

# Can Young Children Understand Commission and Omission on Similar Levels?

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## Introduction

Bad acts are typically carried out through a specific action, or doing something (e.g., killing a person with a knife). However, some bad acts are carried out through inaction, or doing nothing (e.g., ignoring a drowning person). These two types of bad acts are defined by legal and moral systems as acts of “commission” and “omission,” respectively. Little is known about moral judgments related to inaction or omission, except for “omission bias.” This bias means the tendency of adults to judge acts of commission as worse than those of omission when intentions and outcomes are held constant between commission and omission (e.g., Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991; Haidt & Baron, 1996). However, these studies have assumed that the participants already recognize both commission and omission. It is necessary to investigate a more fundamental issue: “Is there a difference in difficulty in recognizing commission and omission?” This study aims to clarify this issue.

If there is such a difference for children, a bad outcome from doing nothing would presumably be recognized at a different age from a bad outcome from doing something. In contrast, if there is no difference in the degree of difficulty in recognizing commission and omission, then these situations should be recognized at about the same age.

## Method

**Participants** Thirty-four Japanese children participated in this study. The sample consisted of 11 5-year-olds (mean age 5:7 years; range 5:3-5:11), and 23 6-year-olds (mean age 6:5 years; range 6:0-6:9) (years: months).

**Materials and Procedure** Two action tasks and two inaction tasks were prepared. The four tasks had two similar stories. Both two stories were that a boy did something (commission) or nothing (omission), where in each case the result was bad for a girl. However, two stories differed only in the boys' mental states. In one story, the boy knew an important fact (X) and could foresee the outcome, whereas in the other story, the boy did not know the important fact and could not foresee the outcome. Accordingly, if the participants understand the boys' mental states, they can judge which of the two boys did worse.

The following three questions were prepared. *Mental state questions* were: “Which boy *knows* (or *does not know*) X?” The answer choices were: “The boy in story 1,” “The boy in story 2,” and “I have no idea.” *Moral judgment questions* were: “Which boy did worse?” The answer choices were: “The boy in story 1,” “The boy in story 2,” and “Both did

about the same bad thing.” In the moral judgment questions, “the boy who knew an important fact (X)” was defined as the only correct answer, and the other two choices were defined as wrong answers. *Control questions* were asked to check whether participants understood and distinguished the two stories, without requiring an understanding of mental states. If participants gave wrong answers to the control questions, they were told the two stories again.

## Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the percentages of correct answers to the mental state questions and the moral judgment questions for the two action tasks and the two inaction tasks. In both the mental state questions and the moral judgment questions, a series of chi-square tests showed that there was no significant difference in the percentages of correct answers between the age groups for each task, and a series of Cochran's Q found no significant differences in the percentages of correct answers between the four tasks for each of the age groups. These results indicate that there is no difference in the degree of difficulty among all four tasks.

Furthermore, in the moral judgment questions, a significant correlation was found between the number of correct answers in the two action tasks and those in the two inaction tasks ( $r = .80, p < .001$ ). This result means that there is no difference in the degree of difficulty between commission and omission. Children can recognize commission and omission on similar levels. Considering the previous studies that explored “omission bias,” there may be a difference in *moral judgments* between acts of commission and omission, but there is no difference in the *ability to recognize* them.

**Table 1: Percentages of correct answers for all four tasks.**

	Action task (1)		Action task (2)	
	Mental state	Moral judgment	Mental state	Moral judgment
5 years	91%	36%	91%	27%
6 years	86%	29%	95%	38%
	Inaction task (1)		Inaction task (2)	
	Mental state	Moral judgment	Mental state	Moral judgment
5 years	100%	36%	73%	45%
6 years	86%	29%	95%	29%

## References

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