Parents underestimate young children's abilities which may undermine their parenting practices

Reut Shachnai[1] **(reut.shachnai@yale.edu), Arielle Belluck**[2] **(abelluck@princeton.edu), Julia Leonard**[1] **(julia.leonard@yale.edu)**
[1]Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511
[2]Department of Psychology, Princeton University, NJ 08544

Abstract

Parents' beliefs about children's abilities shape their parenting practices. But how accurate are parents at estimating what children are truly capable of? Here, we test the hypothesis that U.S. parents underestimate young children's abilities to complete challenging, multi-step tasks, and in turn, intervene beyond children's developmental needs (a behavior known as "overparenting"). In Studies 1A and 1B, parents (N = 130) of preschool-aged children underestimated their children's abilities, especially on practical (vs. academic) and novel (vs. familiar) multi-step tasks. In Studies 2A and 2B, we found that parents' (N = 109) underestimation has potential negative consequences: Parents who believed their child was less capable were more likely to take over tasks and provided less encouragement for independent actions. These findings suggest that parents underestimate young children's abilities, which may hinder the development of children's learning and autonomy.

Keywords: parenting, early childhood, beliefs, competence

Introduction

Young children learn new skills every day and grow at a remarkable rate. Parents try to support their children's learning by adapting their behaviors based on children's evolving abilities. Importantly, more accurate estimates of children's abilities predict better parenting practices (e.g., more appropriate levels of scaffolding and support) and – in turn – better child developmental outcomes (Hunt & Paraskevopoulos, 1980).

But how accurate are parents at estimating young children's abilities? Past research suggests that parents tend to *accurately* estimate or even *overestimate* their child's capabilities. For instance, during the first two to three years of life, parents' evaluations of their child's communication, language, motor, and emotion comprehension skills align closely with expert assessments (Molina, Bulgarelli, et al., 2012; L. E. Miller, Perkins, Dai, & Fein, 2017; Bodnarchuk & Eaton, 2004). For slightly older children ages three to five, parents tend to overestimate their child's abilities across domains such as math, spatial reasoning, verbal skills, and motor skills, perceiving them as more advanced than they actually are (Zippert & Ramani, 2017; Fluck, Linnell, & Holgate, 2005; Kårstad, Kvello, Wichstrøm, & Berg-Nielsen, 2014; Mack, Scherrer, & Preckel, 2025; Totta & Crase, 1982).

Given evidence of accurate estimation or overestimation, one might expect parents to allow young children to tackle various challenges independently, including those that match or even exceed their skill level. Interestingly, however, findings from psychology, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and economics paint a different picture: In recent decades, parents in the U.S. and other developed countries have increasingly limited children's autonomy (Doepke, Sorrenti, & Zilibotti, 2019; Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund, 2023; Mott Poll Report, 2023; Rutherford, 2009; Lancy, 2014). Indeed, there has been growing attention to the rise of "overparenting" (also termed "helicopter parenting"), where parents minimize children's struggles by stepping in and completing developmentally appropriate tasks for them (e.g., tying their shoes, doing their homework) (Quealy & Miller, 2019; Love, May, Cui, & Fincham, 2020; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Schiffrin & Liss, 2022; Leonard, Martinez, Dashineau, Park, & Mackey, 2021; Clarke, Cooper, & Creswell, 2013; Segrin, Burke, & Kauer, 2020; Ishizuka, 2019; Locke, Kavanagh, & Campbell, 2016; Lythcott-Haims, 2015; C. C. Miller & Bromwich, 2019; Obradović, Sulik, & Shaffer, 2021). Parents' tendency to take over tasks that children can complete independently suggests that they may actually *underestimate* their child's abilities. Supporting this notion, sociological analyses of advice in U.S. parenting magazines reveal a historical shift whereby children are increasingly viewed as fragile, incompetent, and in need of constant protection (Rutherford, 2009).

