Differential effects of reasoning and speed training in children

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to determine whether intensive training can ameliorate cognitive skills in children. Children aged 7 to 9 from low socioeconomic backgrounds participated in one of two cognitive training programs for 60 minutes/day and 2 days/week, for a total of 8 weeks. Both training programs consisted of commercially available computerized and non-computerized games. Reasoning training emphasized planning and relational integration; speed training emphasized rapid visual detection and rapid motor responses. Standard assessments of reasoning ability – the Test of Non-Verbal Intelligence (TONI-3) and cognitive speed (Coding B from WISC IV) – were administered to all children before and after training. Neither group was exposed to these standardized tests during training. Children in the reasoning group improved substantially on TONI (Cohen’s $d = 1.51$), exhibiting an average increase of 10 points in Performance IQ, but did not improve on Coding. By contrast, children in the speed group improved substantially on Coding ($d = 1.15$), but did not improve on TONI. Counter to widespread belief, these results indicate that both fluid reasoning and processing speed are modifiable by training.

Introduction

Fluid reasoning (FR) represents the capacity to think logically and solve problems in novel situations (Cattell, 1987; Horn & Cattell, 1967). Cattell proposed the Investment Hypothesis, whereby FR serves as a scaffold that allows a child to acquire other cognitive skills and knowledge (Cattell, 1987). Indeed, FR is a strong predictor of performance in school, at university, and in cognitively demanding occupations (Floyd, Evans & McGrew, 2003; Fuchs, Fuchs, Compton, Powell, Seethaler, Capizzi, Schatschneider & Fletcher, 2006; Gottfredson, 1997). Although FR is typically thought of as a stable characteristic of an individual, several lines of research have called into question this long-held assumption (Flynn, 2007; Gray & Thompson, 2004; Nisbett, 2009).

Given that FR ability is relevant for scholastic achievement, and that it is likely to be influenced by environmental factors (Flynn, 2007; Nisbett, 2009), we hypothesized that this cognitive skill would be a good target for a cognitive intervention in children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. It has been shown that several cognitive skills that support reasoning, including working memory (WM) (Evans & Schamberg, 2009), attention (Mezzacappa, 2004), and language (Noble, McCandliss & Farah, 2007), are compromised by low socioeconomic status (SES), and that academic outcomes are consistently worse for low SES children than for their middle-class peers (Bradley, Convyn, Burchinal, McAdoo & Coll, 2001; McLoed, 1998).

In the present study, we conducted a cognitive intervention in students of ages 7 to 10 at a school with a history of low statewide test scores and a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. We chose to focus on this age range because the strongest influences of FR on later achievement have been observed among children of ages 5 to 10 (Ferrer & McArdle, 2004; Ferrer, McArdle, Shaywitz, Holahan, Marchione & Shaywitz, 2007).

Over the years, interventions aimed at improving FR have had mixed results (Sternberg, 2008). Several studies have provided evidence that training of working memory, a cognitive function that is strongly related to FR (Engle, Tuholski, Laughlin & Conway, 1999; Fry & Hale, 1996), leads to moderate improvements in FR (Jaeggi, Buschkuehl, Jonides & Perrig, 2008; Klingberg, Fernell, Olesen, Johnson, Gustafsson, Dahlström, Gillberg, Forssberg & Westerberg, 2005; Olesen, Westerberg & Klingberg, 2004; Thorell, Lindqvist, Bergman Nutley, Bohlin & Klingberg, 2009). Further, Holmes and colleagues have shown that training-related gains in WM, even in the absence of corresponding gains in FR, can lead to improvements in academic outcomes (Holmes, Gathercole & Dunning, 2009). On the other hand, Owen...
and colleagues (Owen, Hampshire, Grahn, Stenton, Dajani, Burns, Howard & Ballard, 2010) have found in a large sample of adults that multiple days of playing a set of computerized cognitive tasks online, including FR tasks, does not transfer to a measure of speeded verbal reasoning.

