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Subtle alterations of the physical environment can nudge young children to cheat less

Li Zhao[1] | Yi Zheng[1] | Brian J. Compton[2] | Wen Qin[1] | Wenjin Sun[1,3] | Fang Fang[4,5,6] | Genyue Fu[1] | Gail D. Heyman[2] | Kang Lee[3]

[1] Department of Psychology, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

[2] Department of Psychology, University of California, San Diego, USA

[3] Dr Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

[4] School of Psychological and Cognitive Sciences and Beijing Key Laboratory of Behavior and Mental Health, Peking University, Beijing, China

[5] Peking-Tsinghua Center for Life Sciences, Peking University, Beijing, China

[6] IDG/McGovern Institute for Brain Research, Peking University, Beijing, China

Correspondence
Li Zhao, Department of Psychology, Hangzhou Normal University, No. 2318 Yuhangtang Rd, Yuhang District, Hangzhou 311121, PR China (email: zhaoli@hznu.edu.cn), Fang Fang, School of Psychological and Cognitive Sciences and Beijing Key Laboratory of Behavior and Mental Health, Peking University, No.5 Yiheyuan Rd, Haidian District, Beijing 100871, PR China (email: ffang@pku.edu.cn), or Kang Lee, Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, 45 Walmer Rd., Toronto, Ontario M5R 2X2, Canada (email: kang.lee@utoronto.ca).

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Abstract

Cheating is a common human behavior but few studies have examined its emergence during early childhood. In three preregistered studies, a challenging math test was administered to 5- to 6-year-old children (total $N = 500$; 255 girls). An answer key was present as children completed the test, but they were instructed to not peek at it. In Study 1, many children cheated, but manipulations that reduced the answer key's accessibility in terms of proximity and visibility led to less cheating. Two follow-up studies showed that the answer key's visibility played a more significant role than its proximity. These findings suggest that subtle and seemingly insignificant alterations of the physical environment can effectively nudge young children away from acting dishonestly.

KEYWORDS
accessibility, cheating, nudge, proximity, visibility, young children

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Cheating is a ubiquitous human behavior. It occurs in all spheres of human life, including politics, commerce, relationships, and education. It can have pernicious consequences at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Understanding the developmental origins of cheating behavior in early childhood could shed light on the nature of children's moral decision-making, and it could be used to inform interventions aimed at preventing cheating in early childhood, before this behavior is normalized. The present study addresses this issue by investigating how seemingly insignificant physical environmental cues can influence young children's decisions to cheat.

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