

Spring 2022

# SOCIAL & MORAL COGNITION LAB

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY





## WHAT DO WE STUDY?

We are interested in how children and adults navigate their social world, including how they...

1. make moral decisions
2. think about right and wrong
3. reason about and interact with people who are different from them
4. reason about supernatural entities (e.g., God)
5. perceive the criminal justice system
6. and more!



## WHERE TO FIND US?

DUE TO COVID-19, WE'VE PAUSED IN-PERSON PARTICIPATION AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

**We are currently recruiting participants virtually via Zoom!**

To sign-up for Zoom studies, please visit our website:  
<https://columbiasamclab.weebly.com/for-parents.html>

OR sign up directly through our Calendly:  
<https://calendly.com/snc2123/research-games-with-the-social-moral-cognition-lab>



For more information email us at [columbiasamclab@gmail.com](mailto:columbiasamclab@gmail.com).

AND find us at the **Brooklyn Children's Museum**, Thursdays and Sundays from 2-5pm EST

## How do children respond to others' actions?

### Main Question:

In our previous study, we found that older kids (7 to 8-year-olds) cared more to learn about why people did transgressive (mean) things when compared to prosocial (nice) things, and that younger kids (4- to 6-year-olds) did not show this same difference.

Now, we want to know if this difference between age groups is because older children care more about the reason why people do things than younger kids do.



We will read children a set of four stories where:

(1) one character accidentally pushed somebody and another intentionally pushed someone.

(2) one character accidentally took an apple from somebody and another intentionally stole an apple.

(3) one character accidentally spilled paint on the floor and another intentionally spilled paint.

(4) one character accidentally broke a mirror and another intentionally broke a mirror

Next we will ask the children: (1) who should get into trouble and (2) how much trouble should they get into?

### Findings/Next Steps:

This line of research is ongoing and findings for this study are not available at this time. We hope to share more about this work in our next newsletter in Spring 2023.

We are currently signing families up for this research game with child participants (ages 4-to-9 years old) over Zoom.

To find out how to sign your child up see **Page 1** of our newsletter!

## How do children think about different types of punishment?

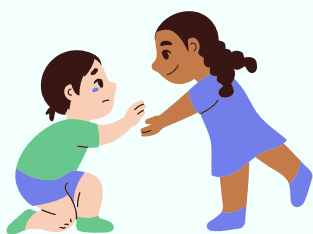
### Main Question:

How do children think about mild versus harsh punishment against wrongdoers?

Children heard a story in which one character (the wrongdoer) shared candies selfishly with another person. Then, children learned about varying degrees of punishment. For example, in one scenario, a character took one candy away from the wrongdoer, as a mild punishment. In a different scenario another character took all of candies away from the wrongdoer, showing harsh punishment. After each scenario, we asked children to rate how good or bad each person was, and how good or bad each person's behavior was.

### Findings/Next Steps:

Overall, regardless of their age, 5- to 10-year-olds evaluated taking 0 candies from the selfish individual most positively, followed by taking 1 candy and 2 candies away from the selfish individual. They evaluated taking all 3 candies away from the person most negatively. This finding suggests that (a) children generally do not endorse punishment in this context and (b) they judge mild punishment more positively than harsh punishment.



## How do adults feel about different responses to harm?

### Main Question:

For this study, we investigated how adults feel toward individuals who cause harm and also how they feel about how others respond to the harms they caused.

To address this idea, adult participants learned about individuals who caused either an emotional or financial harm. Additionally, adults learned that each individual either apologized or offered money in response to causing harm.

### Findings/Next Steps:

Overall, adults reported more positivity toward wrongdoers who apologized, versus offered money, following instances of emotional harm. These findings were explained by people's perceptions of remorsefulness. In other words, adults viewed those who apologized in response to causing emotional harm as more remorseful than those who offered money.

These findings highlight the powerful role of apologies following instances of emotional harm.

