



Intentional or Accidental?


**How understanding the
distinction impacts children's
moral judgements**

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With Sophie Charles, Columbia Social and
Moral Cognition Lab, and Summer
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Morality

moral adjective

 Save Word

mor·al | \ 'môr-əl , 'mär-\

Definition of *moral* (Entry 1 of 2)

- 1 a** : of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior : ETHICAL
// moral judgments
- b** : expressing or teaching a conception of right behavior
// a moral poem
- c** : conforming to a standard of right behavior
// took a moral position on the issue though it cost him the nomination
- d** : sanctioned by or operative on one's conscience or ethical judgment
// a moral obligation
- e** : capable of right and wrong action
// a moral agent

“Moral judgment refers to a decision about what one should do in a morally problematic situation, what is right and what is wrong when deciding what to do.”

Moral Judgement - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics. (n.d.)

The background features a light blue watercolor wash on the left side, with various celestial motifs including a brown planet, a blue planet, and a grey planet with rings. On the right side, there is a large, textured blue planet with a black shadow beneath it, and a small blue planet above it. The overall aesthetic is artistic and scientific.

What We Know from Previous Research



Development of Intention Concepts in Children



Between ages 4 and 6...

Event-Outcome Seriousness → **Motives** of those involved

Piaget 1932

Kohlberg 1964

As children age, their ability to distinguish intention from accident **increases**

King 1971





Behavioral Prediction and Punishment



Behavioral prediction **improves** with age

Behavioral prediction becomes **more difficult** with **noncanonical** causal systems

Older children and adults are more likely to use a **conjunction rule** to assign punishment

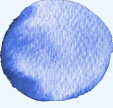
3 and 4-year-olds typically use simple intention or outcome rules

Zelazo, P. D., Helwig, C. C., & Lau, A. 1996





C&C3 at the SAMC Lab



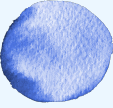
How do children think about other children's actions?

- Should the person who accidentally did something bad get in trouble or should the person who tried to do something bad get in trouble?
- Do you want to learn more about the person who demonstrated prosocial behavior or transgressional behavior?
- How many stickers do you want to take away from the individuals with transgressional behavior?






C&C3 at the SAMC Lab



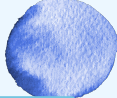
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This person accidentally stole an apple after it rolled into their shopping basket when they weren't looking



This person tried to steal an apple, but it rolled out of their shopping basket when they weren't looking

Which person should get in trouble?
How much trouble should they get into?







My Predictions

Younger Age Group (4-6)

