

ABSTRACT:

# Imitation and self-recognition in autism: In search of an explanation

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The observation that children with autism are deficient in their ability to imitate dates back over 50 years (Ritvo & Provence, 1953). Recent reviews have outlined experimental evidence that these children do not imitate in the same way as typically developing children (Rogers, 1999; Williams, Whiten, & Singh, 2004; Williams, Whiten, Suddendorf, & Perrett, 2001). Yet considerable debate remains over how best to define the imitation deficit in autism, and the basis of this deficit. We review two possible explanations for the imitative deficit shown by children with autism. The first is that it may reflect wider problems in their socio-affective and/or socio-communicative abilities. The second is that there is a diminution or disruption in their ability to match seen and felt sensations. We review old and introduce new research with typically developing children and children with autism to evaluate these explanations.

Infants have been shown to copy simple but novel actions on objects from 6 to 9 months of age (Barr, Dowden, & Hayne, 1996; Meltzoff, 1988a, 1988b). Hence, quite early in life infants can use imitation as a means of acquiring new skills. However, children can also imitate others' actions on objects as a means of initiating and sustaining interaction, something they may not do until their second year (Uzgiris, 1981). To illustrate this point we will begin with a review of the development of an important, but largely neglected, aspect of imitation.

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