

Social and Moral Cognition Lab

SPRING 2023



What do We Study?

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

- make moral decisions
- think about right and wrong
- reason about and interact with people who are different from them
- and more!



Where to Find Us

We are currently recruiting participants both in person and virtually via Zoom!

To sign-up for Zoom studies, please visit our website. [Click here!](#)

OR

To sign up directly through our Calendly, [click here!](#)

You can also find us at a museum!

Brooklyn Children's Museum: Fridays and every other Sunday, 2pm - 5pm

Liberty Science Center: select Sundays

How do children think about their peers' kind and mean behaviors?

Main Question:

From early in development – even in infancy – children often show helpful behaviors such as comforting and sharing with others. Children also have a similarly developing understanding of morality; more specifically, previous studies show that younger children (4- to 6-year-olds) care less about a person's intent behind an action than older children (7- to 9-year-olds).

In this current study, we are interested in learning if older children simply care more about intent than younger children, or if older children care more generally about “why things happen” than younger children.



To answer this question, we will read children a few stories about characters who have chosen either a “good” behavior (like giving away their toy) or a “bad” behavior (like borrowing someone else's things without asking). The characters will be in situations where they can make easier choices (like choosing to share when they have a lot) or harder choices (like choosing to share when they have very little). After hearing these stories, children will be asked if they think that these characters are (1) good or bad and (2) nice or mean.

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 2024. We are currently signing families up for this research game with child participants (ages 4-to-9 years old) both in person and over Zoom.

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



"The more children cared about why people do things overall, the more they wanted to know about why people did mean things."

How do children try to find out about others' actions?

Main Question:

In a previous study, we learned that older children wanted to know more about why kids did mean things to others than why they did nice things. We wanted to know why that is. In our latest study, we want to know if this difference is possibly because older children care more than younger children do about why people do things overall.



Findings:

We found that the more children cared about why people do things overall, the more they wanted to know about why people did mean things. This could help change how we think about changes in children's reasoning about the behavior of others, as children are actually selective in what motives they choose to care about.

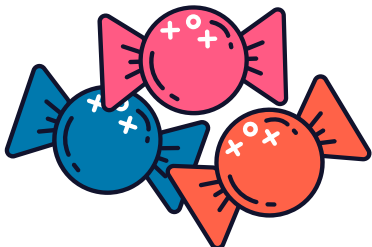


How do children think about different degrees of punishment?

Main Question:

We assessed how children evaluate different degrees of punishment against wrongdoers.

Five to 10-year-old children heard a story about a transgression, in which one person (the wrongdoer) stole another person's candy (the victim), resulting in three candies for the wrongdoer and one candy for the victim. Then, children learned about varying degrees of punishment. For example, in one scenario, a third person took two candies away from the wrongdoer, so that the wrongdoer and the victim would have the same number of candies (We call this equality-establishing punishment). In another scenario, the third person took 0 candies away from the wrongdoer, showing no punishment. After each scenario, we asked children to rate how right or wrong each person was, and how right or wrong each person's behavior was.



Findings:

Overall, children evaluated equality-establishing punishment most positively, while they evaluated no punishment most negatively. These results suggest that children consider the degree of punishment when evaluating its moral wrongness.



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 (a) why God, versus another human (Joan), might punish others and (b) whether their reasoning about God's punitive motive generalizes across different religions and different types of transgressions.



Findings:

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. We observed this effect among adults from different religious groups, including among Catholic and Jewish participants..

Further, we found the same result regardless of whether a person violated religious rules or secular rules. These findings suggest that adults may view earthly and divine agents as punishing for different reasons and this reasoning generalizes across different religious backgrounds and different types of transgression.



What do children infer about social relationships based on punishment motives?

Five- to 10-year-olds learned about two different punishment stories: One punisher punished a wrongdoer with a retributive motive (e.g., to make the wrongdoer pay for his/her behavior) and another punisher punished a wrongdoer with a consequentialist motive (e.g., to teach the wrongdoer a lesson).



Main Question:

We examined if and how children reason about social relationships between wrongdoers and punishers who punished the wrongdoers.

Findings:

Regardless of whether the punisher had a retributive or consequentialist motive, children believed that the punisher and the wrongdoer would dislike each other, inferring negative social relationships from punishment.