We predicted that a training program targeting children, featuring a variety of computerized and non-computerized reasoning games in a classroom setting, could lead to larger gains in FR than those observed in previous studies. We sought to work with children from low SES backgrounds, since we reasoned that these children would be most likely to benefit from environmental enrichment (Gray, Chabris & Braver, 2003; Raizada & Kishiyama, 2010).

Many prior cognitive intervention studies have included for comparison a group of adults who did not participate in the training (a passive control group) or a group whose training did not get progressively difficult over time (an active control group with non-adaptive training); other studies simply did not include a control group. Here, we sought to compare the effects of two well-matched training programs that emphasized different cognitive functions – FR and processing speed (PS) – each of which is a critical component of cognition (Gottfredson, 1997; Kail, 1991). Both training programs included a variety of engaging, commercially available games that increased in difficulty as participants improved. Unlike prior studies, in which researchers sought to show a larger improvement in cognitive test scores for the intervention group than the control group upon re-testing, we predicted a double-dissociation in the magnitude of the effects of our two training programs on FR and PS.

Our FR intervention was informed by research on the neural basis and development of this capacity (Ferrer, O’Hare & Bunge, 2009). Many tests of FR require relational integration, or the ability to jointly consider distinct relationships between stimuli (Halford, Wilson & Phillips, 1998). Such tests include, but are not limited to, Raven’s Progressive Matrices, Tower of London, transitive inference problems, and propositional analogies. Although these tests differ from one another in many ways, they engage common brain regions – lateral prefrontal and posterior parietal cortices – in addition to task-specific regions (Bunge & Wendelken, 2009; Gläscher, Rudrauf, Colom, Paul, Tranel, Damasio & Adolphs, 2010; Gray et al., 2003; Jung & Haier, 2007). In adults, rostral lateral PFC (rL), frontal cortex (Fr) is primarily engaged on trials that require relational integration (Christoff & Gabrieli, 2002; Christoff, Prabhakaran, Dorfman, Zhao, Kroger, Holyoak & Gabrieli, 2001; Wendelken & Bunge, 2009). Using several of these tests, it has been shown that children aged 7–12 engage the appropriate set of brain regions while performing reasoning tasks, but that they exhibit an immature, non-selective activation profile in rostral lateral prefrontal cortex (Crone, Wendelken, van Leijenhorst, Honomichl, Christoff & Bunge, 2009; Ferrer et al., 2009; Wright, Matlen, Baym, Ferrer & Bunge, 2007).

Given the commonalities and differences in brain activation observed across these various FR tasks, we hypothesized that ‘cross-training’ on various tasks that require relational integration would lead to maximal gains in FR. Importantly, because fluid intelligence characterizes the ability to tackle novel problems, we ensured that children were continually challenged with new tasks.

We designed a speed intervention that emphasized rapid visual detection and rapid motor responses during performance of a variety of games with simple rules. With this training program, we sought to tax PS, or ‘the ability to fluently perform cognitive tasks automatically, especially when under pressure to maintain focused attention and concentration’ (McGrew & Flanagan, 1998: 24). This skill is considered a central factor in cognitive development. Indeed, Kail and Salthouse (Kail & Salthouse, 1994) have argued that changes in PS over the lifespan underlie many of the observed changes in cognitive performance. Further, Bavelier and colleagues have shown that playing action video games results in improved PS across a variety of perceptual and attentional tasks (for review, see Dye, Green & Bavelier, 2009). We sought to create a speed training program that would include as large a variety of games as the reasoning training program.

PS is thought to contribute to FR only weakly, and indirectly, through its influence on WM (Kail, 2007; Kail & Ferrer, 2007). Thus, while we anticipated that speed training might lead to slight gains in FR, we predicted that gains resulting from direct FR training would be much larger. In contrast, since FR training did not emphasize rapid responding, we predicted that reasoning training would result in minimal or no change in cognitive speed.

In summary, we sought to test whether children who participated in one of two 8-week cognitive training programs would exhibit selective improvements in the targeted cognitive processes. Importantly, both groups participated in active interventions focused on foundational cognitive skills. Given that motivation is critical for learning, we selected commercially available games that were designed to be entertaining. Further, recognizing the importance of social interaction in learning (Gelman, 2009), children in both groups had extensive and equal interactions with the researchers and with other children throughout the program.