In sum, whereas research on parents' *beliefs* suggests that they have accurate or even optimistic beliefs about children's abilities, research on parents' *behaviors* suggests that they underestimate their children's abilities. What can explain this apparent discrepancy? Although many factors could contribute to the gap between what parents believe and how they act, here we argue that a key distinction lies in the types of tasks examined in these two lines of research. Previous research examining parents' beliefs about children's abilities have focused on relatively simple, single-step actions, such as counting objects, identifying whether a character is happy or sad, or jumping a set number of times (Zippert & Ramani, 2017; Kårstad et al., 2014; Fluck et al., 2005; Totta & Crase, 1982). In contrast, many tasks children encounter in everyday life (e.g., dressing themselves, solving puzzles, cleaning their room) – as well as the ones used in observational and experimental work on parenting behavior – are multi-step and involve some degree of problem-solving and persistence. As a result, these two types of studies may capture different facets of parents' beliefs. One possibility is that parents accurately estimate, and sometimes even overestimate, their child's ability to complete straightforward, single-step

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actions in the moment, yet underestimate their ability to complete more challenging, multi-step tasks. Alternatively, parents may accurately estimate children's abilities across simple and challenging multi-step tasks, suggesting that a third factor, beyond beliefs about their child's abilities, influences their behaviors. Our studies test these possibilities by directly examining parents' beliefs about children's abilities on challenging multi-step tasks and investigating whether these beliefs relate to parenting behaviors. Given the growing trend of overparenting, we hypothesize that parents underestimate children's abilities on such tasks, which in turn, predicts their tendency to take over.

Importantly, we also hypothesize that parents' underestimation is greater on practical life tasks (e.g., getting dressed, cleaning toys) than on academic tasks (e.g., solving puzzles, tracing letters). Previous research shows parents place greater value on academic compared to practical life skills and are significantly more likely to take over practical tasks (Shachnai, Asaba, Hu, & Leonard, 2025). This suggests parents may be more inclined to view their child's academic abilities favorably and less aware of their child's practical skills due to fewer opportunities to observe them.

Here, we examine whether parents underestimate their young child's ability to independently complete challenging tasks (Studies 1A and 1B) and how such underestimation may be linked to parenting behaviors (Studies 2A and 2B). In Study 1A, we asked parents of four- and five-year-old children to evaluate their child's abilities on both novel and familiar multi-step practical and academic tasks. To measure parents' prediction accuracy, we compared their responses to an average of same-aged children's actual abilities assessed via observational lab studies and national standards established by early childhood specialists. In Study 1B, we similarly asked parents to evaluate their child's abilities, but then compared their evaluations to *their own child's* abilities and measured the extent to which observing their child work independently on the tasks violated parents' expectations and encouraged them to interact differently with their child in the future. In Studies 2A and 2B, we examined the potential consequences of parents' underestimations, namely, whether parents who view their child as less capable also take over more.

Study 1A

In Study 1A, we examined parents' accuracy at estimating their child's abilities on practical life and academic tasks. We used both novel and familiar tasks to examine whether underestimation differs based on task familiarity. As a measure of parents' accuracy, we compared parents' beliefs to children's actual abilities obtained via observational lab studies for novel tasks, and established by early childhood specialists for familiar tasks. For each task, we asked parents to rate how much of the task (out of 100%) their child could complete on their own. We hypothesized that parents would underestimate children's capabilities across both novel and familiar tasks, and that their underestimation would be more pronounced on practical life tasks than academic tasks. All hypotheses and analyses were pre-registered (https://tinyurl.com/prereg1a).

Methods

Participants Participants were 100 parents (68% mothers, 32% fathers) of four- and five-year-old children (M_{age} = 5.10, SD_{age} = .46) recruited via CloudResearch. Participants' education ranged from 12 to 20 years (M = 15.35, SD = 2.28) and their median annual income was $87,500 ($M$ = $102,464, SD = $77,923). They identified as 84% White, 5% Asian, 4% Black, 3% multiracial, 2% another race, and 2% preferred not to answer, and their ethnic makeup was 91% not Hispanic/Latino and 9% Hispanic/Latino. As pre-registered, we excluded an additional 25 participants who reported that their child had a neuro-psychiatric disorder (N = 23), reported a child's date of birth outside the age range for this study (N = 1), or provided an unrelated or nonsense response to the open-ended question at the end of the survey (N = 1).

Procedure and Measures We asked parents to evaluate their child's capabilities on a set of novel tasks and a set of familiar tasks. Below, we describe each of these measures.