## Do people expect others to punish differently from God?

### Main Question:

Though people often imagine God as being able to punish others, we don't yet know how people think about why God punishes. To answer this question, we asked adults about why God, versus another human (Joan), might punish others.

### Findings/Next Steps:

We found that adults believed that God was less likely than Joan to punish for retributive reasons (punishing for the sake of punishment itself).



This result occurred because adults believed that God was more optimistic than Joan about humans' moral goodness. Therefore, adults also told us that God was less motivated than Joan to punish people for retributive reasons.

These findings suggest that adults may view earthly and divine agents as punishing for different reasons.



## How do children and adults feel about communicating punishment to others?

### Main Question:

To whom should punishment be communicated? In this study, we were interested in how adults and 4- to 7-year-old children would respond to this question.

Children and adults heard a story about a character (transgressor) who intentionally did something wrong to another character (victim) like knocking down the victim's sandcastle.

Participants next heard about a third character (witness) who saw this wrongdoing and choose whom (transgressor or victim) to show how they punished the transgressor's bad behavior.



(1) Witness A punished the transgressor by locking the transgressor's belonging in a lockbox and let only the transgressor know about it.

(2) Witness B punished the transgressor by locking the transgressor's belonging in a lockbox and let only the victim know about it.

We asked both children and adults to rate the goodness, niceness, and rightness of Witness A's and Witness B's punishment.



### Findings/Next Steps:

Adults rated letting only the transgressor know about the punishment more positively than they rated letting only the victim know. However, children of all ages viewed letting the victim know more positively.



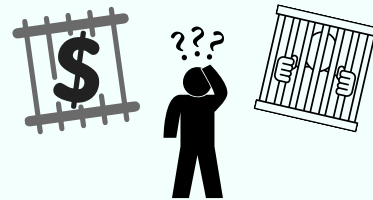


## How do adults think about different types of punishment?

### Main Question:

People often draw negative inferences about the moral character of people who have been punished. This study asked whether the type of punishment affects these negative judgments.

This study examined whether adults think people who have received punishments targeted at the person receiving the punishment (e.g., paying a fine) are less likely to become better people, than those who have received punishments targeted at the actions that brought about the punishment (e.g., compensating the victim).



### Findings/Next Steps:

When asked to make a direct comparison, adults thought that people ordered to pay compensation to the victim were more capable of improving than people ordered to pay a fine, even when the two punishments resulted in the same amount of financial cost to the wrongdoer. These findings suggest that adults make unique distinctions between these different types of punishments.

Future research in our lab plans to look into why it may be that people draw this distinction and also its potential consequences for policy.



## How do children think about different families?

### Main Question:

In one recent research game, we were interested in how children respond to peers growing up in different families.

In this study, 5- to 8-year-olds learned about three different characters:

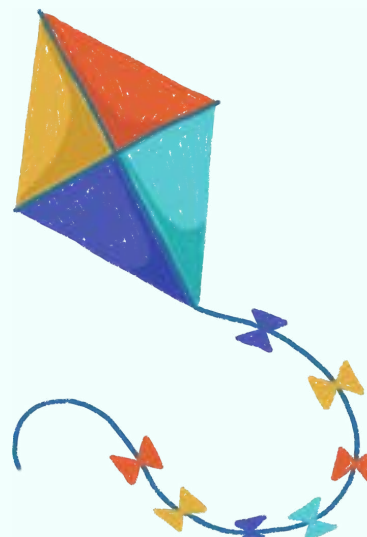
- (1) a character who lived with their parent,
- (2) a character whose parent was away on a business trip
- (3) a character whose parent was incarcerated.

Next, children answered questions about each character's moral beliefs (e.g., whether it is okay to hit someone else for no reason). Children also had the opportunity to share resources with each character.

### Findings/Next Steps:

With age, children became increasingly pessimistic that peers with incarcerated parents possess moral beliefs. Additionally, children shared fewer resources with peers whose parents were incarcerated compared to peers whose parents were not incarcerated.