Methods

School selection

Our intervention was conducted within an after-school program at an elementary school in Oakland, California. This school was selected based on its low statewide test
scores, which place it in the bottom 20% of California schools. Thirty-six percent of students at this school are English language learners. In 2008, over 60% of students failed to achieve proficiency in English, and around 40% failed to achieve proficiency in Math on the California Standards Test. Seventy-two percent of students at this school qualify as economically disadvantaged and receive free or reduced price lunch.

Participants

Children aged 7–10 with no history of neurological or psychiatric illness were recruited from this after-school program with approval from the Institutional Review Board at University of California, Berkeley. Children whose parents spoke languages other than English were included in the study, given the relatively high proportion of these students in the after-school program. However, all potential study participants spoke English fluently. Informed consent was obtained from parents in their native language (Spanish or English), and an information letter was given to children. Participants were randomly assigned to either the reasoning training program or the speed program, which were offered on alternate days of the week (Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays). Data are reported for 17 children (10 boys and seven girls, with a mean age of 8y 6m) who participated in reasoning training, and 11 children (eight boys and three girls, with a mean age of 8y 6m) who participated in speed training. No significant differences were found between groups in demographic measures (see Table 1). Demographic data for individual children can be found in Tables S1 and S2.

The study took place over the course of two semesters, with each child participating in a single 8-week training program. During the first semester, 12 children aged 7–10 participated in reasoning training and 10 children in speed training. The three 10-year-olds in the study (two in the reasoning group and one in the speed group) displayed little interest in playing games with the younger children, and were not fully engaged in the program. As it was evident early in training that the emergent group dynamics were not conducive to learning for the older children, it was decided that the 10-year-olds would be excluded from final data analysis, and that enrollment during the second semester would be restricted to children aged 7–9. Additionally, two children from the speed group were excluded from data analysis based on pre- or post-training assessment scores 2 standard deviations from the means for all children in the study. During the second semester, seven additional children participated in reasoning training and four in speed training. In total, data are presented for 17 children in the reasoning group and 11 children in the speed group. In Tables S1–S5, we provide data for all study participants.

Cognitive assessments

Assessments of cognitive ability were conducted both before and after 8 weeks of training. Standard cognitive measures of PS, FR, and WM were administered by researchers who were not involved in the training program. During the first semester of the training program, assessments were administered in a quiet corner of the training classroom. Since children were assessed on the days they attended training (either Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays), the researchers conducting the assessments during the first semester could deduce each child’s training group. During the second semester, assessments were administered in a separate room by a researcher who was blind to the group assignments.

We examined the effects of cognitive training on two different PS measures (Feldmann, Kelly & Diehl, 2004): Cross Out from Woodcock-Johnson-Revised and Coding B from Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV. Cross Out is a timed test in which one must rapidly identify and put a line through each instance of a specific symbol in a row of similar symbols. A row is counted as correct if a child correctly identifies all five instances of the target symbol in that row. The raw score on this assessment is the total number of rows completed correctly in 3 minutes. Unlike Cross Out, Coding requires a mental transformation; it is a timed test in which one must rapidly translate digits into symbols by identifying the corresponding symbol for a digit provided in a legend. The total number of digits translated in 2 minutes serves as the raw score.

Although we did not attempt to train working memory per se in either training program, we sought to determine whether playing the reasoning and/or speed games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education of primary caregiver</th>
<th>Training days attended</th>
<th>WASI vocabulary raw (normed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>10 M, 7 F</td>
<td>8.58 ± 0.68</td>
<td>10.33 ± 1.50</td>
<td>12.71 ± 2.37</td>
<td>28.2 (48.2) ± 6.66 (9.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>8 M, 3 F</td>
<td>8.52 ± 0.67</td>
<td>10.50 ± 3.07</td>
<td>12.00 ± 2.05</td>
<td>28.2 (46.2) ± 8.64 (7.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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would result in gains in this core cognitive function. We measured working memory with simple span measures of phonological and visuospatial working memory, namely the Digit and Spatial Span tests from the Wechsler Memory Scale. Both span tasks require participants to recall encoded stimuli in the same order in which they were presented (Forward span), and in the reverse order (Backward span). Two trials are presented for each number of stimuli. The raw score represents the number of correct trials. The Forward tests measure the ability to maintain information online, whereas the Backward tests measure the ability to both maintain and manipulate information online. Digit Span and Spatial Span scores are computed as the sum of the Forward and Backward scores for each test.