Novel tasks. We first asked parents to evaluate children's capabilities on two novel tasks: a dressing task (dressing hockey gear; practical task) and a puzzle task (solving block design puzzles; academic task). To ensure both tasks were novel, we excluded any child with prior experience wearing hockey gear and used puzzles from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), a clinical tool not commercially available for home use. Importantly, in prior work we have shown that four- and five-year-old children can complete these tasks independently with only verbal guidance (i.e., without an adult physically doing any part of the task for children). Specifically, children on average independently completed 18.8/19 actions (99%) on the dressing task (N = 20) (Shachnai et al., 2025) and 8/8 actions (100%) on the puzzle task (N = 30). These results provide a reliable proxy of children's actual ability on these tasks, which serve as a benchmark to compare against parents' estimates.

To examine parents' estimates of children's capabilities on these novel tasks, we first showed them videos of a research assistant explaining these tasks using the same introduction that children received at the museum. Then, we asked parents: "Do you think your child could put on these hockey clothes/finish these puzzles completely on their own, with no physical help from you and only verbal guidance?". If parents responded "yes", we marked this response as parents thinking that children could complete 100% of the task on their own. If parents responded "no", we followed up with the question: "What percent of the hockey clothes/puzzles task do you think your child could do on their own?", to which parents responded on a sliding scale ranging from 0% to 100%. Thus, parents' estimation could range from 0% (unable to complete any of the task on their own) to 100% (able to complete all of the task on their own). In a pilot study with 11 parents, this

global ability estimate strongly correlated with a more objective checklist measure, in which parents indicated which specific task steps their child could complete independently (r = .95 for the dressing task; r = .94 for the puzzle task), suggesting that the global estimate reliably captures fine-grained judgments of children's capabilities.

The order in which the dressing and puzzle tasks were presented was randomized. To ensure that parents were paying attention and not responding indiscriminately, we also showed them a video of a research assistant explaining an extremely easy task – moving eight markers from a table to a box – and asked parents the same questions about their child's capabilities. We expected all parents to report that their child is capable of completing this task.

At the end of the survey, after the "familiar tasks" measure below, we included a secondary measure of parents' beliefs. Specifically, we revealed to parents that we found in a study that all four- and five-year-old children *could* do each of these tasks (dressing task, puzzle task, moving markers task) on their own with only verbal guidance and asked parents to estimate how long it takes four- and five-year-old children, on average, to do these tasks independently.

Familiar tasks. To investigate whether parents' familiarity with the tasks affected their estimates, we also asked parents about children's ability to complete familiar daily tasks. To do so, we used a list of tasks developed by early childhood specialists across states which specifies practical and academic tasks that children are capable of completing by 4-5 years of age (Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, 2014; California Department of Education, 2010; Ohio Department of Education, 2020; Head Start, 2015), such as buttoning a shirt (practical life skill) and completing a shape puzzle (academic skill; for a full list, see https://tinyurl.com/prereg1a). To control for potential differences in parents' beliefs about their child's physical vs. cognitive abilities, all of the familiar tasks included physical elements. We also added two control tasks to this list: walk five steps (which children are typically able to do at younger ages, around eight to 18 months) and read a chapter book (which children are typically able to do at older ages, around six to eight years) to ensure that parents were attending to the task scenarios and not responding indiscriminately.

As we did for the novel tasks, we asked parents whether they thought that their child could complete each of the familiar tasks completely on their own, and if not, how much of the task (out of 100%) they could complete. We presented these tasks in randomized order. As a secondary measure, we presented parents with the same list of familiar tasks and asked them to guess at *what age* they thought that most children could do each of these tasks on their own, using a sliding scale ranging from zero to ten years of age. We only asked this question for the familiar tasks, and not the novel tasks, because we do not know the precise age at which children develop these abilities, and thus we did not have a reliable proxy of children's ability to compare to parents' estimates.

Results and Discussion

To examine how accurately parents estimate their children's abilities and whether this varies by task domain (practical vs. academic) and task familiarity (novel vs. familiar), we conducted a linear mixed-effects model[1]. First, we calculated a difference score for each task by subtracting parents' estimations of their child's ability from the child's actual ability, both expressed as percentages. We then predicted this difference score from task domain and familiarity as fixed effects, with a random intercept for participant. Since task domain and familiarity were mean-centered, the intercept represents the overall mean difference score, reflecting the extent to which parents, on average, underestimated or accurately estimated their children's abilities across all types of tasks.

