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Children's understanding of disclaimers

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### Abstract

Individuals who anticipate poor performance on some imminent task often offer disclaimers – verbal statements which serve to protect them from negative social evaluation by dissociating the poor performance from their identity. In the present study, 7- to 14-year-olds (N = 226) responded to hypothetical vignettes where the protagonists either used or did not use a disclaimer when telling a peer audience that they did not expect to perform well on an imminent task. Children made predictions about the evaluations that the peer audience would form of the protagonists, regarding both their imminent performance and their typical performance. Children over 10 years of age recognised that a disclaimer would lead the audience to form a more favourable impression of the protagonists' typical performance. Further, boys who were more preferred by their classmates tended to have a better understanding of the social evaluation consequences of using a disclaimer. Results are discussed in the light of research on children's growing self-presentational awareness.

**Keywords:** disclaimer, self-presentation, impression management, social cognition, peer relations, defensive tactics

### Children's understanding of disclaimers

Research on self-presentation tactics – tactics that are used to control the impressions that an audience will form of an actor (Goffman, 1959) – often distinguishes between assertive and defensive self-presentational tactics (Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999). Assertive tactics, such as ingratiation and self-promotion, are used proactively to establish an impression in one's audience (i.e., appearing likeable or competent, respectively). On the other hand, defensive tactics such as excuses and disclaimers are used to protect a desired self-image that one believes is in jeopardy of being altered negatively. Defensive tactics are important for instances when social norms or an audience's expectations are violated; the individual must know how to lessen the audience's anger or decrease disapproval (Juvonen, 1996).

Much research to date exploring the use and implications of self-presentational tactics has tended to focus on positive self-presentation (individual's attempt to receive approving judgments from others; Tyler & Feldman, 2005). For instance, it may involve making a statement that will allow others to think of oneself in a positive way (e.g., using ingratiation or self-promotion) or to circumvent others from thinking of oneself in a negative way (e.g., using apologies, excuses and self-handicapping). In line with invoking positive judgments of the self in others, the use of self-presentational tactics has been shown to be related to individuals' desire to create and maintain a positive public image; for instance in the adult literature, individuals who are higher in social anxiety (Lee et al., 1999), have lower self-esteem (Elliot, 1982), report lower autonomy (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005), and are higher on self-monitoring (Klein, Snyder, & Livingston, 2004) use self-presentation tactics more often in an effort to create a positive impression (i.e., will make a statement to an audience to create or maintain a desired self-image). More recently, Banerjee and Watling (2010) have found that children who are more socially anxious use self-presentational tactics more often, even though they are less able to differentiate between audiences. Given these aforementioned relationships it is important to understand when children come to understand the social evaluative function of self-presentational tactics.

A number of studies have evaluated children's use of and understanding the effectiveness of assertive tactics, such as ingratiation and self-promotion (Aloise-Young, 1993; Banerjee, 2000; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990a, 1990b; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, b; Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982), and of defensive tactics, such as apologies, excuses, and self-handicapping (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989; Juvonen & Murdock, 1993, 1995; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998). Research on children's use of self-presentational tactics traditionally observes what tactics children use in experimental settings (e.g., if they want encourage someone to choose them as partner in a game they will be asked to describe themselves and their responses would be coded; e.g., Aloise-Young, 1993). In contrast, researchers exploring children's understanding of self-presentation tend to use hypothetical social stories where a protagonist makes a statement (specifically, a self-presentational statement) and children are asked to judge, depending on the tactic, the appropriateness, effectiveness (e.g., likelihood of an outcome, likelihood of being punished), and/or character evaluation. Children demonstrate an understanding of the effectiveness a tactic if their judgments are in line with the goal of the tactic (e.g., ingratiation will lead to a more favourable character evaluation, while self-promotion will lead to a greater likelihood of achieving some desired outcome; Watling & Banerjee, 2007b). However, as highlighted above, these are primarily positive statements about the self to detract from negative

evaluations of the self. Very little research has focused on negative statements about the self that are used as self-presentational tactics.

While researchers to date have tended to primarily focus on presenting oneself in a positive light, the current study focuses on children's understanding of how presenting negative information about the self can influence audience's judgments about the presenter. In some situations individuals may judge it necessary to present oneself negatively. One clear example of this would be in the use of disclaimers: if an individual believes that he or she is about to behave/perform in a manner that will be perceived poorly by their audience they may wish to offer an explanation for this poor behaviour/performance prior to the event, thereby using the disclaimer as a self-presentational tactic. Very little is known about children's appreciation of the disclaimer as a self-presentational tactic, even though this is an important strategy used to protect one's identity from anticipated social-evaluative threat in the future. The present study examines children and adolescents' (aged 7 to 14 years) understanding of how negative self-presentation (i.e., disclaimers) can influence an audience's evaluation of the self.

As noted above, some existing studies have already examined children's reasoning about excuses, which are closely related to disclaimers. An excuse is a retrospective self-presentational tactic used to deny responsibility for a negative event that has already occurred, and thereby defend one's desired identity (Lee et al., 1999). Juvonen and Murdock (1995) showed how young adolescents in eighth grade provided differentiated explanations for academic failure depending on their audience. For example, they were more likely to offer a 'lack of effort' explanation to their peers than to an adult audience. The excuses provided were clearly influenced by self-presentational motives: pupils of this age were found to believe that a less diligent student would be viewed as more popular by their peers. Furthermore, the basic idea of providing retrospective 'accounts' (e.g., apologies, excuses, justifications) to minimise the negative impact of misconduct or poor performance is also relevant to younger children. Much and Shweder (1978) report use of such accounts even among kindergarten children, and experimental studies show that primary school children can reason about the different impact of negative events when apologies or excuses have or have not been offered (e.g., Banerjee, Bennett, & Luke, 2010; Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994). Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that primary school children are able to take motive and context information into consideration when evaluating how others describe themselves (Gee & Heyman, 2007).

