence of behavior	3.96	1.84	4.54	1.64

*Note.* Different subscripts within rows indicate significantly different average ratings. Scores ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating less favorable judgments. A midpoint rating score of 4 represented the neutral judgments *not good or bad* for moral judgment, *don't like or dislike* for liking judgment, and *none* (i.e., no reward or punishment) for consequence-of-behavior judgment.

note that the main effect of character disposition was nonsignificant for children's consequence-of-behavior judgments ( $p = .25$ ). However, the main effect of character disposition was significant for children's moral judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 22.12$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .33$ , and liking judgments,  $F(1, 45) = 5.60$ ,  $p < .022$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ . As Table 4 shows, the nice character received significantly more favorable moral and liking judgments than did the mean character.

## Discussion

### *Effects of Valence of Behavior and Character Disposition on Children's Judgments*

Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Berndt & Berndt, 1975; Jones et al., 1999; Lyons-Ruth, 1978; Nelson-Le Gall, 1984), we found that preschool

children differentiate characters as a function of the valence of judgment cues. To our knowledge, moral judgment studies have not varied information about the valence of character disposition as depicted in the scenarios that we presented to the preschool children. The findings of the present study support our hypothesis that information about the valence of behavior and character disposition would influence the preschool children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments. Specifically, we found that characters who engaged in positive behavior were judged more favorably than characters who engaged in negative behavior. Also, the preschool children judged nice characters more favorably than mean characters. These findings suggest that the children found both sources of information, the behavior and character disposition, to be relevant factors upon which to differentiate judgments of the characters.

#### *Negative-Behavior Valence Associated With Diminished Effects of Character Disposition*

It was important to assess children's judgments of characters across both positive and negative social behaviors. Separate examination of each behavior type as a function of character disposition revealed an interesting pattern of judgments. The children's moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments were significantly differentiated by character disposition for both of the positive-behavior scenarios so that nice characters were rated more favorably than mean characters. Most of the children's judgments differed significantly by character disposition for the two negative-behavior valences. The two exceptions were the liking judgments of the verbal-insult character and consequence-of-behavior judgments of the physical-aggressive character. Previous studies with preschool children (e.g., Lyons-Ruth, 1978; Nelson, 1980) have suggested that negative-behavior valence information may diminish the effect of other relevant judgment cues featured in the sociomoral scenario. Perhaps the preschool children in the present study were sensitive to verbal insult and physical aggression, two examples of negative-behavior valence information, and such information somewhat diminished—but did not eliminate—the effect of the character-disposition cue. That is, perhaps the valence of a character's disposition becomes less relevant as a basis upon which to differentiate judgments because of the intentional negative behavior.

#### *Influences of Mean Disposition With Physical Aggression on Children's Judgments*

The participants used 7-point Likert-type rating scales to make their moral, liking, and consequence-of-behavior judgments. Higher average ratings indicated less favorable judgments of the characters, and the midpoint (scored 4) indicated neutral judgments. A close examination of the average ratings indicated that not even physically aggressive behavior resulted in unfavorable ratings given an

otherwise nice disposition. Perhaps the preschool children found positive-valence information—in this case, nice disposition—worthy of consideration so as not to harshly judge and evaluate even the physically aggressive character. Only in the case of physical aggression given mean disposition did children's average ratings of characters reach a relatively unfavorable range of the rating scales (with the exception of consequence-of-behavior judgments). The mean disposition and physical-aggression scenario featured two sources of negative-valence information, and it appears that was the one condition that engendered relatively unfavorable moral judgments and liking perceptions of the character. Likewise, the mean disposition and verbal-insult scenario also featured two sources of negative-valence information, but only children's average moral judgments reached a relatively unfavorable range of the rating scale. Perhaps the negative physical contact (i.e., pushing), given mean disposition, reached a level of transgression that warrants relatively harsh judgment because of the potential physical harm.

These findings support the argument that young children's moral and social judgments are more contextualized and complex than once thought (e.g., Smetana et al., 1999; Sy et al., 2003). The present study suggests that a mean disposition with physical aggression is an important contextual factor that warrants unfavorable moral and liking judgments of characters. The patterns of the children's judgments are interesting and suggest some complexity in their coordination of information about the valence of behavior and character disposition.

#### *Neutral Consequence-of-Behavior Judgments of Negative Behaviors*

Children judged whether characters should receive a consequence of behavior, specifically a magnitude of *reward*, *punishment*, or *no reward or punishment* (the neutral response). The average consequence-of-behavior ratings for the verbal-insult characters and physical-aggression characters were in the neutral range of the rating scale (i.e., *no reward or punishment*). Thus, children were reluctant to judge that even the behavior of physical-aggression characters warrants punitive consequence. Perhaps these ratings relate to the children's own experience of how unpleasant discipline and especially punishment can be. It is plausible that the young children in our study had experienced discipline, perhaps even punishment, because of their misbehavior. Understanding how unpleasant discipline—and especially punishment—can be, perhaps the children tended to not judge that the misbehavior of characters warrants punitive consequence and instead rated even physically aggressive characters in the neutral range.

#### *Limitations*

The present study suggests that it would be fruitful to broaden the scope of research on the contexts of sociomoral events and children's moral and social judgments of others. One limitation is that this study depicted one negative

physical-contact behavior and one negative nonphysical-contact behavior. In the future, researchers need to examine the influences of various physical-contact transgressions and various nonphysical-contact transgressions as contextual aspects of sociomoral events to more fully study any differences (and similarities) across transgressions on children's moral judgments and social evaluations.

Findings of the present study also suggest the need to examine the possibility of age-related changes in children's moral and social judgments as a function of misbehaviors depicted in scenarios. For example, we studied only preschool children and found that the children were reluctant to judge that misbehavior warrants punitive consequences, even given intentional physical aggression. Perhaps a sample of elementary school children would have been more likely than the preschool children to judge that characters should receive some magnitude of punishment given misbehavior. For example, Shultz, Wright, and Schleifer (1986) found that children—5-, 7-, 9- and 11-year-old children—assigned punishment to characters who intentionally caused property damage, and only the 5-year-old children assigned more punishment than did the 11-year-old children.

#### AUTHOR NOTES

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*Original manuscript received May 15, 2008*

*Final version accepted April 7, 2009*



**APPENDIX**  
**Judgment Scenarios**

Scenario type	Behavior type	
	Nice	Mean
Share	This is Tom and his friend. Tom likes to be nice to his friend. Here, Tom is sharing his book with his friend.	This is Tom and his friend. Tom likes to be mean to his friend. Here, Tom is sharing his book with his friend.
Help	This is Mark and his friend. Mark likes to be nice to his friend. Here, Mark is helping his friend pick up toys.	This is Mark and his friend. Mark likes to be mean to his friend. Here, Mark is helping his friend pick up toys.
Verbal insult	This is Dave and his friend. Dave likes to be nice to his friend. Here, Dave is telling his friend his drawing looks bad.	This is Dave and his friend. Dave likes to be mean to his friend. Here, Dave is telling his friend his drawing looks bad.
Physical aggression	This is John and his friend. John likes to be nice to his friend. Here, John is pushing his friend to the ground.	This is John and his friend. Here, John is pushing his friend to the ground.

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