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## Impact of parenting, reward, and prior achievement on task persistence

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test the impact of reward, prior achievement, parenting style, and parents' educational and income levels on second graders' task persistence in the face of a challenging task. The participants were 179 s graders enrolled in one of three public schools in the Şanlıurfa. Participants were randomly assigned to success, no-reward, and reward groups. On the pre- and posttest, participants' task persistence was measured through engagement with an unsolvable labyrinth puzzle. Stepwise multiple regression was calculated to predict students' task persistence based on students' gender, mother and father education, income, parenting styles, pretest results and experimental grouping (success, no-reward, reward). Regression analyses pointed only to reward as a significant predictor of students' task persistence. Students' task persistence decreased on average 421 s when a reward was removed. Task persistence for the success and no-reward groups was significantly higher than for the reward group.

### 1. Introduction

Motivation has been defined as “the process whereby goal-directed behavior is energized and sustained” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 49). This definition emphasizes two dimensions of motivation. First, motivation works to initiate goal-directed behavior. After the behavior has started, level of motivation also determines the sustainability of the effort to reach the goal. The amount of time and effort that a person allocates to attaining a predetermined goal can be called task persistence. Weaver, Watson, Cashwell, Hinds and Fascio (2003) defined task persistence as “the percent of intervals spent on task during each condition” (p. 363). For this study, the operational definition of task persistence was a child's endurance when engaging with a challenging, problem-solving and learning task.

Task persistence is a requirement for achieving any task at hand. Any subject we wish to master requires working and learning. Therefore, we must exhibit task persistence to learn, succeed and improve (Wallace, Ready, & Wietenhagen, 2009). Task persistence at age 13 was found to be a significant predictor of income, occupation level and educational attainment in middle adulthood (Andersson & Bergman, 2011). Several studies have addressed task persistence as a predictor of cognitive development and academic achievement throughout the life span from early childhood to adulthood (Banerjee & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Deckard-Deckard, Petrill, Thompson, & DeThorne, 2005; Martin, Ryan & Brooks-Gun, 2013). Therefore, scholars have claimed that increased motivation may cause an increase in effort and task persistence that concludes with better performance, better learning and better cognitive performance (Logan, Medford, & Hughes, 2011; Young & Hauser-Cram, 2006). Besides academic achievement and cognitive performance, a negative association between task persistence and behavioral problems has been found (Deckard-Deater et al., 2005). In another study, a positive relationship was found between school readiness outcomes and task persistence among kindergarten children (Berhenke et al., 2011). In a longitudinal study, Martin et al. (2013) found that persistence at age 3 predicted all

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academic skills at age 5. These studies revealed the importance of task persistence on children's academic and cognitive development. Therefore, it is reasonable to examine factors that affect task persistence among young children. Findings will help educators and other related professionals such as educational psychologists and social workers to find ways to improve task persistence. This study examined the impact of performance contingent rewards, prior success and parenting styles on young children's task persistence.

Although the plethora of studies and meta-analyses have shown that tangible rewards have detrimental effects on students' intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Deci, Koestler, & Ryan, 1999; Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 2001; Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999) rewards are widely used in education by parents and teachers to improve motivation and through motivation, task persistence (Moberly, Waddle, & Duff, 2005; Smith, 2004; Yilmaz and Babaođlan, 2013). From teaching academic skills such as mathematics, to behavioral skills such as delayed gratification (Lee, Lan, Wang, & Chiu, 2008), rewards are used by educators. From kindergarten to the university, the reward-punishment paradigm is part of our educational system. Moberly et al. (2005) examined the use of reward and punishment by prekindergarten–grade 3 teachers. They found that the majority of teachers (98%) were using extrinsic rewards such as stickers, candy, soda, tickets for later purchases, and points toward later purchases, as their main source of motivation. A study conducted in Turkey by Yilmaz and Babaođlan (2013) had similar findings. They examined use of rewards and punishment by grade 1–5 teachers. Their findings were congruent with those of Moberly et al. (2005). They reported that the majority of the teachers (82%) were using psychological, social, and contingent rewards. These studies revealed that the reward-punishment paradigm was still a major part of educational practices.