Disclaimers are of particular interest because although they also offer a potential explanation for expected poor conduct or task performance, they are offered *prior* to the relevant event/task rather than afterwards (Lee et al., 1999). They have been formally defined as:

a verbal device employed to ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct. Disclaimers seek to define forthcoming conduct as not relevant to the kind of identity-challenge or re-typification for which it might ordinarily serve as a basis (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975, p. 3).

Disclaimers provide reasons to expect poor performance on a given task, but the reasons are carefully delimited in such a way that any such poor performance would not reflect negatively on the actor's identity. For example, "I'm not an expert on flowers, but ..." implies that subsequent statements about flowers might not be accurate, but also that any inaccuracies should not reflect badly on the audience's impression of the actor in general.

Although Hewitt and Stokes (1975) explored how disclaimers were used and received, little empirical work has been conducted on the understanding of the strategic use

of disclaimers in either adult or child populations. One exception is a study by Bennett (1990), involving an investigation into children's understanding of the mitigating function of disclaimers. Bennett had 5-, 8-, and 11-year-olds listen to a short story, which was either focussed around a child protagonist being asked to give assistance with either washing dishes or trying to calm an upset baby. In each story, the child agrees to help, with half of each age group hearing a disclaimer (e.g., "I'm not very good at washing dishes/holding the baby"; p. 32) and half of each age group hearing just the agreement to help, without any disclaimer. The child then proceeds to either drop and smash a plate or drop and badly hurt the baby. After the story, children were asked if the protagonist should be punished. Bennett found that only the oldest children were significantly less likely to recommend punishment when a disclaimer was offered than when no disclaimer was offered, although the 8-year-olds did demonstrate a similar pattern. Furthermore, 79% of the 11-year-olds, 46% of the 8-year-olds, and 25% of the 5-year-olds explicitly referred to the disclaimer as a reason for not punishing the child. This study suggests that by the end of primary school, children can understand at least one potential benefit of using a disclaimer.

Notwithstanding Bennett's (1990) important preliminary study on reasoning about disclaimers, there is still a key unresolved question: Do children appreciate the consequences of a disclaimer in terms of the *public identity* of the actor? In particular, the disclaimer is likely to have two social evaluation outcomes. First, it creates the expectation that the actor could behave or perform poorly on the imminent task. However, it also implies that any such poor performance should not reflect negatively on the actor's identity. Recognising these distinct social evaluation consequences is a critical part of understanding the disclaimer as a self-presentational tactic. The present study focuses specifically on children's appreciation of the social evaluation consequences of using disclaimers.

We know from research on children's understanding of assertive tactics, such as ingratiation and self-promotion, that children are aware of specific self-presentation motives to shape social evaluation from around 8 to 10 years of age. For instance, researchers have demonstrated that between the ages of 8 and 10 years children understand that to create a more favourable impression it is good to be modest and not good to be immodest (Banerjee, 2000; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a; Yoshida, Kojo, & Kaku, 1982). In fact, children at this age recognize that ingratiation (statement that is employed to make others think positively about the self; e.g., stating something nice about the audience) and self-promotion (statement that is employed to make other think one's accomplishments are more positive than previously believed; e.g., being overtly positive about one's own ability/attributes) both have social evaluation motives (Aloise-Young, 1993; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990a, 1990b; Watling & Banerjee, 2007b).

In contrast to the understanding of assertive tactics, it is expected that the understanding of disclaimers may appear later than the understanding of assertive tactics. First, it seems likely that children will first be interested in tactics to establish a positive identity, and then later become focused on using defensive tactics to maintain their desired identity. Indeed, children's public image first becomes a salient issue during the primary school years (Parker and Gottman, 1989), so there is likely to be an emphasis on actively constructing a positive image. In contrast, the understanding of particular defensive tactics to protect one's desired image from threat (i.e., being aware of how specific tactics may protect one's desired image from being altered in a negative or unwanted way) should typically follow in later years. This is especially the case for understanding disclaimers, which involve the strategic use of identity-protecting statements to avoid negative evaluation following *anticipated* negative conduct or poor performance in the future; particularly where our stories involve the protagonist offering a statement with negative self performance expectations,

which initially may appear to be in contrast to the motivation to present oneself positively. The use of a disclaimer involves: 1) recognition of the fact that one's desired public identity is in danger of being altered negatively; 2) a self-presentational motivation to avoid such negative alteration; 3) a statement that prepares the audience for an imminent negative performance; and, most importantly, 4) an explanation that downplays the extent to which any such negative performance is identity-changing (see Hewitt and Stokes, 1975). The fact that all of this is taking place before any negative performance has actually occurred means that considerable abstract reasoning is required, and there is good evidence that this develops substantially in the second decade of life (Kuhn & Franklin, 2006). Thus, we predict significant improvements with age in the understanding of effectiveness of the disclaimers in mediating social evaluation.

