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Authors

Asaba, Mika
Nerenberg, Amanda
Leonard, Julia Anne

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Who is motivating? Students evaluate encouragement based on speaker's knowledge

Mika Asaba
Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Amanda Nerenberg
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States

Julia Leonard
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, United States

Abstract

Students often receive encouragement ("You can do it!") to take on and stick with challenges, yet they don't always listen. Past work suggests that domain knowledge underlies speaker credibility. We propose that students find encouragement more or less motivating based not only on the speaker's domain knowledge (e.g., math), but also on their knowledge of the student's abilities (e.g., math abilities). Adolescents (n=369; ages 11-19) said they would be more likely to seek out and listen to encouragement from a hypothetical person who has both knowledge of the domain and their abilities compared to someone who has knowledge of just one or neither. When asked to reason about real people in their lives (parents, teachers, peers), knowledge of domain and ability also significantly predicted whose encouragement participants would seek out and listen to. Ongoing work is experimentally testing this hypothesis with behavioral measures of persistence and challenge-seeking.