We found that across all types of tasks, parents significantly underestimated children's abilities (b = 19.89, 95% CI = [16.66, 23.12], $p < .001$). Their underestimation was more pronounced for practical (vs. academic) tasks (b = 3.30, 95% CI = [1.34,5.27], p = .001) and for novel (vs. familiar) tasks (b = 4.03, 95% CI = [2.06, 5.99], $p < .001$) (Figure 1). Exploratory analyses revealed that underestimation was more pronounced for younger (vs. older) children across all types of tasks (b = -4.43, 95% CI = [-7.54, -1.31], p = .006), but did not vary based on child gender, parent gender, parent age, parent education, income, race, or parents' reported weekly hours spent with child (all $|b|$s < 2.62, all ps $> .111$).

Parents also significantly underestimated how quickly children could complete the novel tasks, estimating that it would take about twice as long as it actually did. For the practical task (dressing), parents estimated 5.5 minutes, while the actual time was 2.8 minutes (W = 328.5, $p < .001$), and for the academic task (puzzle), parents estimated 5.2 minutes compared to an actual time of 2.3 minutes (W = 742.5, $p < .001$). However, underestimation of children's speed did not significantly differ between the practical and academic tasks (V = 2371, p = .598)[2], nor did it vary by any of the demographic variables mentioned above (all $|b|$s $< .55$, all ps $> .090$)

For familiar tasks, parents believed that practical skills develop at a later age than academic skills (age 5 vs. 4.6 years, respectively, pre-registered t-test: $t(197) = 3.69$, $p < .001$), even though these skills develop at the same age based on national standards from early childhood specialists.

Importantly, parents' responses to the control questions revealed that they were not responding indiscriminately. On average, parents believed their child would be able to do 99% of the control marker task independently (SD = 7.90%) in about 1 minute (SD = 1.27). Similarly, parents, on average, believed

[1]Note that this model differs from our pre-registered models which involved domain comparisons *within* novel and familiar tasks. We decided to use this model instead because we realized it provides the most parsimonious analysis of our data. Importantly, however, our pre-registered analyses yielded the same patterns of results.

[2]These analyses were pre-registered and involved Wilcoxon tests since our variables were not normally distributed.

that their child could complete 100% of the 'walk five steps' task (SD = 0%) and 23.72% of the 'read a chapter book' task (SD = 33.22%).

In Study 1A, we found that parents systematically underestimate four- to five-year-old children's ability to complete both novel and familiar multi-step tasks. This underestimation was more pronounced for practical tasks compared to academic tasks and for novel tasks compared to familiar ones. However, a limitation of this study is that we compared parents' estimations of their own child's abilities to the average ability of same-aged children, rather than directly assessing their child's actual abilities.

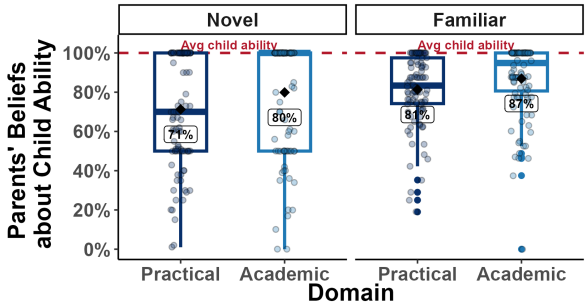

Figure 1: Study 1A Results: Parents significantly underestimated children's ability to complete both novel and familiar tasks. This underestimation was more pronounced for practical tasks compared to academic tasks, and for novel tasks compared to familiar ones. Black diamonds represent group means; dots represent individual scores.

Study 1B

In Study 1B, we directly compared parents' estimations against *their own child's abilities*. We first examined parents' estimates of their child's ability to complete the novel dressing task and puzzle task, and then compared these estimates to the child's actual ability as tested in the lab. This approach not only enabled a more direct test of our hypothesis regarding parents' underestimation but also allowed us to explore two additional questions, as described below.

First, this design allowed us to examine whether parents are calibrated to their own child's abilities, even if they generally tend to underestimate them. While there is little variability in children's ability to complete the novel dressing and puzzle tasks independently (as demonstrated in Study 1A), we used the time it took children to complete these tasks as a proxy for their relative ability. This allowed us to test whether parents who believed their child could complete less of the tasks had children who were indeed slower at completing them. Such a finding would suggest that parents accurately anticipate the extent to which their child will struggle (i.e., taking longer to complete the task), but underestimate their child's ability to overcome this struggle and ultimately succeed.

Second, since parents observed their child complete the task after providing their estimates, we also measured their reactions via a post-study questionnaire. Specifically, we asked whether children's performance violated parents' expectations, and whether this experience influenced how parents intend to interact with their child in the future.