Training

Each program was offered for 75 minutes per day, 2 days per week for 8 weeks. Sixty minutes of the 75-minute sessions were dedicated to training, and the remaining 15 minutes were used to take attendance, explain games, and provide breaks. Attendance ranged from 8 days to 16 days per child, and mean attendance did not differ significantly between groups (12.7 days for the reasoning group and 12 days for the speed group, \( p = .42 \)). During the first semester, all children began training on the same day. During the second semester, start dates were staggered over the first 3 weeks of training. This modification made it feasible for the researchers performing assessments to be blind to the group assignments.

The games included in the reasoning and speed training programs are listed in Table 3 (for additional information about games and child–researcher interactions, see Data S1). As noted previously, we sought to provide children with a variety of new reasoning games over the course of training. We sought to include a similarly varied set of games in the speed training so that it would be a well-matched control program. Both programs incorporated a mix of commercially available computerized and non-computerized games, as well as a mix of games that were played individually or in small groups. Games selected for reasoning training demanded the joint consideration of several task rules, relations, or steps required to solve a problem. Games selected for speed training involved rapid visual processing and rapid motor responding based on simple task rules.

Each day, children spent 15 minutes at each of four stations: computer games, Nintendo DS games, group non-computerized games, and individual non-computerized games. The remaining time was spent as short breaks between stations. This format kept children on task and engaged for a full hour during each training session. Two researchers managed the non-computerized game stations (one per station), and one researcher managed both computerized game stations. Researchers ensured that children stayed on task and motivated by providing hints and increasing the difficulty of games when appropriate.

Results

Both training programs led to significant improvements in the trained cognitive ability, as measured by standard cognitive assessments. After reasoning training, children were able to solve an average of 4.5 more matrix reasoning problems on the Test of Nonverbal Intelligence (TONI-3) (\( t = 4.36, df = 16, p < .001 \); one-tailed \( p \)-value reported here and for all subsequent \( t \)-tests). This change corresponds to an effect size (Cohen’s \( d \)) of 1.51 (Figure 1a, Table 2). Before training, children in the reasoning group had an average score of 96.3 points on the TONI, which is normed with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. After training, they had an average score of 106.2 points. This gain of 9.9 points
Table 2  Pre- and post-training assessment scores. Significant paired one-tail t-tests are bolded. Spatial span was not collected for one subject in the speed group, so post-training data are reported for 10 subjects. Bold p-values are significant at p < .05 uncorrected. Asterisks indicate p-values that survived false discovery rate (FDR) corrected for multiple comparisons (α of .05 adjusted for 14 independent tests; p < .004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Pre-training</th>
<th>Post-training</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TONI</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross Out</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digit Span - Forward</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digit Span - Backwards</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Span - Forward</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Span - Backwards</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Pre-training</th>
<th>Post-training</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TONI</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross Out</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digit Span - Forward</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digit Span - Backwards</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Span - Forward</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Span - Backwards</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Training games. For computerized and DS games, the company format is as follows: Publisher (Developer). All C games are available for purchase and download at bigfishgames.com. Computerized: C; Non-computerized: NC; Nintendo DS: DS; Indiv.: Individual