Given the lack of research on this topic, we sought to gain a first insight into this understanding by examining children's and adolescents' predictions about the social evaluation consequences of disclaimers. For this purpose, we needed disclaimers that would acknowledge the likelihood of poor performance on a given task, but that could also successfully dissociate that poor performance from the actor's identity. There are many different kinds of disclaimers, and El-Alayli, Myers, Petersen, and Lystad (2008) have recently shown that many disclaimers used in everyday life simply do not fulfil their intended self-presentational function (e.g., "I'm not racist/lazy/selfish, but ..." often reinforces the very impression the disclaimer is designed to avoid). In the present study, we follow Lee et al.'s (1999) operationalisation of disclaimers in terms of *explanations given in advance of anticipated poor performance*. The disclaimers always took the form of a specific, transient reason for poor performance *on that particular day* that could serve to protect the protagonist's public identity with respect to the relevant ability. Using such a tactic (e.g., telling others "I hurt my foot last night" before an imminent race) not only acknowledges the likelihood of poor performance in the immediate future, but also implies that any such poor performance should not be taken as a reflection of one's true ability. Thus, the use of this tactic should fulfil the key defensive goal of protecting one's public identity from being altered negatively.

In the investigation reported below, we created hypothetical scenarios where the protagonist uses a plausible disclaimer prior to performance on some task/competition (e.g., running a race). Children were then asked to predict the audience's judgments about the protagonist. We had two main expectations. First, regardless of age, children should see that the protagonist will be judged by the audience as less likely to do well on that particular day when a disclaimer is offered than when no disclaimer is offered – simply because the disclaimer provides a specific reason to expect poor performance. Second, and most importantly, if children understand the underlying self-presentational function of disclaimers, they should appreciate that the information provided in the disclaimer is designed to be a signal that the upcoming event will *not reflect his or her typical performance*. Thus, children should see that audiences' judgements about the protagonists' *typical* performance will be more positive when a disclaimer is offered than when it is not. As explained above, and in line with Bennett's (1990) earlier work on this topic, we expected that this key recognition of the identity-protecting implication of disclaimers for social evaluation will develop with age.

Finally, in addition to exploring age differences, we examine how individual differences within age groups may be related to the understanding of disclaimers. In past research, the peer context in particular has been implicated in the development of an understanding of self-presentation, whereby during middle childhood children become more aware of the motivation for using self-presentation because of an increasing emphasis on peer evaluation for social acceptance (e.g., Banerjee & Yuill, 1999; Parker & Gottman, 1989;

Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, b). In this study we will explore how the understanding of disclaimers is related to individual differences in sociometrically-measured peer preference.

The existing literature provides some evidence for positive links between children's peer preference and their understanding of mental states (Banerjee & Watling, 2005; McDowell & Parke, 2000; Underwood, 1997). Furthermore, a recent study by Watling and Banerjee (2007b) found that boys who were more preferred by their classmates had a greater understanding of ingratiation and self-promotion, whereas no such relationship was found among the girls. In particular, the boys who were more preferred by their classmates were more likely to offer more social evaluation justifications (e.g., 'so [the audience] would think he is nice') to explain why an ingratiating statement might be offered, and also were more likely to offer social outcome justifications (e.g., 'so he will get picked for the team [by the audience]') to explain why a self-promoting statement might be offered in comparison to their less preferred classmates. Therefore, there appears to be a trend whereby it may be socially advantageous for boys (more than for girls) to understand self-presentational tactics. This has been explained through normative expectations in boys' social interactions. For instance, boys are more likely than girls to interact in larger groups focused around competitive, status-related activities (Dweck, 1982; Hartup, 1989). In such contexts, self-presentational tactics may be especially important for maintaining desired public identities and social status. Indeed, Buhrmester and Prager's (1995, p. 35) review of research on self-disclosure suggests that boys' friendships are "less of a haven from self-presentational concerns" than those of girls, and points to a "status-oriented style" among males. In view of this evidence, we expected that a superior understanding of the social evaluation consequences of disclaimers may be associated with peer preference especially among boys.

### *Pilot Study*

We first conducted extensive pilot work to test our stories, questions, and stimuli materials. Twenty-seven 7-year-olds, twenty-four 9-year-olds, and twenty-five 11-year-olds completed the disclaimer task. Children heard six stories, where in each story a protagonist (who is different in each story) is asked by a peer how he/she thought he/she would do at some task (e.g., in a race). The protagonist responded each time by stating that he/she does not believe he/she will do well today, either without a disclaimer (e.g., "Not that well today") or with a disclaimer (e.g., "Not that well today because last night I tripped and hurt my foot"). Following each story, children were asked two questions: 1) if the peer would think the protagonist would do well on the task *today*, and 2) how well the peer would think the protagonist *normally* does at the task. For the first question, children received a '0' when they stated the protagonist would not do well at the task and a '1' when they stated that the protagonist would do well at the task on that day. These scores were counted separately for the three no-disclaimer stories and for the three disclaimer stories (scores ranged from 0 to 3), where a higher score indicated the number of times the child responded that the protagonist would do well on the day. For the second question, concerning the protagonists' typical performance, children responded on a four point Likert scale: very slow/bad (0), quite slow/bad (1), quite fast/good (2), very fast/good (3). These scores were added separately for the three no-disclaimer stories and the three disclaimer stories (scores ranged from 0 to 9), where a higher score indicated a belief that the protagonist would be judged as typically performing very well at the task.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the judgment of today's performance and judgment of typical performance separately, with age group (7 years, 9 years, and 11 years) and sex (male or female) as the between subjects variables, and tactic use (no disclaimer offered or disclaimer offered) as the within subjects variable. As expected,