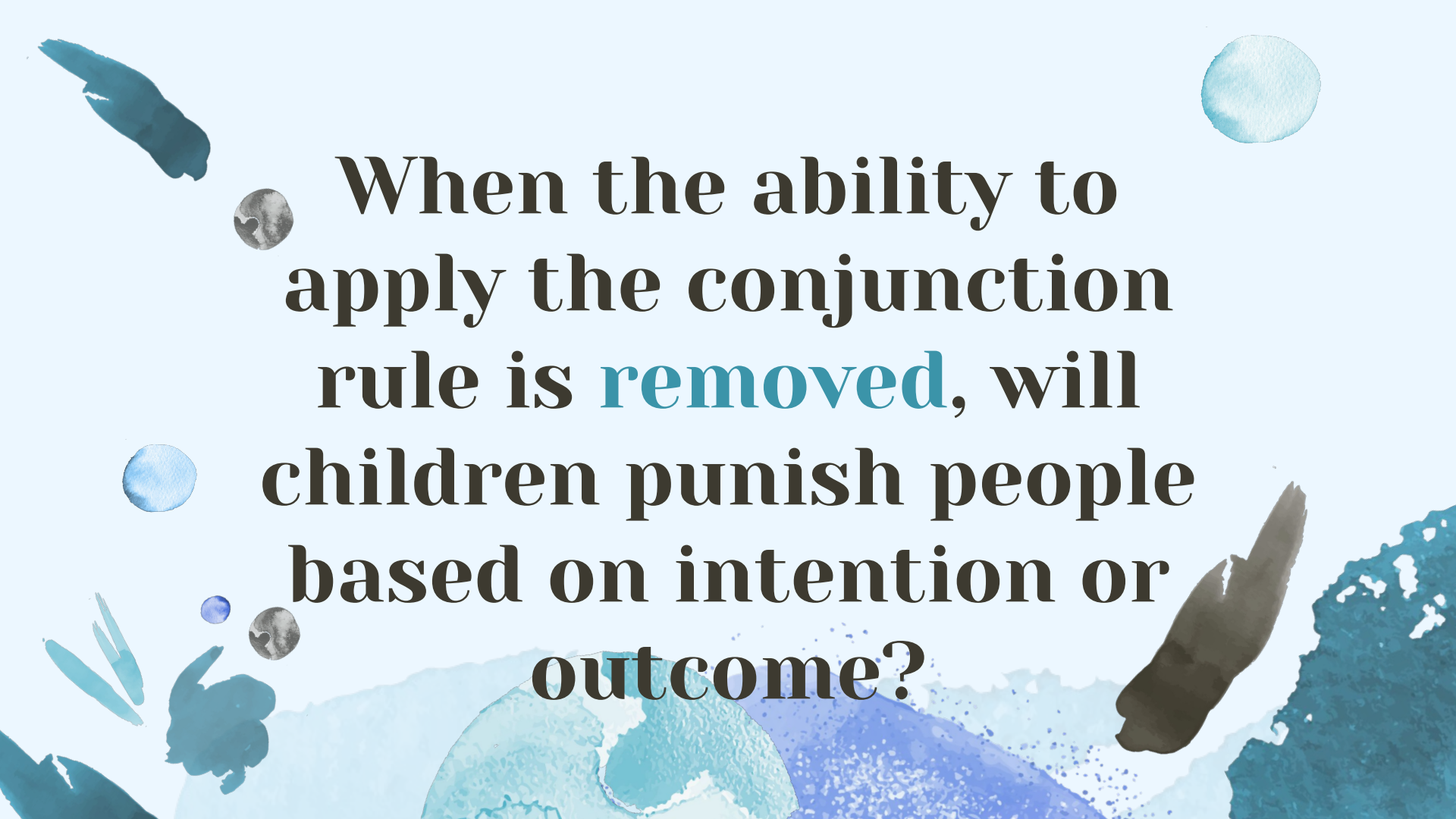
- Will focus more on the **outcome** rather than the intention
- Will, therefore, be more likely to state that **individuals who accidentally do something bad** should get in trouble

Older Age Group (7-9)