There are several types of rewards such as verbal rewards, unexpected rewards, task noncontingent, engagement contingent, completion-contingent and performance contingent rewards (Deci, Koestner et al., 1999). Performance contingent rewards were defined by Deci, Koestner et al. (1999) as “rewards given for performing an activity well” (p. 695). Performance rewards are the most commonly used reward type (e.g., grades, report cards) in the education system (Deci, Koestner et al., 1999; Moberly et al. (2005); Yilmaz and Babaođlan, 2013). Because rewards are widely used in education, many studies have investigated the impact of rewards on students and learning (Cameron, 2001; Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Marinak and Gambrell, 2008). Deci and Ryan (2000) constructed self-determination theory (SDT) to add new insights into the working mechanisms of reward.

Through the application of SDT, Deci and Ryan (2000, 2008) claimed that “people are by nature active and self-motivated, curious and interested, vital and eager to succeed because success itself is personally satisfying and reward” (p. 14). In other words, people like to be in charge of their own actions and behaviors rather than controlled by a higher authority with the power to dispense rewards. Although some studies have maintained that performance contingent rewards do not undermine task persistence (Cameron, 2001; Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Marinak and Gambrell, 2008), the plethora of studies and meta-analyses have shown that performance contingent rewards have detrimental effects on task persistence (Deci, Koestner et al., 1999, Deci, Koestler et al. 1999; Deci, Ryan et al., 2001; Deci, Koestner et al., 2001). To the author's knowledge, no study has examined the impact of rewards on second graders' task persistence in Turkey. We wanted to test this phenomenon with our sample.

Parents (caregivers) are one of the most important outside factors that may positively and negatively affect children's development, attitudes, and behaviors. Parents' socio-economic level (parents' level of education and income) have been emphasized as among the most important key indicators for child development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The impact of parenting styles on children's cognitive (Bee et al., 1982; Pettrill & Deater-Deckard, 2004), socio-emotional development (Alegre, 2011; Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003), and academic achievement (Attaway & Bry, 2004; Boon, 2007) have been very well documented. Parenting practices also have been found to be associated with children's task persistence development.

Studies have revealed that autonomy in supportive, responsive, and warm parenting practices have positive impacts on young children's task persistence (Deckard-Deater, Pettrill, Thompson, & DeThorne, 2006; Martin et al., 2013; Pettrill & Deater-Deckard, 2004; Young & Hauser-Cram, 2006). This autonomy supports the development of mastery motivation in children. Mastery motivation represents a desire to develop competence and increase knowledge and understanding through effortful learning (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; Murphy & Alexander, 2000). Mastery-oriented people perform a task or learn a subject just for its own sake and not to gain an outside reward. Therefore, mastery orientation has been related to intrinsic motivation and task persistence (Sideris & Kaplan, 2011; Vlachou & Farrell, 2000). Kelley, Brownell and Campbell (2000) revealed that mothers who established more autonomy-supporting control, provided corrective feedback and gentle support for their 2-years-olds while their toddlers worked on challenging task had children who displayed more task persistence at age 3 than children whose mothers were less supportive and more critical of their efforts. In sum, these studies emphasized parenting as an indicator of children's task persistence. Therefore, we examined the impact of parenting style on children's task persistence.

This study classified parenting styles according to Baumrind's (1967) typology: indulgent, authoritarian and authoritative. Protective parenting, which is very common in Turkey, was added as another category (Cücelođlu, 2015). Indulgent parents exercise little control and make few demands of their children. They are neither critical nor demanding and do not engage in punitive or traditional discipline. Parents try to meet every demand and reward even simple achievements (Alegre, 2011; Baumrind, 1967, 1991; Boon, 2007). Authoritarian parenting may involve interacting with children in an angry, non-responsive, critical and intrusive manner (Alegre, 2011; Baumrind, 1967, 1991; Boon, 2007; Türkel & Tezer, 2008). Authoritarian parents exert extrinsic control over methods such as rewards and punishments to ensure their children's obedience to authority, rules and standards (Alegre, 2011; Baumrind, 1967, 1991; Boon, 2007; Türkel & Tezer, 2008). Studies have shown that children of authoritarian parents are performance-oriented and have an extrinsic locus of control and low self-regulation skills (Boon, 2007; Cohen, Biran, & Gross-Tsur, 2008). Therefore, authoritarian parenting practices damage the autonomy development of children (Suldo & Huebner, 2004). Authoritative parenting is characterized by being caring, supportive, warm, responsive and demanding. Authoritative parents support the autonomy of their children (Baumrind, 1991, 1967; Boon, 2007). Studies have shown that the children of authoritative parents are intrinsically motivated, mastery-oriented, interested in learning, and have high self-esteem and autonomy (Boon, 2007; Cohen et al.,

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