children were less likely to say the protagonist would do well *today* when a disclaimer was used ( $M = 1.54, SE = .18$ ) than when a disclaimer was not used ( $M = 1.88, SE = .22$ ),  $F(1, 70) = 7.23, p = .009$ , and this did not vary by age or sex. Furthermore, when judging typical performance, when a disclaimer was offered children judged that the protagonist's typical performance would be greater,  $F(1, 69) = 3.02, p = .044$ . More specifically, there was a tactic by age group interaction,  $F(1, 69) = 3.37, p = .020$ , where it was only the oldest children would predicted that the protagonist would be judged to have better *typical performance* when a disclaimer had been used than when no disclaimer had been used,  $t(24) = 4.27, p < .001$  (see Table 1). Thus, it appears that unlike findings from previous research with assertive tactics (e.g., Banerjee, 2000; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, b), children do not recognize the key social evaluation consequences of disclaimers, in terms of protecting public identity regarding typical performance, until after 9 years of age. In light of this, we extended the age range in the main study to explore 7- to 14-year-olds' understanding of disclaimers. We also made some minor adjustments to scenarios and illustrations, and adjusted the procedure to use a visual analogue scale for both questions (see Shields, Palermo, Powers, Fernandez, & Smith, 2005), allowing us to explore children's and adolescents' predictions about audience judgments with greater sensitivity.

Table 1

Mean judgment scores (SE) for typical performance judgment, by tactic usage and age group.

Age group	Tactic Usage	
	No disclaimer	Disclaimer
7 years	6.11 (0.35)	5.95 (0.37)
9 years	6.06 (0.38)	6.21 (0.40)
11 years	4.94 (0.37)	6.18 (0.38)

## Method

*Participants.* Two-hundred and twenty-six children from urban primary and secondary schools in primarily working class neighbourhoods from four age groups were seen. There were fifty-five 7- to 8-year-olds (mean age = 8.25 years, range = 7.74 to 8.73, 32 females), fifty-nine 9- to 10-year-olds (mean age = 10.28 years, range = 9.49 to 10.77, 29 females), fifty-nine 11- to 12-year-olds (mean age = 12.39 years, range = 11.89 to 12.84, 28 females), and fifty-three 13- to 14-year-olds (mean age = 14.35, range = 13.88 to 14.96, 28 females).

*Materials.* Two measures were used in this study: the disclaimer task and sociometric nominations. Both tasks were presented to the children in the form of a multimedia presentation on a laptop computer, developed by the authors using Runtime Revolution



Software. The presentation included the simultaneous presentation of the story illustrations with the verbal components of each task (instructions and narrations of the stories).

*Disclaimer task.* Four stories were used in this study, with two sports related (running and tennis) and two academic (mathematics and grammar) stories presented to each child. The methods of presentation here were the same as in the pilot study, whereby the task stories were accompanied by cartoon-style drawings of the interactions. Each story involved a protagonist, who was different in each story, being asked by a peer how he/she thought he/she would do at some task (e.g., how well the protagonist will do in a tennis match). The protagonist states that he/she does not believe he/she will do well today, either with a disclaimer that focuses attention on a specific, transient reason for anticipated poor performance (e.g., “No, I do not think I will win this match because my arm is a bit sore today”) or without any such device (e.g., “No, I do not think I will win this match”). There were four versions of the stories, in order to control for story content. Versions were block randomised so that each child heard two no-disclaimer (one sporty and one academic) and two disclaimer stories (one sporty and one academic). Additionally, two sets of the stories and materials were developed, one with female characters and one with male characters, allowing the participating children to hear about story protagonists who matched their own sex. For a complete example see Appendix 1.

After each story, children were reminded of how the protagonist had responded and were asked two questions: 1) how well the peer audience would think the protagonist would perform on the task *today* (e.g., ‘How well will the boy think that Derek will do in the tennis match today’), and 2) how well the peer audience would think the protagonist *normally* performs on the task (e.g., ‘How well will the boy think that Derek normally does when he plays tennis’). For both questions children responded using a visual analogue scale (ranged from 0 – 100), with higher scores indicating more positive audience evaluations. For each question, children’s judgments were averaged for the two disclaimer stories and for the two no-disclaimer stories. The inter-relationships of the children’s judgments are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Inter-relationships between children’s judgments of today’s performance and typical performance depending on if a disclaimer was used or not (after controlling for age).*

		Today		Typical	
		No disclaimer	Disclaimer	No disclaimer	Disclaimer
Today	no disclaimer		.50***	.32***	.18*
	disclaimer			.24**	.28***
Typical	no disclaimer				.41***
	disclaimer				

Note: \*  $p = .010$ , \*\*  $p = .001$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Sociometric nominations.* Children saw a screen on the computer with the names of all the children within their class and were asked to click on the names of three classmates with whom they would most like to play followed by a new screen asking them to click on the names of three children with whom they would least like to play. As children click on a name the computer program puts the name in one of three spaces on the screen to show they have been nominated. Children could select classmates of either sex, but were unable to choose themselves. Following Coie and Dodge (1988), the nominations were used to assess peer preference. Each child's total number of most-like nominations and total number of least-like nominations were standardised within sex and class. Finally, a social preference score was calculated for each child by subtracting the standardised least-like nominations score from the standardised most-like nominations score.