As in Study 1A, we hypothesized that parents would underestimate their child's abilities, and more so on the dressing vs. puzzle task. We also hypothesized that parents would indicate that their child's performance was better than they expected after watching their child complete the dressing vs. puzzle task. All hypotheses and analyses were pre-registered (https://tinyurl.com/prereg1b).

Methods

Participants Participants were 30 parents (57% mothers, 43% fathers) and their four- to five-year-old children (57% girls M_{age} = 4.95, SD_{age} = .61) recruited at an urban children's museum in Philadelphia. Parents' education ranged from 12 to 20 years (M = 16.71, SD = 2.45) and their median annual income was $225,000 ($M$ = $233,750, SD = $118,036). They identified as 40% White, 30% Asian, 13% Black, 3% American Indian or Alaskan, 3% another race, and 10% preferred not to answer. As pre-registered, we excluded 3 dyads because parents reported that the child has a neuro-psychiatric disorder, 3 dyads who wanted to stop midway, and 1 dyad due to experimenter error. We also excluded one child with a broken arm since it affected their ability to participate.

Procedure and Measures As in Study 1A, we showed parents videos of a research assistant explaining the dressing and puzzle tasks using the same language that their child later heard, while counterbalancing whether the dressing or puzzle task came first. Then, we asked parents to complete a survey in which they estimated children's ability to complete the novel tasks using the same questions as in Study 1A, resulting in an estimated ability score of 0-100% for each task. After parents completed the survey, an experimenter explained to children how to do each task and parents were asked to watch but not intervene as their child was working. While children worked on the tasks, the experimenter verbally scaffolded the child as needed (e.g., offered hints or reminders), but did not physically do any parts of the task for them or directly instruct them on what to do.

We calculated children's actual ability as the percentage of required actions they completed without physical help out of 19 actions in the dressing task (e.g., wrapping the shinguard strap around their leg, pulling the chest guard over their head) and out of eight actions (i.e., puzzle pieces) in the puzzle task. As a secondary measure of children's ability, we also calculated the time it took them to complete each task.

After children completed the tasks, parents filled out a post-study questionnaire in which they were asked how well their child did on each of the tasks as compared to their expectations, on a one to five scale ranging from "A lot worse than expected" (1) to "A lot better than expected" (5). They also answered open-ended questions asking whether they had learned anything in today's activity and if there was anything

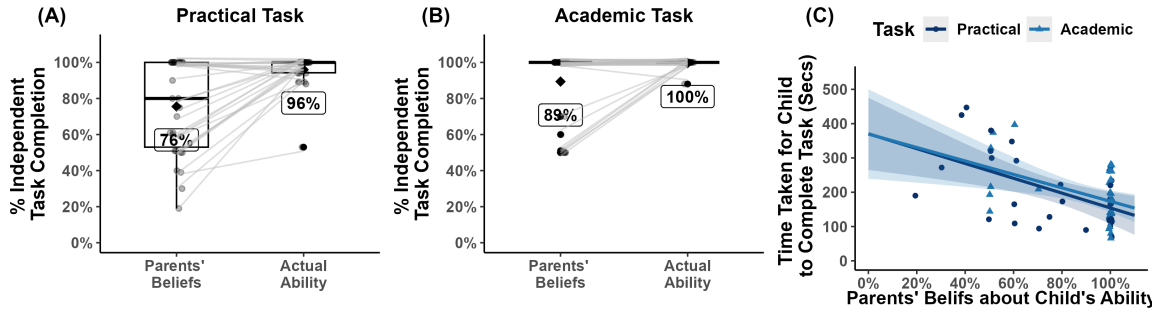

Figure 2: Study 1B Results: Parents significantly underestimated their own child's ability to perform both novel tasks: the practical (dressing; A) task and the academic (puzzle; B) task. However, parents' estimations of their child's ability were calibrated to the amount of time it took their child to complete the tasks (C). Error band represents 95% CIs; dots represent individual ratings; black diamonds represent group means.

they intended to change in their interactions with their child.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, parents significantly underestimated their child's ability on both novel tasks: the practical (dressing) task ($V = 16$, $p < .001$) (Figure 2A) and the academic (puzzle) task ($V = 1$, $p = .019$) (Figure 2B). This underestimation was slightly greater for the dressing task than the puzzle task ($V = 172.5$, $p = .049$), and marginally greater for young (vs. older) children across tasks ($b = -5.88$, 95% CI = [-12.45, .70], $p = .092$). However, underestimation did not vary based on child gender, parent gender, parent age, parent education, income, race, or parents' reported weekly hours spent with child (all $|b|$s < 5.71, all ps $> .101$).

