Childhood is a period of remarkable learning and growth, and the toddler and preschool years involve particularly exciting changes for children and their families!

Our research examines two main questions:

1) How do children organize their experiences into categories?
2) How do they learn about human behavior and social relationships?

This newsletter describes some of the studies that we have recently completed or are currently working on. We hope that you and your child have enjoyed participating in our research!

During the last 2 years, parents, children, museums, preschools, and teachers helped us with one or more of the studies described in this newsletter. We would like to thank the following museums, preschool and day-care centers for their participation in our research:

Experiencing conflict, especially within a group framework, is an inevitable part of childhood. How do children reason about these types of experiences? How does conflict between individuals influence children’s beliefs about friendship and groups?

In this study, children were told a story about two groups of children: a blue group and a red group. Some children were told that two of the children (from different groups) had been in a conflict (e.g., got into a fight on the playground), while others were not told that there had been any conflict. Children were then asked to make predictions about what types of interactions would occur between the two groups in the future. Would they expect future harmful interactions to occur between the two groups following the original conflict?

By examining 4-year-old children’s predictions, we found that after seeing a neutral interaction (no conflict) between members of different groups, children did not expect conflict between the groups in the future. This means that children do not expect people to fight with one another simply because they are in different groups. However, after seeing a single instance of conflict, children reliably predicted that there would be more harmful interactions between the groups. From this result, we can see that children expect the original conflict, which happened between only two people, to spread to both groups.

Our findings in this study show us that children, even at the young age of 4, are very sensitive to information about groups in the world around them. This finding is especially important when we think about the social environment that preschoolers experience. As young children attend school and participate in activities such as organized sports teams, they will continue to learn a great deal about group dynamics and they will use this information to help them navigate the world around them.
Developing a concept of morality is an essential part of childhood. How do children distinguish right from wrong, and how does information about groups factor into their reasoning about these situations? This study seeks to understand how children incorporate groups into their understanding of morality.

In this study, 4- and 5-year-old children were told a story about two groups: the Flurps and the Zazzes. They were then told about a harmful interaction either between members of different groups (e.g., a Flurp stole a cookie from a Zazz and made him sad) or members of the same group (e.g., a Flurp stole a cookie from a Flurp and hurt his feelings). Then, the children were asked to evaluate whether the harmful action was acceptable, and if not, “how bad” they thought it was.

By asking these questions, we were able to examine whether or not children believe that the moral implications of an action are different depending upon whether it occurred between members of the same group versus members of different groups. We found that children see a harmful action as worse when it is done to a member of the actor’s own group. On average, children said that harming a member of a different group was “sort of bad,” but that harming a member of one’s own group was “very, very bad.”

The findings of this study, which have also been found in adults, indicate a surprising feature of human moral judgment: when thinking about moral situations, people use groups as “moral boundaries” to guide their thinking about whether an action is right or wrong. This means that people may believe themselves to have different moral obligations to members of their own social group than to members of other social groups. Furthermore, this tendency is found from early childhood all the way through adulthood, showing us that groups are a very important factor in moral reasoning throughout the lifespan.
**ONGOING STUDIES**

**SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION**

The ways in which parents communicate values to their children can have very important implications for how children form concepts and navigate the world. In this ongoing study, we are looking at how parents talk to their children about different types of social situations. Parents and children read and discuss a storybook that includes a number of social situations. We examine how parent-child conversation varies across different types of social scenarios.

**ARE CHILDREN EFFECTIVE TEACHERS?**

In order to effectively teach, teachers must first understand what the learner does not know, and fill in those conceptual gaps by choosing examples that best illustrate the concept. Though children often teach or explain things to each other, we know very little about whether children are effective teachers. In this study, children are asked to teach a naive puppet how a toy works or where a rectangle is on a piece of paper by choosing what they think are the best two examples from a set of examples. Ultimately, we hope to learn more about how 4- and 5-year-old children reason about other people’s beliefs and whether they can take that into account when teaching.

**LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT**

Much of the information children gather about the world is through their communication with others. Children's conceptual development is driven by conversations with adults, and therefore language can have a major impact on the way children learn about concepts such as groups. In on-going studies, we look closely at how language affects the way children think.