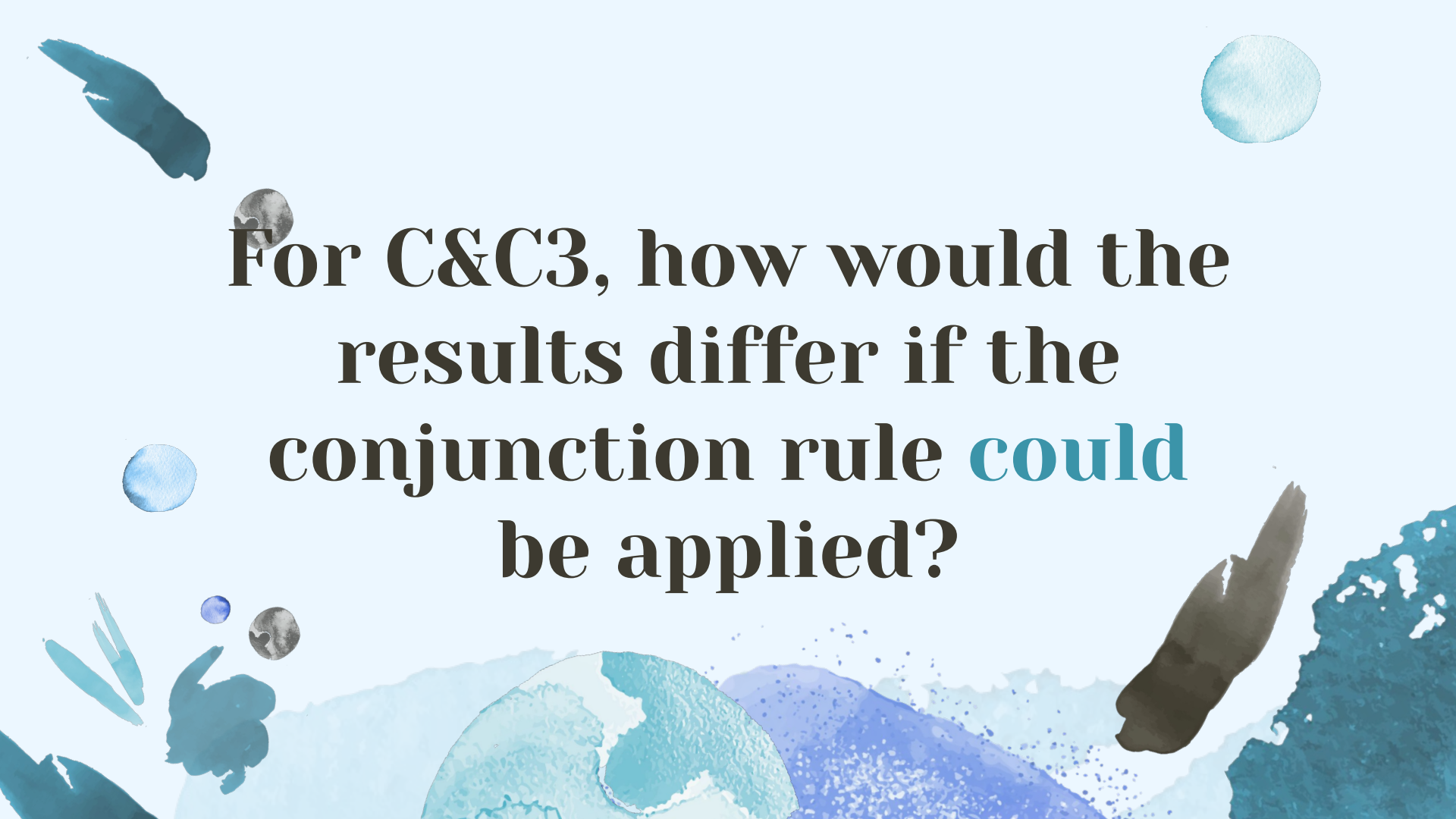
- Will be **more capable** of distinguishing between intention and accident
 - Will place more importance on **intention** rather than outcome
 - Will, therefore, be more likely to believe that **people who try to do something bad (and fail)** deserve to get in trouble
- 
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The background is a watercolor-style illustration of a celestial scene. On the left, a large, light blue, textured shape represents a nebula or galaxy. Scattered around it are several celestial bodies: a small blue sphere, a grey sphere, a brown sphere, and a larger brown sphere with a blue ring. On the right, a large, textured blue sphere with black lines representing continents or features is partially visible, set against a dark, starry background. The overall style is artistic and ethereal.