**Reasoning games**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Players</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set</td>
<td>SET Enterprises</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quirkle</td>
<td>MindWare</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rush Hour</td>
<td>ThinkFun</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangoes</td>
<td>REX Games</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate Fix</td>
<td>ThinkFun</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azada</td>
<td>Big Fish Games</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azada II</td>
<td>Big Fish Games</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Brain Academy</td>
<td>(Think Games) (Edutainment)</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picross</td>
<td>Nintendo</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Brainium’s Games (Mind Bender)</td>
<td>(Jupiter Multimedia)</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neves</td>
<td>Atlus Co. (Yuke’s USA)</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipe Mania</td>
<td>Empire Interactive</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Speed of processing games**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Group/Indiv.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spoons</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictureka</td>
<td>Hasbro Games</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blink</td>
<td>Mattel</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfection</td>
<td>MiltonBradley</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding Frenzy</td>
<td>Oberon Media</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super Cow</td>
<td>Big Fish Games (Neosoft)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricks of Atlantis</td>
<td>Arcade Lab</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervous Brickdown</td>
<td>Eidos Interactive (Arkedo Studio)</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Super Monkey Ball</td>
<td>Sega</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario Kart</td>
<td>Nintendo</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratatouille</td>
<td>THQ (Helixe)</td>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Indiv.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2  Double-dissociation in training outcomes. Improvements in the two primary outcome measures show a significant training improvement by training condition interaction. Error bars represent standard error of the ANOVA. Reasoning group: N = 17; Speed group: N = 11.

In contrast, children in the speed training group improved significantly on a measure of cognitive speed, Coding (t = 5.35, df = 10, p < .001), whereas children in the reasoning group did not (t = 0.88, df = 16, p = .20) (Figure 1b, Table 3). Children in the speed group were able to complete an average of 8.3 more items on this measure, which corresponds to an effect size of 1.15. Training brought this group from slightly below average for their age (as indicated by the dotted line in Figure 1b) to above average. Both groups improved on Cross Out (Table 3), but the improvement was greater for the speed group (t = 1.76, df = 26, p = .04).

To test for a double-dissociation in training outcomes, we compared the percent change in raw scores on each measure for each group (Figure 2). The training group by outcome interaction was significant (F(1, 26) = 13.03, p < .001), showing that training led to selective improvements in the targeted skill. Reasoning training tended to show larger improvements on the TONI than did speed training (t = 1.63, df = 26, p = .058), and
speed training resulted in larger improvements in Coding than did reasoning training ($t = 3.44$, $df = 26$, $p = .001$).

Several groups have found that intensive practice of a working memory task results in moderate improvements in FR (Jaeggi et al., 2008; Klingberg et al., 2005; Olesen, Macoveanu, Tegner & Klingberg, 2006; Thorell et al., 2009). As such, we sought to test whether children in the reasoning group improved on WM. Because both the FR and PS games required children to keep relevant information in mind, and because they placed an emphasis on visuospatial processing, we hypothesized that children in either or both groups might exhibit gains in WM, particularly on the Spatial Span measure.

Indeed, children in the reasoning group exhibited a moderate improvement on Forward Spatial Span ($t = 2.51$, $df = 16$, $p = .01$; Cohen’s $d = .65$) (Table 2, Figure 3). After training, children in the reasoning group remembered an average of 5.5 locations on the Forward Span task, as compared with 5 locations before training. The reasoning group also showed a trend-level improvement on Backward Spatial Span ($t = 1.57$, $df = 16$, $p = .07$), and therefore the effect of FR training on Total Spatial Span was significant ($t = 2.94$, $df = 16$, $p = .005$). The gain in Total Spatial Span was greater than the gain in the speed group ($t = 2.31$, $df = 26$, $p = .01$), who did not improve significantly on any of the Spatial Span measures. In contrast with the Spatial Span results, neither group exhibited a significant effect of training on Forward or Backward Digit Span. However, there was a trend towards higher Backward Digit Span after PS training ($t = 1.54$, $df = 10$, $p = .08$).

Given that the reasoning group improved on Spatial Span, we sought to determine whether their gains in reasoning could be explained by underlying gains in spatial WM. In fact, our data do not support this hypothesis. Gains on these working memory span measures were not correlated with gains in FR in the reasoning group (Forward Spatial Span: $R^2 = .05$, $p = .37$; Backward Spatial Span: $R^2 = .06$, $p = .36$), or in both groups combined (Forward Spatial Span: $R^2 = .02$, $p = .46$; Backward Spatial Span: $R^2 = .11$, $p = .09$). In other words, participants who improved the most on TONI were not necessarily the same individuals who improved substantially on the spatial working memory span task. It is an open question whether reasoning training would have resulted in improvements on more demanding measures of working memory, such as the complex span tasks of Engle and colleagues (Engle et al., 1999).

