

Imitation, Autism & Theory of Mind:

A comparison of the copying abilities of autistic and normally developing
3 & 4 year-old children on 3 social learning conditions using the
simultaneous chaining task*

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Various researchers have suggested that autistic children have a specific imitation deficit (Rogers, 1994; Rogers and Pennington, 1991). The current study sought to investigate cognitive imitation among autistic children, controlling for motor confounds and feedback provided by the model. An absolute measure of imitation was employed in the current study. Subjects either discovered the answer faster in the imitation condition than at baseline or compared to logical chance. Results suggest that when motor confounds are eliminated from the imitation task, autistic children appear capable of learning serial information from a model. However, when different types of feedback (social, non-social, combination of social and non-social feedback) are provided in the course of learning from a model, autistic children failed to distinguish between social and non-social feedback. This is consistent with the view that this population of children may have a specific deficit in social cognition. to copy abstract information may be a shared-derived catarrhine trait.