These results suggest that negativity toward individuals with incarcerated parents begins relatively early in life and strengthens with age.





## What views do children have of peers with incarcerated parents?

### Main Question:

Some legal scholars think about punishment as expressive—as both a behavior and a tool for communication. Within psychology, some research examined people's reasoning about what punishment communicates about punished individuals. Recent work from our lab extended this past work by asking whether people interpret punishment as also communicating information about the children of those who have been punished (e.g., incarcerated individuals).

Children heard stories about a baby born to an incarcerated mother, but raised by a non incarcerated mother. Then, children answered questions about what this baby would be like when they grow up (e.g., when this baby is all grown up, will they break the law).

### Findings/Next Steps:

With age, participants were less likely to report that children inherited negative moral “essences” from incarcerated parents, and that parental incarceration indicated that children would come into contact with the criminal legal system in the future.

These findings suggest that younger, versus older, participants were especially likely to understand punishment as communicating messages about those indirectly implicated in punishment-related scenarios.



## Are adults more generous when thinking about God?



### Main Question:

How does recall of past kind behavior and benevolent God concepts shape people's generosity toward those who are different from themselves?

Adult participants recounted an instance of their past kind or mean behavior directed toward an individual who was dissimilar from them in age. Additionally, they read a short essay portraying God's nature as either benevolent or punitive and then summarized the essay. Lastly, adults allocated the number of lottery entries they would like to give to another person who was much older or younger than themselves.

### Findings/Next Steps:

Adults who recalled their past kind acts and read an essay portraying God as benevolent showed the highest generosity, while those who recalled their past mean acts and read an essay portraying God as punitive showed the lowest generosity. This finding suggests that not only thinking of past kind behaviors towards others who are different from oneself, but also perceiving God as benevolent increased generosity toward those individuals..





## How do children and adults think about curiosity?

### Main Question:

Previous research shows that curiosity can be a valuable pathway for learning, yet prior work has not probed how people morally evaluate people who are curious. In this research game, we wanted to know how children and adults think about people who are curious about different topics like religion and science.

Adults and kids viewed characters who were curious, not curious, or knowledgeable about science or religion. Participants then answered questions about the morality of each character.

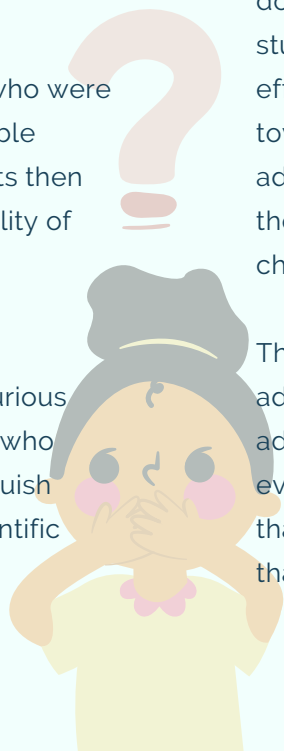
### Findings/Next Steps:

Children ages 5-8 years old rated curious targets more favorably than targets who were not curious, but did not distinguish between religious curiosity and scientific curiosity.

In a follow up study, children ages 7-8 years old completed a reward or punishment task with respect to characters who were curious and not curious about science and religion. This study indicated that children's attitudes about curious targets did not extend to their behaviors.

Adults rated curious targets more favorably than both not curious and knowledgeable targets, patterns that emerged for both domains of science and religion. Follow up studies showed that adult's perceptions of effort underly their favorable responses towards curious individuals (e.g., the harder adults thought that each character worked the more positively they rated those characters).

These results show that both children and adults view curiosity positively. Among adults, our findings show that moral evaluations were dependent upon the view that curious targets are more hardworking than non-curious targets.





# THANK YOU!

We would like to send a big thank you to all of the amazing families that participate in our research!

We are also grateful to Columbia University, the John Templeton Foundation, and the National Science Foundation for their support.