

# Psychology - Social Learning Theory

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The media always talk about the films we watch, music we listen to or video games we play. Unfortunately there have been several recent murders involving children shooting schoolmates in the USA and Finland. Each time, the media focus on the influence of violent TV or video games to provide an answer for their behaviour.

Do you think violent TV and video games alone could cause these tragedies?

## Social learning theory as an explanation of aggression

### Observational learning

Children learn through watching other people. When we try to teach child to eat with a spoon, complete a jigsaw or use a pen, we often demonstrate the skill first. The child remembers and copies this action and performs it itself. This is called **observational learning**.

**Modelling** is the act of copying an observed behaviour. If a parent frequently reads books, the child may model this behaviour by picking up books, opening them and turning pages.

Observational learning can take place without modelling; we don't copy everything we see, but we still learn it. It involves four steps:

- Attention: paying attention to the person being observed.
- Memory: being able to remember what we have seen until it is needed.
- Reproduction: being able to act out what we see - this is modelling.
- Motivation: the incentive to copy what has been seen.

### Role models

The person we observe and learn from is called a **role model**. This can be anyone we watch, such as a sporting hero, celebrity, teacher or parent. David Beckham is a role model for most children who like football. They model him by wearing 'his' football shirt and copying his football tricks.

### Identification

We are more likely to model a person who is popular, attractive, a similar age, or the same gender as us. We identify with role models who are like us or that we look up to.

**Identification** is when we adopt the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of a role model. We become like them and believe that we can do what they do.



## Vicarious learning

We are more likely to imitate someone if we think that there will be a reward in it for us. Vicarious learning is when we learn from the fortunes or misfortunes of others. If we see a friend being praised for helping tidy away after a class, we are more likely to model this behaviour. This is known as **vicarious reinforcement**, because the reward we see others receive will motivate us to copy them and get a reward too. However, if we see a friend receiving a detention for being noisy in class we are less likely to model this behaviour. This is known as vicarious punishment, because if we copy we might get a detention too.

Essentially, we are learning through the consequences of other people's actions. We do not have to receive reward or punishment ourselves.

In the 1960s the psychologist Albert Bandura found that children were more likely to copy an adult attacking a large inflatable doll (known as a bobo doll) if the adult was rewarded for it. If the adult was punished the child would be less likely to copy. Bandura's study seems to support the idea that children can learn aggression. He also found that boys were more likely to copy physical aggression than females.

### Do children copy TV and video games?

If we use social learning theory to understand how TV and video games change the behaviour of young children, then we should believe that watching violence could make children aggressive. Young people do watch programmes and play games that are not suitable for their age group, and observational learning of aggression or violent behaviour can occur.

Many children act out the behaviour of their favourite television or video game characters. You only need to watch small children for a little while to be able to pick out the fighting moves of their favourite superheroes or the dance steps of their pop idols.

Children can identify with characters on TV and in video games and believe they can be like them. Many of these characters are rewarded for their behaviour, even if it is aggressive, motivating children to copy them because they feel they will receive a similar reward.

### Evaluating social learning theory as an explanation of aggression

Strengths:

- Bandura's (1961) study supports social learning theory because he found that children do copy aggression.
- Many tragedies, such as school shooting, have been linked to TV and video game violence.



## Weaknesses:

- It could be that aggressive children watch aggression on TV and play violent video games rather than being affected by them. They could be naturally aggressive.
- Many children watch violence but not all children copy it.
- Watching violent TV and video games can actually lower aggression. This is because it acts as a release for natural aggression.
- It is difficult to study observational learning because modelling may take place a long time after it has been observed or may never have taken place at all.

## Key definitions

**observational learning:** the process of learning from watching others

**modelling:** observing, identifying and copying the behaviour of a role model.

**role model:** a person who is looked up to and copied.

**identification:** a feeling of similarity with a role model that leads to the imitation of their behaviour - we believe we can be like them.

**vicarious reinforcement:** learning through the positive consequences of other people's actions rather than firsthand - we are more likely to copy if they are rewarded.