Next, we sought to test whether initial FR and PS scores and/or days of training predicted training outcomes. We found a significant negative correlation between pre-training TONI scores and TONI improvement ($R^2 = .33$, $p = .02$). We did not find a correlation between pre-training Coding and Coding improvement ($R^2 = .09$, $p = .37$). In summary, children who began the intervention with the lowest FR scores showed the largest gains in FR after reasoning training. Initial PS scores did not predict gains in PS after speed training. Gains were also not correlated with training days attended – either when each group was considered separately (FR: $R^2 = .02$, $p = .62$; PS: $R^2 = .08$, $p = .71$), or when percent change in the targeted skill was considered for both groups ($R^2 = .01$, $p = .69$).

Discussion

We found that a mere 8 weeks of playing commercially available games can lead to large improvements on standard cognitive tests of FR and PS in children. To our knowledge, this study provides the first clear evidence of a double-dissociation in cognitive gains between two training programs in children, and the strongest effect of training on FR. Both programs targeted general cognitive skills that are central to cognitive development (Fry & Hale, 1996; Kail, 2007) and that have the potential for widespread influences.

Particularly surprising is the finding that FR training resulted in an average gain in Performance IQ of almost 10 points, with four of the 17 children showing gains of over 20 points. This large effect underscores the point that FR is modifiable by environmental influences, contrary to claims that it is a relatively fixed ability (Cattell, 1987). Indeed, the very existence and widespread use of IQ tests rests on the assumption that tests of FR measure an individual’s innate capacity to learn. These and other findings (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007; Jaeggi et al., 2008; Klingberg et al., 2005; Rueda, Rothbart, McCandliss, Saccamanno & Posner, 2005) indicate that cognitive training can influence FR, even if it does not always do so (Owen et al., 2010). This collective evidence suggests that prior experience does...
impact test performance – even on FR tests, which were
designed to be ‘culture fair’ (Cattell, 1987).

In addition to the large effect on FR, reasoning
training also had a moderate effect on Spatial Span
(Cohen’s $d = .65$). Calculated in the same way, Klingberg
and colleagues’ spatial WM training research has yielded
effect sizes on Spatial Span ranging from .86 in children
with ADHD (Klingberg et al., 2005) to .89 in preschool
children (Thorell et al., 2009). The absolute amount of
improvement in our study (2 points in Spatial Span) was
similar to that found by Klingberg and colleagues. Thus,
our results indicate that just as engaging in progressively
more challenging spatial working memory problems
results in improved spatial WM, so too does playing a
variety of engaging reasoning games that rely on visuo-
spatial processing.

Our results may appear to contradict recent findings
by Owen and colleagues (Owen et al., 2010), who have
shown that computerized training games targeting FR
and WM do not transfer to gains on other tasks. How-
ever, several factors make it difficult to compare results
across studies, including differences in the study popu-
lations (children from low SES backgrounds vs. typical
adults), training settings (a classroom setting vs. unsu-
ervised training at home), and outcome measures
(a standard visuospatial reasoning test vs. a speeded
verbal reasoning test).

Speed training led to roughly a 30% improvement on
Coding. To our knowledge, this is the first study that
has found large training gains in PS in children. While
these gains did not transfer to gains in WM, as one
might predict based on Fry and Hale’s Developmental
Cascade Model (Fry & Hale, 1996), the trend observed
for Digit Span Backwards suggests that a significant
effect might emerge with a larger sample size – and/or
with complex span measures of WM (Conway, Kane &
Engle, 2003). Additionally, the speed group showed a
trend towards improvement on the TONI. However,
this gain is difficult to interpret without a passive
control group, as we cannot determine whether this
gain is larger than would be expected from test–retest
effects.