*Design and Procedure.* A female experimenter saw the children in a quiet room in groups of one to four. The child was seated in front of the laptop computer, away from any other children in the room. The order of the two tasks and the versions of the disclaimer stories were block randomised according to age group. Additionally, the order of story presentation for the disclaimer task was randomised for each participant. Children's responses to the two tasks were automatically transferred into a data file through the presentation software.

## Results

A mixed-design analysis of variance was conducted with sex (male or female) and age group (8, 10, 12, or 14 years) as the between-subjects variables, and question (today's performance or typical performance) and tactic usage (disclaimer or no disclaimer) as the within-subjects variables. It should be noted first that no significant effects of sex were observed ( $F < 1$ ), apart from a three-way interaction of question by sex by age group. However, this interaction had no bearing on the effect of using disclaimers and is therefore not discussed further.

There was a main effect of age group,  $F(3, 216) = 9.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , whereby the 8-year-olds ( $M = 60.05, SE = 1.81$ ) in comparison to three older age groups,  $p < .001$ , and the 10-year-olds ( $M = 55.58, SE = 1.74$ ) in comparison to the two older age groups,  $p = .003$ , tended to be more positive about how the audience would judge the protagonists' performances while there was no significant difference between the 12-year-olds ( $M = 48.61, SE = 1.73$ ) and 14-year-olds ( $M = 49.63, SE = 1.84$ ),  $p > 1$ . Furthermore, there was a main effect of tactic usage,  $F(1, 216) = 3.88, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$ , where children judged that the audience would rate the protagonists' performance more positively when a disclaimer was offered than when no disclaimer was offered ( $M = 54.49 (SE = 1.01)$  and  $52.44 (SE = 1.05)$ , respectively), and a main effect of question,  $F(1, 216) = 435.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .67$ , where children judged that the audience would rate the protagonist's 'normal' performance more positively than their expected performance on the day ( $M = 66.14 (SE = 1.05)$  and  $40.79 (SE = 1.11)$ , respectively).

Consistent with our expectations there was a significant question by tactic usage interaction,  $F(1, 216) = 44.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ . According to our follow-up simple effects analysis, children judged that when a disclaimer was offered it would lead to a poorer audience judgment about today's performance than when no disclaimer was offered,  $F(1, 216) = 8.18, p = .005$ . However, when asked about typical performance, children judged that when a disclaimer was offered it would lead to a more positive audience judgment than when no disclaimer was offered,  $F(1, 216) = 32.84, p < .001$ . This pattern is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

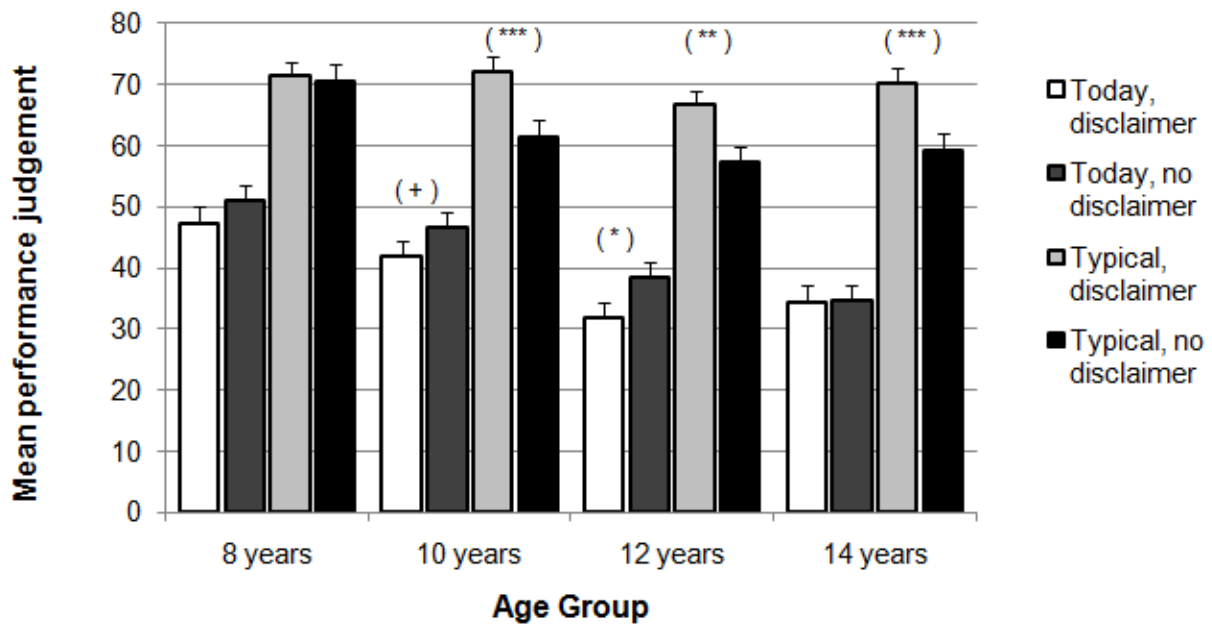
Mean judgment scores (SE) for each question, by tactic usage.