Although parents generally underestimated their child's ability to complete both tasks, their estimates were calibrated to their child's relative ability, as measured by the time taken to complete the task independently. Parents who estimated that their child could complete less of the task had children who took longer to complete it, a pattern observed for both the dressing task ($\rho = -.49$, $p = .006$) and the puzzle task ($\rho = -.39$, $p = .033$) (Figure 2C).

On the post-study questionnaire, parents reported that their child performed significantly better than they expected on the dressing task (as evidenced by average ratings significantly above 3: "As expected"; $V = 109$, $p = .004$) but not on the puzzle task ($V = 59.5$, $p = .667$). In response to the questions asking parents if they have learned anything and if they plan to change anything in their interaction with their child, 40% of parents spontaneously mentioned that their child is more competent than they had realized (e.g., "*He can do more than I thought he could*"). Additionally, 37% of parents mentioned that they intend to allow their child more independence going forward (e.g., *"Our child needs more freedom to do things himself*").

Replicating and extending findings from Study 1A, results from Study 1B revealed that parents underestimated their own child's ability to complete both practical (dressing) and academic (puzzle) tasks, with greater underestimation for the practical task. However, the consequences of this underestimation on parenting behaviors remains unclear.

Study 2A and Study 2B

In Studies 2A and 2B, we examined the potential consequences of parents' underestimation of children's abilities. We analyzed two existing datasets in which 4- to 5-year-old children and their parents interacted on dressing and puzzle tasks similar to those used in Studies 1A and 1B. Across both datasets, we examined the relation between parents' estimates of children's ability and their behavioral and verbal interactions with their child. Note that although data for Studies 2A and 2B were collected as part of separate projects (and Study 2A has already been published; Shachnai et al., 2025), the relations between beliefs about children's abilities and parents' behaviors presented here have not been previously published.

Methods

Participants In Study 2A, participants were 60 parents (62% mothers, 37% fathers, 1% legal guardians) and their 4-5-year-old children (50% girls, $M_{age} = 5.03$, $SD_{age} = .57$) recruited from an urban children's museum in Philadelphia. Parental education ranged from 10 to 20 years ($M = 16.61$, $SD = 2.58$) and median income was \$175,000 ($M = \$136{,}245$, $SD = \$69{,}395$). The racial makeup of the children was as follows: 48% White, 20% Asian, 13% Black, 10% multiracial, 2% American Indian or Alaskan, 3% another race, and 3% preferred not to answer, and the ethnic makeup was 77% not Hispanic/Latino, 17% Hispanic/Latino, 5% another ethnicity, and 2% preferred not to answer.

In Study 2B, participants were 49 parents (80% mothers, 20% fathers) and their 4-5-year-old children (51% girls, $M_{age} = 5.06$, $SD_{age} = .54$) recruited from an urban children's museum, the lab database, and an afterschool program (data collection is still ongoing). Parental education ranged from 12 to 20 years ($M = 17.40$, $SD = 2.22$) and parental median income was \$175,000 ($M = \$194{,}312$, $SD = \$124{,}844$). Parents identified as 63% White, 16% Asian, 4% Black, 4% another race, and 12% preferred not to answer, and the ethnic makeup was 69% not Hispanic/Latino, 16% Hispanic/Latino, 4% another ethnicity, and 10% preferred not to answer.

Procedure and Measures In Studies 2A and 2B, children completed a task (dressing in Study 2A and solving puzzles in Study 2B) and parents were instructed to help as much or as little as they wished. We measured both parents' takeovers and their verbal interactions with their child. Takeovers were operationalized as the number of dressing actions or puzzle pieces parents completed for their child. Verbal interactions were categorized as positive feedback (e.g., "Good job!"), direct instruction (e.g., "Close the strap"), or scaffolding (e.g., "What do you think is the front and what is the back?"), with verbal interaction data available for Study 2A and ongoing for Study 2B. After interacting with their child, parents completed a post-study questionnaire where, among other questions, they were asked to rate how capable they believed their child was of completing the task independently, on a scale from 1 (not at all capable) to 5 (extremely capable).