Potential caveats and future directions

Although our findings are very encouraging, some issues
deserve attention. Due to the intensive nature of our
training programs, our sample size was fairly small. With
a larger sample size, it would be possible to assess the
influence of each of the following factors on training
outcomes: training-related variables (e.g. days attended,
semester of enrollment), demographic variables (age,
gender, socioeconomic status), and cognitive functioning
prior to training.

In addition, because we administered assessments in
an after-school setting, we had limited time to assess
each child. Therefore, we had to choose tests of PS, WM
and FR that could be administered quickly, and we were
not able to administer as many tests of each skill as
would have been ideal. It is unclear whether reasoning or
speed training would have transferred to gains on com-
plex span measures of WM, like those designed by Engle
and colleagues (Conway et al., 2003).

We chose not to compare gains to a passive control
group (i.e. a group of children who took only pre- and
post- assessments) because we wanted every child who
signed up to be assigned to an active training program.
We were concerned that the children whose parents
would sign them up for this option could be different
from the other two groups in ways that are difficult to
quantify (e.g. parental involvement and attitudes towards
research and/or educational opportunities). Without a
passive control group, we were limited in our ability to
interpret the trend towards improvement on the TONI in
the speed group, and the gain on Cross Out in the speed
group.

Training in a social environment has many benefits,
but it does not lend itself to tight experimental control
over instruction and task progression. It was not possible
to standardize feedback from researchers and from other
children. We have matched the two training programs in
terms of researcher interactions to the best of our ability,
but there is no question that training programs aimed at
different cognitive skills would involve different teaching
strategies. Further, we do not have the data to address the
question of which games (e.g. computerized vs. non-
computerized, or group vs. individual) had the greatest
impact on cognitive skills. We hypothesize that no single
game drove the effects that we observed, but instead that
the variety of games helped to train FR and PS from
multiple angles, while sustaining the children’s interest.

Further research is needed to determine how FR and
PS training influence brain structure and/or function.
We hypothesize that FR training would lead to repeated
co-activation of parietal and lateral prefrontal regions
that support the processing and integration of visuo-
spatial relations. This repeated co-activation could, in
turn, lead to activity-dependent changes in these regions,
such as myelination and dendritic branching. Ongoing
and future studies incorporating neuroimaging methods
could provide further insight into these potential mech-
anisms for training-related gains in cognitive skills.

Additional research is also needed to address the fol-
lowing critical questions. How long do these training
effects last? Even if training effects fade without con-
tinued practice, the finding that these skills are malleable
is important. Gains in physical fitness would not be
expected to be maintained without practice, but this does
not mean that exercise is not beneficial. Can training-
related gains in cognitive skills lead to improved aca-
demic outcomes? The encouraging results of these and
other recent cognitive training studies warrant the
pursuit of larger-scale research that includes academic
outcome measures.

The central message of this paper is hopeful. Even
though there is increasing evidence that cognitive skills
are compromised in low SES children (Kishiyama, Boyce, Jimenez, Perry & Knight, 2009; Noble et al., 2007; Stevens, Lauinger & Neville, 2009), there is also increasing evidence that cognitive skills are amenable to training (Raizada & Kishiyama, 2010). Notably, our work and others’ shows that cognitive training need not be expensive. Simple instructional strategies and inexpensive commercially available games can be used to train core cognitive processes in children who stand to benefit most.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the University of California at Berkeley. The first author was supported by a T.O. Liu fellowship and a predoctoral fellowship from the National Science Foundation. The last author was supported by an R01 grant from the National Institute on Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NS057146-01). We thank Natalie DeShetler, Sasha Gupta, Rohan Oberoi, Monique Porsandeh, and Jeff Chu for supervising the training sessions, Kirstie Whitaker, Zdena Op de Macks and Ori Eliz for their help with pre- and post-training assessments, Alejandro Ponce for his help with Spanish translation, and Emilio Ferrer and Carter Wendelken for comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

References


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Received: 8 March 2010
Accepted: 14 July 2010

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:
- Data S1. Training Information
- Table S1 Demographic information for the reasoning training group
- Table S2 Demographic information for the speed training group
- Table S3 Reasoning and speed raw scores for the reasoning training group
- Table S4 Reasoning and speed raw scores for the speed training group
- Table S5 Working memory scores

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