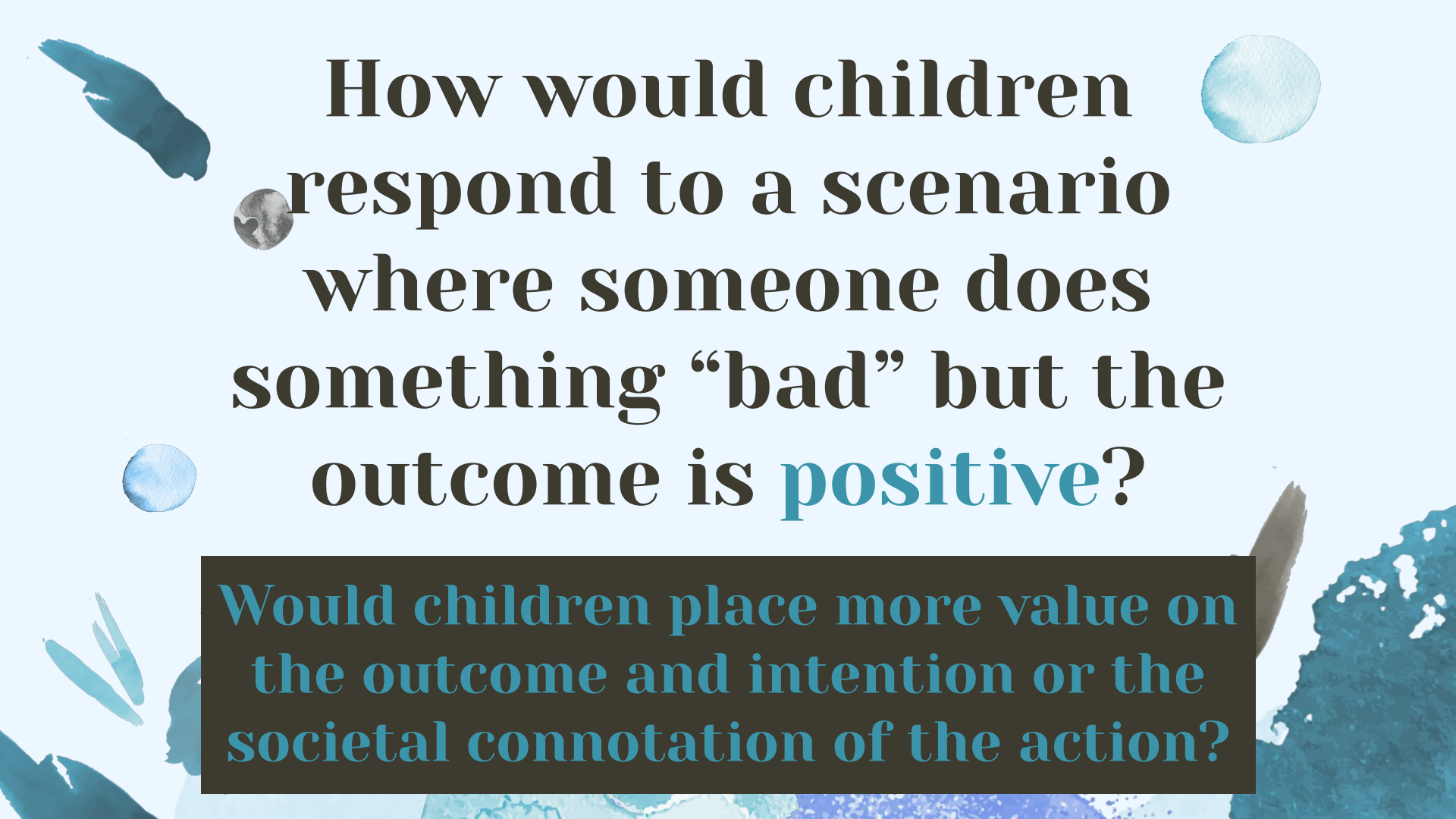
My Questions



When the ability to apply the conjunction rule is **removed**, will children punish people based on intention or **outcome**?



For C&C3, how would the results differ if the conjunction rule **could** be applied?



**How would children
respond to a scenario
where someone does
something “bad” but the
outcome is **positive**?**

**Would children place more value on
the outcome and intention or the
societal connotation of the action?**



THANKS!

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The background is a watercolor-style illustration of a celestial scene. On the left, a large, light blue, textured shape resembles a nebula or a large planet. Several smaller celestial bodies are scattered around it: a dark brown planet, a blue planet, a grey planet, and a brown planet. On the right, a large, textured blue planet is partially visible, with a dark brown planet below it. The overall style is artistic and ethereal.

Questions?

RESOURCES

Zelazo, P. D., Helwig, C. C., & Lau, A. (1996). Intention, Act, and Outcome in Behavioral Prediction and Moral Judgment. *Child Development*, 67(5), 2478. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131635>

King, M. (1971). The Development of Some Intention Concepts in Young Children. *Child Development*, 42(4), 1145. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1127799>

Moral Judgement - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics. (n.d.). [www.sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/moral-judgement). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/moral-judgement>

Merriam Webster. (2014). *Definition of MORAL.* Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral>