

## Pretending to be Batman Helps Kids Stay on Task

*by Christian Jarrett*

Do their homework or reach over there for the iPad and dive into a world of games? It's the ever-present dilemma facing young children today. Here's a simple technique that could tip the balance a little in favor of the homework. Psychologists have reported in *Child Development* that when four- to six-year-olds pretended to be Batman while they were doing a boring but important task, it helped them to resist distraction and stay more focused. The challenge now is to nail down exactly why the technique works, and to see if over time it could improve children's self-regulation skills without them needing to go through the ritual of pretending to be someone else.

Rachel White and her colleagues, including Angela Duckworth famous for her work on "grit", recruited 180 kids aged 4 to 6 years and had them take some basic psych tests assessing their mental control, memory and empathy. Next the researchers asked them to complete a boring, slow but supposedly important ten-minute computer task that involved pressing the space bar whenever they saw a picture of cheese or not pressing anything when the screen showed a cat. The children were encouraged to stay on task, but they were told they could take a break whenever they wanted and go play a game on a nearby iPad.

Some of the children were assigned to a "self-immersed condition", akin to a control group, and before and during the task were told to reflect on how they were doing, asking themselves "Am I working hard?". Other children were asked to reflect from a third-person perspective, asking themselves "Is James [insert child's actual name] working hard?" Finally, the rest of the kids were in the Batman condition, in which they were asked to imagine they were either Batman, Bob The Builder, Rapunzel or Dora the Explorer and to ask themselves "Is Batman [or whichever character they were] working hard?". Children in this last condition were given a relevant prop to help, such as Batman's cape. Once every minute through the task, a recorded voice asked the question appropriate for the condition each child was in [Are you working hard? or Is James working hard? or Is Batman working hard?].

The six-year-olds spent more time on task than the four-year-olds (half the time versus about a quarter of the time). No surprise there. But across age groups, and apparently unrelated to their personal scores on mental control, memory, or empathy, those in the Batman condition spent the most time on task (about 55 per cent for the six-year-olds; about 32 per cent for the four-year-olds). The children in the self-immersed condition spent the least time on task (about 35 per cent of the time for the six-year-olds; just over 20 per cent for the four-year-olds) and those in the third-person condition performed in between.

The results suggest that pretending to be a popular fictional character helps young children to resist distraction, at least compared to the other conditions used in this experiment. White and her team think this is probably at least partly because it helps create a feeling of self-distance from the task, which is known to help people resist immediate distractions and prioritize longer-term goals. The trouble is, there are so many other aspects to the Batman condition that could have led to its apparent benefits, such as perhaps it simply made the boring task more fun, or maybe the children identified with their fictional character and assumed some of his or her qualities.

"Regardless of the origins of the benefits [of the Batman condition] seen here, it is important to note that pretending to be another character had large effects on children's perseverance," the researchers said. They note that the great American psychologist William James observed how "voluntarily bringing back the wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will" but that he also lamented how difficult it is to teach this life skill. "The current research," the researchers concluded, "suggests that perseverance can be taught through role play, a skill that is accessible to even very young children." Adults too may be wondering if this is something they could try – at the very least it could provide an excuse for wearing a Batman cape to the office.