In the first study, 4-year-old children read a picture book twice with a research assistant. This picture book introduces a new group of people called Zarpies. Some children hear the category referred to with generic labels (e.g. “Zarpies”) and some hear specific labels (e.g. “This Zarpie”). Children then complete questions about the new category. The purpose of these questions is to examine how labels influence children's understanding of the category. In a second study, we ask parents to read the storybook to their children, and examine the types of labels that parents naturally use when they are teaching their children about new categories. In particular, we are looking at whether parents tend to make general statements (e.g., “Bears eat honey” or more specific statements (e.g., “Some bears eat honey,” “This bear is eating honey”) when they are teaching their children about new categories and properties.
CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO RELATIVE SUCCESS

How do 4- and 5-year-old children develop ideas about what kinds of things girls and boys are good at? How do children evaluate themselves relative to peers? Implicit and explicit comparisons between a child's performance and that of his or her peers can be very influential in driving that child's self-evaluation and behavior. Comparisons with children of the opposite gender might be even more salient to kids.

In this study, we look at children's speed and explanations on a tracing game after they learn that they did better than another child, either a boy or a girl. This is a completely new game, and children have never heard any gender stereotypes associated with it. Do children attribute their success to their individual efforts or abilities, or do they think their success has to do with gender? And how do these different attributions affect their speed and their self-evaluations? Our study examines the influence of gender-based comparisons on children’s development of gender concepts.
ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH SELECTING EXAMPLES

What makes a new toy go? What does a new word like 'Blicket' mean? These are all situations in which children have to experiment and reason through many possible answers to figure out the correct one. They might have to press a few buttons, for instance, or ask an adult if their favorite shirts and pants are 'Blickets', to understand the correct answer. To effectively learn in these situations, children have to look for both positive and negative answers—when something is right and when it is wrong—to identify the most likely explanation. Do children look for positive and negative answers when testing their hypotheses? At what ages does this develop? What other strategies might children use? And does the process of forming and testing one's own hypotheses offer benefits or challenges to learning?

To answer these questions, we present kids with a set of pictures that differ by color, shape and size. We introduce 4- and 5-year-old children to a doll, Daxy, who is a visitor from a land far away. Daxy uses different words for some of these familiar items, like 'Blickets' for striped things, for example, and the children have to guess the meaning of these new words. Children pick three shapes to ask Daxy about, learn whether each one is a Blicket, and finally, using all the examples, have to infer what kinds of things are Blickets. The results of this study will add to our growing knowledge of how children reason actively about multiple hypotheses.

"Daxy says some of these might be Blickets. Can you help me figure out what kinds of things are Blickets?"
**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

1. **Tell me about your lab.**
   We are researchers who work in the psychology department at New York University. Dr. Marjorie Rhodes, an assistant professor at NYU, is our principal investigator and director. Her research examines how children learn about the world. Specifically, she is interested in conceptual development and the development of social cognition.

2. **My child participated in a study! How did my child do?**
   Each child is different, and we are interested in changes that they all go through during their preschool years. That is why we typically look at the averages of many children, rather than any individual child. Parents are sometimes worried that their child appears to give “wrong” answers. In fact, there are no wrong answers to our tasks, and we are often curious about how they make a guess, rather than the guess itself.

3. **Where can I find the results of the study?**
   First, we have to collect enough data to be able to interpret it. After we finish data collection, it's time to publish our studies. The publishing process can take a long time, so it can be years before a particular study is “finished”! In the meantime, we release a newsletter every semester so that interested parents can be in the loop about new and ongoing research. If you are interested in receiving our newsletter via email, please ask any researcher how you can sign up!

4. **If I’d like my child to participate in more studies with a caretaker, what steps should I take?**
   If the parents or legal guardians will not be present, they must fill out a consent form beforehand. They do not need to be physically present during the study.

5. **I know a daycare or preschool that would be interested in your studies. How can I put you in touch?**
   We are always looking to collaborate with other institutions, so we thank you in advance for your referral! You can send us an email with your first name and the name of the preschool to cdsclab@nyu.edu. Or you can give us a call at 212-998-7902.

6. **How can I find out more/participate in more studies?**
   Thank you for your interest! Please visit our website at www.psych.nyu.edu/cdsc/, send an email to cdsclab@gmail.com, or call us at 212-998-7902.

7. **When are you at the Children’s Museum Of Manhattan?**
   Fridays, Sundays, the first Saturdays of every month, some Wednesdays.
HOW CAN I PARTICIPATE?

If you would like more information on any of our work or if you would like to visit our on-campus laboratory to participate in another study, we can be reached through:

Our website: www.psych.nyu.edu/cdsc/
Email: cdsc.lab@nyu.edu
Phone: 212-998-7902

We are also planning to conduct further research in preschools across New York City during the 2012-2013 school year.

Thank you once again for your participation!

RECENT PUBLICATIONS