Results and Discussion

Across both studies, parents who believed their child was less capable took over more: They completed more dressing actions for their child in Study 2A (ρ = -.52, $p < .001$; Figure 3A) and placed more puzzle pieces in Study 2B (ρ = -.28, $p = .048$; Figure 3B). Additionally, in Study 2A, parents who perceived their child as less capable provided less positive feedback (ρ = .42, $p = .001$). However, beliefs about children's capability were not related to parents' use of direct instruction (ρ = -.04, $p = .763$) or scaffolding (ρ = -.04, $p = .762$). These findings suggest that parents' underestimation of children's abilities may contribute to more interventionist parenting practices.

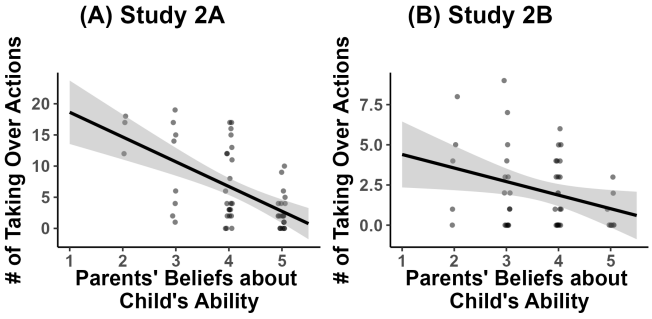

Figure 3: Study 2A and Study 2B Results: Parents who rated their child as less capable took over more (completed more dress-up actions for children in Study 2A and put in more puzzle pieces in Study 2B). Error band represents 95% CIs; dots represent individual ratings.

General Discussion

Our studies reveal that parents systematically underestimate young children's abilities on challenging multi-step tasks. This underestimation is associated with increased parental takeovers and reduced positive feedback when children engage in developmentally appropriate tasks. These findings suggest that parents' consistent underestimation of young children's abilities may contribute to overparenting behaviors that undermine children's motivation and learning (Leonard et al., 2021; Segrin et al., 2020).

Parents' underestimation was consistently more pronounced for practical tasks compared to academic tasks and for novel tasks compared to familiar tasks. Previous research suggests that parents tend to place greater value on academic skills than practical life skills (Shachnai et al., 2025). As a result, parents may be more motivated to view their child's academic abilities in a positive light. Additionally, parents may provide fewer opportunities for children to complete practical tasks independently, either because they see these tasks as less valuable for learning (Shachnai et al., 2025) or because practical tasks often arise in time-sensitive situations (e.g., when a parent is rushing to get out the door and dresses the child to save time). Consequently, parents may be less aware of their child's actual practical life skills. Indeed, observing children perform tasks appears to influence parents' estimates of their abilities: Parents in Study 1A were more accurate at estimating children's abilities on familiar vs. novel tasks.

Interestingly, although parents underestimated their child's ability to complete tasks, their estimates were calibrated to the time it took their child to finish the tasks. That is, parents who believed their child could complete less of the task had children who took longer to do so. This suggests that parents may accurately anticipate task-related struggle, but underestimate their child's ability to eventually overcome it.

Finally, we found suggestive evidence for a negative consequence of parents' underestimation: Parents who thought their child was less capable took over more and provided less positive feedback on tasks that children were capable of completing alone. However, these findings are correlational. In ongoing work we are experimentally manipulating parents' beliefs about children's abilities to examine whether such beliefs causally affect their behavior. Critically, we also found suggestive evidence that merely watching children complete a task that parents do not believe children could complete on their own can increase parents' beliefs in children's competence and inspire them to allow more autonomy.

Our studies have several limitations. First, our samples were restricted to U.S. parents, limiting the generalizability of our findings across cultures. Second, the tasks we used had ceiling effects, as most children were able to complete them independently. This allowed us to test for parent accurate estimation or underestimation, but limited our ability to examine overestimation. Third, our studies do not examine the underlying cognitive mechanisms that drive parents' underestimation. Future work should investigate how parents form and update mental models of their children's abilities.

Taken together, our work demonstrates that parents tend to underestimate preschool-aged children's ability to complete challenging tasks, which may negatively influence parenting behaviors. These findings suggest that the next time a child faces a new challenge, parents might consider stepping back, taking a deep breath, and discovering what their child can do all on their own.

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