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Casey Bowen

Washington University in St. Louis

Alyssa Hunt

Washington University in St. Louis

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MASTERY MOTIVATION IN CHILDREN: CAN INCREASED TASK DIFFICULTY ENHANCE TASK COMPETENCE?

Casey Bowen and Alyssa Hunt

Mentor: Laura Hennefield

Children's motivation to master a task could be malleable based on the task's difficulty, and understanding how to intentionally enhance children's motivation could provide educators with effective strategies to ultimately strengthen learning outcomes. The goal of the present study is to determine whether the initial difficulty of a task impacts children's motivation to complete and master the task, thus serving as a desirable difficulty for children. Children ages 3-8 completed a building task in which they replicated a set of block buildings, beginning with either initially difficult models or initially easy models. Children's persistence to complete the set and their ability to replicate the models correctly were measured as indicators of the child's mastery motivation. The findings demonstrated that younger children, but not older children, were more affected by the initial difficulty of the task, such that younger children who started with the initially easy models demonstrated greater competence than younger children who began with the initially difficult models. Therefore, our results reveal that younger children may be more motivated and thus learn more effectively by starting with easier tasks and working their way up to harder tasks. In this way, task difficulty could be an effective pedagogical strategy to enhance younger children's motivation and subsequent overall performance.