How do adults think about different types of punishment?

Main Question:

People often make assumptions about how people who have previously received punishment will behave in the future. This study asked whether and how the type of punishment affects these assumptions.

A prior study found that adults think people who have received punishments targeted at the person receiving the punishment (e.g., paying a fine) are less likely to avoid doing bad things in the future than people who have received punishments targeted at the actions that brought about the punishment (e.g., compensating the victim). Follow-up studies explored the cognitive mechanism behind this effect.

Findings:

Adults thought that people ordered to compensate the victim were more likely to behave better in the future than people ordered to pay a fine. They made this judgment much more often and with much greater confidence in cases where both defendants had correct beliefs about what type of punishment they had received than in cases where one defendant was mistaken. This finding suggests people think that different types of punishment send different messages about the nature of a wrongdoing.

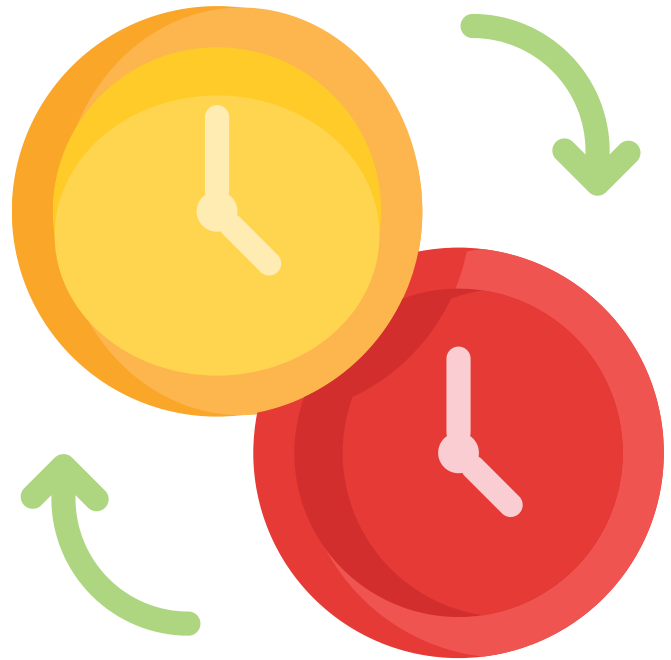
"People think that different types of punishment send different messages about the nature of a wrongdoing."

How do adults think about change over time?

Main Question:

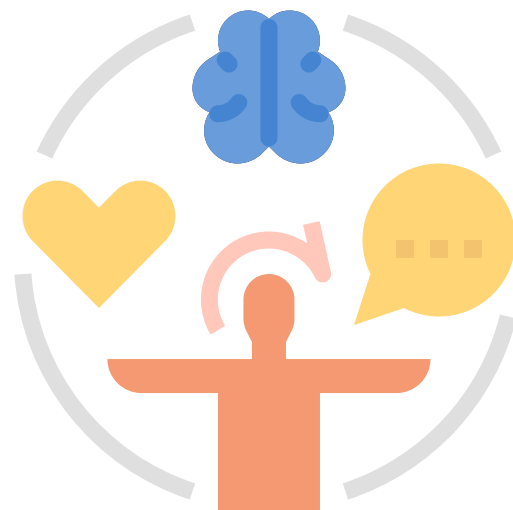
Prior research has found that adults think people who have done something wrong become less connected to the self that had done said wrongdoing as time passes and, as a result, less deserving of either moral criticism or legal punishment for those wrongdoings. The present research examined whether, even in cases of a more serious wrongdoing, people thought less punishment was appropriate as the person became less connected to the self who had previously wronged.

We also asked whether temporal perspective (imagining oneself at the time of the wrongdoing looking forward vs. imagining oneself many years after the wrongdoing looking backward) affected judgments of connectedness and, as a result, judgments about punishment.



Findings:

We found the predicted effect of connectedness on punishment judgments: participants who viewed the person who had done the more serious wrongdoing as less connected to the self that had done wrong thought the person deserved less punishment. However, unexpectedly in light of prior research, we found no effect of temporal perspective on connectedness judgments.





THANK YOU!

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

We would also like to thank our community partners, Brooklyn Children's Museum and Liberty Science Center, for allowing us to use their space!

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