Question	Tactic Usage	
	No disclaimer	Disclaimer
Today's performance	42.71 (1.23)	38.88 (1.36)
Typical performance	62.18 (1.32)	70.10 (1.19)

Importantly, the aforementioned interaction may be qualified by a three-way interaction of question by tactic usage by age group which approached significance,  $F(3, 216) = 2.34, p < .08, \eta^2 = .03$ . Given our expectations that the differentiated social evaluation consequences of using a disclaimer would be understood only by the older children, we conducted a follow-up analysis to explore the simple interaction effect of question by tactic usage within each age group. As predicted, there was no significant interaction for the 8-year-olds,  $F(1, 216) = 1.47, p = .226$ , but significant interactions were found for the 10-year-olds,  $F(1, 216) = 20.07, p < .001$ , the 12-year-olds,  $F(1, 216) = 22.12, p < .001$ , and the 14-year-olds,  $F(1, 216) = 9.56, p = .002$ . Breaking this down further, Figure 1 shows that when a disclaimer was offered, in comparison to no-disclaimer stories, 10- and 12-year-olds were more likely to judge that the performance on the day would be poorer,  $F(1, 216) = 3.24, p = .07$  and  $F(1, 216) = 6.66, p = .01$ . Crucially, the 10-, 12-, and 14-year-olds judged that typical performance would be greater when a disclaimer was offered than when no disclaimer was offered,  $F(1, 216) = 15.60, p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 216) = 12.11, p = .001$ , and  $F(1, 216) = 14.45, p < .001$ , respectively. This confirms that among these older children, there was recognition that a disclaimer reinforces the likelihood of poor performance on the imminent task, but simultaneously wards off any negative evaluation of the normal performance of the protagonist.

One possible explanation of the lack of differentiation between the disclaimer and no-disclaimer conditions in the youngest group is that these children might in general have been less likely to link their 'today' performance rating with their 'typical' performance rating, even in the no-disclaimer condition. If this were true, then the disclaimer would have little or no added value. To check this possibility, we evaluated whether there was a significant difference between the age groups in the strength of the relationship between the 'today' performance rating and the 'typical' performance ratings, within each condition. The correlations for each age group are presented in Table 4. Importantly, direct comparisons of the correlations across the four age groups showed no significant differences in the strength of these relationships (all  $z$ 's  $< 1.30$ , all  $p$ 's  $> .20$ ).

Figure 1. Mean performance judgment for each age group, by question and tactic usage.



+  $p < .10$  \*  $p = .01$  \*\*  $p = .001$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 4

Correlation between ‘today’ and ‘typical’ performance ratings for each age group, by tactic usage.

Age group	Tactic Usage	
	No disclaimer	Disclaimer
8 (N = 55)	.272 **	.292 **
10 (N = 59)	.308 **	.167
12 (N = 59)	.480 ***	.308 **
14 (N = 53)	.310 **	.234 +

Note: +  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Sociometric relationships.* In addition to understanding how children’s performance judgments differ depending on if a disclaimer is offered or not, we were interested in exploring if children who are more preferred by their classmates have a greater understanding of the social evaluation consequences of using a disclaimer or not using a disclaimer. To assess individual differences in children’s understanding of the social evaluative consequences of using disclaimers we looked at the two types of stories (disclaimer used or

no disclaimer used) and explored differences in judgments about today's performance and judgments about typical performance. To do this, we calculated a single score (difference score) for each participant on each story type which would represent the child's understanding of how social evaluative judgments may be influenced by the use of a disclaimer. The difference score was calculated by subtracting the predicted audience evaluation about *today's* performance following a disclaimer from the predicted audience evaluation about *typical* performance following a disclaimer. A greater 'typical minus today' difference score indicates a better understanding of the differentiated social evaluation consequences of using a disclaimer.

Preliminary scatter plots revealed differing patterns for boys and girls; therefore, the results for boys and girls will be discussed separately. After controlling for age<sup>1</sup>, boys who were more preferred had a better understanding of the positive social evaluation consequences of disclaimers (i.e., higher difference scores),  $r(99) = .25, p = .013$ . No such relationship existed for the girls,  $r(109) = -.11, p = .274$ . Interestingly, girls who were more preferred were more likely to show less discrimination between their judgments of typical performance and today's performance (i.e., lower difference scores) when no disclaimer was offered,  $r(109) = -.22, p = .019$ , while no such relationship existed for the more preferred boys,  $r(99) = .06, p = .537$ . The differences between the correlation coefficients for the boys and the girls were significant ( $ps < .05$ ).

### Discussion

This study has shown that children and adolescents do use the information provided in disclaimers to predict differentiated audience evaluations of the imminent performance of the protagonist and the typical performance of the protagonist. In general, they predicted that using a disclaimer would lead to a more negative audience evaluation about the *imminent* performance of the protagonist, but – crucially – a more positive audience evaluation of the *typical* performance of the protagonist. However, this pattern was clearly evident only from the age of 10 years onwards. Furthermore, individual differences in boys' peer preference were associated with a superior understanding of the differentiated social evaluation consequences of disclaimers. In contrast to the relationships with boys, while the more preferred girls did not appear to recognize a social evaluative advantage of using disclaimers they were more likely to predict when no disclaimer was offered for expected poor performance that typical performance would be judged similarly to today's performance.

