IMITATION, EMULATION
AND THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the startling tendency for children to prefer imitation over emulation in various goal-oriented learning situations where emulation might be a more efficient means to reach goals. Young children between the ages of a few months and six years are persistent imitators. Surprisingly, rather than out-growing this behavior as they age, children appear to become even more determined imitators. The tendency to imitate other people’s actions is so prominent that researchers have labeled the behavior “overimitation.” This study was designed to test 4- and 5-year-old children’s ability to switch behavioral tactics between imitation and emulation when changing circumstances cause an emulative strategy to be more efficient than an imitative one. The research involved showing pre-school age children how to open a pair of small puzzle boxes. Demonstrations contained several pointless or irrelevant actions. When given a chance to open boxes, children performed not only necessary actions but also irrelevant actions copied from demonstrators. Even when urged to hurry in their attempts to open boxes, children did not abandon the irrelevant actions of demonstrators. Even offers of special prizes could not persuade this group of children to switch from imitation to emulation. Children’s insistence on using imitation despite the availability of another more efficient copying behavior has been linked with our species’ production of culture.