



Episode 12: Imitation as a Foundation for Action and Social Connection

Hosts: Tracy Stackhouse · Cory Dundon · Michelle Maunder



LISTENER NAME

DATE LISTENED

TOTAL LISTENING + REFLECTION TIME (MINS)

CPD HOURS CLAIMED



Episode Summary

Imitation sounds simple, the copycat game that drives siblings mad, but it turns out to be one of the most foundational things a nervous system does. This episode traces it from a newborn matching a parent's tongue, through the line where copying tips over from connecting into irritating, all the way up to emulation: doing the thing in your own way. It is also a quiet master class in why so many skills, praxis, language, even your own therapeutic style, are built on it.

We finally get into a thread that has run through nearly every episode: imitation. Tracy frames it as deeply developmental before it is neurological, the way human beings, as social learners, pick up skill and stay connected. We move through the levels, from unconscious mimicry and emotional contagion, the newborn matching a parent's face, to true imitation with a means-ends goal, to emulation, where you grasp someone's intention and achieve it your own way. The line where copying turns from charming and safe into icky and irritating, it turns out, is the moment it becomes a deliberate, goalless copy.

From there it gets clinical. Tracy connects imitation to praxis and sensory discrimination, and Cory and Michelle work through two children who look like opposites: the one who insists you form the letter A exactly his way, and the one who shrugs and does it his own way. Both, we realise, can share the same underlying gap, weak discrimination, body schema or body-based working memory, just expressed as different coping.

We land on imitation as a conduit capacity: rarely the thing itself, but the route into social connection, language, mastery over gravity, or a ball skill. And why following the child's lead is what supplies the motivational glue that pulls sensory and motor together.



Resources & Mentions

- Developmental psychology of imitation: Andy Meltzoff and Moore (neonatal imitation), Malinda Carpenter, Jacqueline Nadel, and Piaget on deferred imitation.
- The mirror neuron system and intersensory (intermodal, crossmodal) integration as the mechanisms underlying imitation.
- Sally Rogers, on sensory-motor skill as an active ingredient of imitation, with affective connection as the reason we do it.
- The Spirit model (Stackhouse), which imitation draws across: postural, regulation, social, praxis and executive function.
- Check out DFX's Learning Journeys to build your clinical reasoning skills: <https://dfxlearningjourneys.thinkific.com/>



Reflection Prompts

Take a few quiet minutes to consider each prompt and write freely. Add or remove a prompt block to suit the episode.

- 1** Imitation runs from unconscious mimicry through true imitation to emulation, doing it your own way. For a child you're working with, which level are they at, and what would the next one look like?

- 2** The difference between charming copying and irritating copying is intention, not the action. Where have you felt that shift with a child, and what did it tell you about what they were actually doing?

- 3** Two children who look opposite, the one who must copy exactly and the one who refuses to, can share the same underlying gap. Think of a child at each extreme: might weak discrimination or body schema sit beneath both?

- 4** We frame imitation as a conduit capacity, rarely the goal itself but the route into language, social connection or a motor skill. For a child, what is imitation actually a conduit into right now?

- 5** Following the child's lead supplies the motivational glue that pulls sensory and motor together. Where could you use a child's own interest to make imitation worth their while, rather than asking them to copy on demand?