Not surprisingly when children hear that the protagonist expects that he/she will not do well today and offers a cause for this expectation (i.e., a disclaimer), children are more likely to believe that the audience will judge the protagonist's imminent performance more negatively than when no cause is offered. Importantly, we found that children (particularly children who were aged 10 years and up) judged typical performance as greater after hearing the disclaimer in comparison to when no disclaimer was offered. Within these particular stories the children always hear that the cause for the negative performance expectation is a specific transient cause rather than some internal cause (i.e., due to lack of ability). This may highlight that children should attribute the cause of the poor performance to some external cause rather than internal cause. However, when no disclaimer is offered children may be less likely to attribute the poor performance to external causes and be more likely to believe that some internal cause (e.g., poor ability, lack of interest, etc.) is responsible for the poor performance. In fact, Johnston and Lee (2005) have found that when making judgments about the behaviour of others, rather than self, school-aged children are more likely to attribute negative events to internal causes. If children attribute other people's negative outcomes to internal causes in this way, they will be more likely to believe that these will persist and be a

reflection of typical performance. Thus, it is possible that within these stories the use of the disclaimer deflects the natural attribution of protagonists' negative performance to internal causes, resulting in the children attributing the negative performance to external causes which are more likely to be transient and not a true reflection of one's ability.

Turning to the observed age differences in this study, whereby only the 8-year-olds failed to discriminate between the disclaimer and no-disclaimer conditions, one possible explanation might be that these children are simply less likely than older children to make internal attributions in general, and that disclaimers therefore offer little or no added value beyond these children's default assumption that today's poor performance is the result of transient, situational causes. In other words, the older children may be more likely to base their judgments on internal/stable attributions (unless the disclaimer gives them a reason not to), as discussed above. In contrast, the 8-year-olds may be more likely to base their judgments on external/situational attributions, even when no disclaimer is given. This seems plausible, especially in light of the fact that the most distinctive feature of the 8-year-olds' data was their high ratings in the no-disclaimer condition, and in view of previous findings that internal and stable causal explanations are more prominent in older than in younger children (Droege and Stipek, 1993; Johnston & Lee, 2005). However, our analyses confirmed that across all age groups, there was a similar positive relationship between the 'today's performance' judgment and the 'typical performance' judgment when no disclaimer was offered. It is therefore unlikely that differences in general attributional processes explain the age differences observed here. Rather, we believe that the pattern of age differences sheds light on the growth in sensitivity to the self-presentational impact of disclaimers during childhood. Unlike the older age groups, the 8-year-olds clearly did not discriminate between the disclaimer and no-disclaimer conditions when rating typical performance: although their overall positive bias (as indicated by the main effect of age group) means that their no-disclaimer ratings tended to be relatively high, they did not share the older children's understanding that a disclaimer would lead to even higher ratings of typical performance.

The observed patterns suggest that whereas the social evaluation consequences of modesty, ingratiation, and self-promotion are understood from around the age of eight years (Banerjee, 2000; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, b; Yoshida et al., 1982), disclaimers appear to be understood somewhat later. This is consistent with the idea that children in middle childhood first learn about self-presentational strategies to construct their desired public image, and later learn about strategies to maintain and/or defend that desired image. Especially as disclaimers are considered to be a prospective strategy (offered *prior* to an event, rather than after the event; Bennett, 1990), they are more subtle and involve more complex reasoning in comparison to many other self-presentational tactics. Our results build on the work of Bennett (1990) by showing that children from age 10 onwards begin to appreciate the benefit of disclaimers not just in terms of reducing the likelihood of punishment, but also in terms of protecting public identity. This finding adds to mounting research on various self-presentational competencies in preadolescent children (Aloise-Young, 1993; Banerjee, 2000, 2002; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, b).

However, future research is clearly needed to elucidate the factors responsible for the observed developmental pattern. As we have seen, the precise attributional processes involved in children's reasoning need to be targeted directly. In addition, the role of specific perspective-taking and abstract reasoning capacities requires attention, as do the social-experiential factors that might encourage youths to begin using and understanding disclaimers as self-presentational tactics. Importantly, future investigations of these issues will need to distinguish between the perceived motivation underlying the use of disclaimers, and the predicted effects of the disclaimers on social evaluations. In order to demonstrate an

understanding of the social evaluation consequences of disclaimers in this study, children needed to view the disclaimers as successful (i.e., predict that they would in fact protect the protagonist from negative evaluations of typical performance). However, El-Alayli et al. (2008) have shown that college students regard at least some kinds of disclaimers (those related to personality dispositions) as highly likely to backfire (i.e., reinforcing the negative evaluation from which the actor wants to protect him or herself). It is conceivable that some of the older participants in our study could have understood the self-presentational motivation for using the disclaimer, but predicted that the disclaimer would not have the desired effect. Yet, this is unlikely to explain the developmental trend in audience evaluations observed here, since it was the *youngest* group that was least likely to predict differentiated social evaluations following the use of a disclaimer.

In exploring the predictions from the younger children it is also conceivable that they understood the motive but did not make the correct prediction. For instance, researchers have found that young children are able to demonstrate an understanding of the desires, beliefs, and actions of others earlier when asked to provide psychological explanations rather than simply make predictions (e.g., Bartsch & Wellman, 1989; Bartsch, Campbell, & Troseth, 2007; Robinson & Mitchell, 1995). However, the ability to offer psychological explanations prior to accurate predictions has not been consistently found; for instance, Wimmer and Mayringer (1998) found that preschoolers were unable to explain a protagonist's behaviour who was acting on a false belief. Researchers exploring the understanding of assertive self-presentational tactics have examined both children's judgments and understanding of motivation (asked 'why would the protagonist say X?') and found that at the age that children recognize the behavioural expectations (judgments) they are also able to offer a greater number of social evaluative justifications for the self-presentational statements (Banerjee, 2000; Bennett & Yeeles, 1990a, b; Watling & Banerjee, 2007a, b). Clearly, future research should devise separate measures of the motive for the disclaimer on the one hand, and the effect of the disclaimer on the other hand. This would explicitly address the possibility that some adolescents could appreciate the purpose of using a disclaimer, but feel that the disclaimer would not be convincing.

