

Social Learning Theory: Seven Factors shown to influence imitation

One thing seems certain: children will imitate anything that they find interesting. Animals, cartoon characters ... anything! The favourite things to imitate are, obviously, parents and family, but nothing really stops the child imitating other things. However, children do not imitate everything they see, otherwise they would be imitating things constantly. So, what does the child imitate? Gross (1992) mentions 7 factors that have been shown to influence imitation.

Consistency:

If the model behaves in a way that is consistent across situations (e.g. always brave) then the child will be more likely to imitate than if the character behaves in different ways depending on the situation. This is true of their response to parents too. This means that “Don’t do as I do, do as I say” does not work!

Relevance:

Bandura et al (1961) showed that the behaviour of the male was seen by boys as more relevant to them than it was to the girls.

Appropriateness:

Bandura et al (1961) showed that male aggressive models were copied more often than female aggressive models. This seems to be because in Western society male aggression is accepted more readily than female aggression. How many female boxers do you see regularly? It reflects the sex-role stereotyping that we constantly see.

Powerfulness:

Models that appear to have more power, be more in control are more likely to be copied than those who are perceived to be weaker.

Similarity:

This is based on the development of the child’s gender identity. Can they classify themselves categorically as male or female? If so, they are likely to imitate the same sex model. This ability is not usually present before the age of about 30 months, so before that time males and females do not discriminate who they will imitate.

Reward:

Bandura et al (1963) showed children films of adults behaving in various ways (from aggressive to simply unusual) and it was found that if children saw the adults being rewarded (reinforced) for the behaviour then this acted as a reinforcement for the children too (this kind of reinforcement is called vicarious reinforcement) and they were therefore more likely to imitate those behaviours.

Friendliness:

Warm and friendly adults are more likely to be imitated than cold, uncaring models. A study by Yarrow et al (1970) showed that children learn altruistic behaviour (helping others for no personal gain) better from people with whom they have already developed a friendly relationship than from people that they do not know. Does this suggest that they child will have to become involved personally with someone before they can learn good values?