In exploring children's understanding of disclaimers in connection with individual differences in peer relations, we saw that the more preferred boys predicted more strongly differentiated audience judgments about imminent versus typical performance when a disclaimer was offered. Thus, in line with expectations and previous research on assertive tactics (Watling & Banerjee, 2007b), understanding the social evaluation outcome of different self-presentational tactics appears to be more relevant to social success for boys than for girls. As discussed earlier, boys, who often tend to focus on activities that are more competitive (Dweck, 1982; Hartup, 1989), may have greater experience with using/hearing disclaimers, as with self-presentational tactics in general (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Watling & Banerjee, 2007b).

The contrasting relationships for the socially preferred boys and girls clearly warrant further research. For example, it is possible that the focus of the stories presented to the children may contribute to the different patterns found for boys and girls. For instance, socially preferred boys may demonstrate an understanding of disclaimers specifically in scenarios relating to competitive activities, such as sports and achievement (as in the present study). In contrast, links between understanding disclaimers and social preference in girls may emerge in other, less competitive domains, such as caring for a sibling. Furthermore, it is possible that the connections between peer relations and understanding disclaimers could differ when disclaimers highlight situationally transient, unstable causes (as in the present

study – e.g., “because I hurt my foot”) in comparison with situationally stable causes (e.g., “because I’m not a good football player” or “because I’m timid”).

In addition, it is possible that the more preferred girls in this study saw the protagonist’s statement that they would not perform well (with no disclaimer) simply as a modest response to the peer’s enquiry and therefore did not make more strongly differentiated judgments about the imminent and typical performance. In fact, this may not just relate to explaining gender differences, but may also relate to why younger children are not demonstrating an understanding of disclaimers in the judgments that they are making. One way to explore the possibility that children are viewing disclaimers as a form of modesty before an event (or as being a good indicator of actual performance expectation) would be to include the protagonist’s actual performance at the end of the hypothetical story. Through including explicit performance information it would be possible to detect if some children were focusing on the protagonists’ statements as a way of appearing modest about their accomplishments (rather than reasoning about the statements as disclaimers). Research has suggested that the modesty norm (differentiated social evaluations of modest and immodest responses to praise) may emerge later for girls than for boys (10 years rather than 8 years; Banerjee, 2000). It is possible that if the modesty norm appears at around 10 years of age for more preferred girls the focus on modesty could potentially play a role in their emerging reasoning about disclaimers.

More generally, it is unclear what the underlying mechanisms are for the association between peer relations and the understanding of disclaimers, and whether the link is unidirectional or bidirectional. In addition, it is important to further investigate how sex may moderate the link between peer relations and the understanding of other types of defensive tactics. For example, can we expect a similar pattern for the understanding of excuses, a more obvious, retrospective defensive tactic? Finally, while this research did not explore children’s *use* of disclaimers, it is important to note that researchers have already identified individual differences in the *use* of disclaimers and other self-presentational tactics, among college student samples (e.g., social anxiety, self-monitoring, social desirability, etc.; Lee et al., 1999). It will be important to determine whether such differences can be observed in younger samples, and whether such differences in the *use* of disclaimers (and other tactics) are related to the kinds of individual differences in *reasoning* about disclaimers observed in the present study.

### *Conclusion*

Researchers have found that children are less likely to expect a person to disclose negative rather than positive information about themselves (Heyman, Fu, and Lee, 2007). Therefore, when presented with a character who offers negative performance expectations prior to an event (as in the disclaimer), children are faced with a rather complex question about why such a disclosure would be made. This research has demonstrated that children do understand the self-presentational consequences of disclaimers after 10 years of age. They make appropriate, differentiated judgments about what the audience will think of the protagonist’s ability after he or she has provided a disclaimer. Furthermore, boys who are more preferred by their peers appear to have a greater understanding of these social evaluation consequences, at least when the disclaimer serves to attribute negative performance in a competitive situation to an unstable/situational cause. Future work should concentrate on investigating the social-cognitive and social-contextual factors that aid children’s developing understanding of self-presentational processes, as well as focus on the question of how that understanding relates to the use of self-presentational tactics.



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## Footnote

1. Due to computer/experimenter error the exact birthdates of 10 children were not recorded which included seven 8-year-olds (4 boys), two 10-year-olds (1 boy), and one 12-year-old boy). These children were excluded from the correlation analyses where age was controlled.

## Appendix 1: Example of self-presentation story

This is Sarah/Shane. Sarah Shane is waiting for her/his maths test to start when one of her/his new classmates went up to her/him and said, "Sarah/Shane, do you think you will do well on your maths test today?" Sarah/Shane thinks s/he will not do well today, and s/he said to her/his new classmate,

"I do not think I will do well today." [No disclaimer]

or

"I do not think I will do well today because I think I have the flu." [Disclaimer]

Now remember, Sarah/Shane said, "I do not think ..."

1. How well will the girl/boy think that Sarah/Shane will do on the maths test today?
2. How well will the girl/boy think that Sarah/Shane normally does on her/his maths tests?