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BABIES UNDERSTAND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES, EXPECT LEADERS TO FIX EVERYTHING WHEN SOMEONE BREAKS THE RULES

BY KASHMIRA GANDER ON 7/29/19 AT 3:00 PM EDT



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Babies understand social hierarchies and expect leaders to fix everything when someone breaks the rules, according to researchers who observed children watching puppet shows.

Scientists looked at how 120 17-month-old children reacted to puppet shows showing where bears behave unfairly, while they sat on a parents' lap. Would infants expect the leader of a group to step in to fix an issue, compared with those who weren't leaders?

The babies watched three bear puppets, who represented a wrongdoer, protagonist and a victim, respectively, in different scenarios. The protagonist bear presented the other bears with two toys to share. But the mean bear took both.

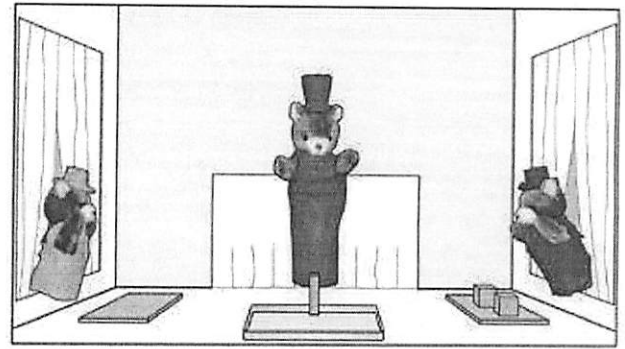
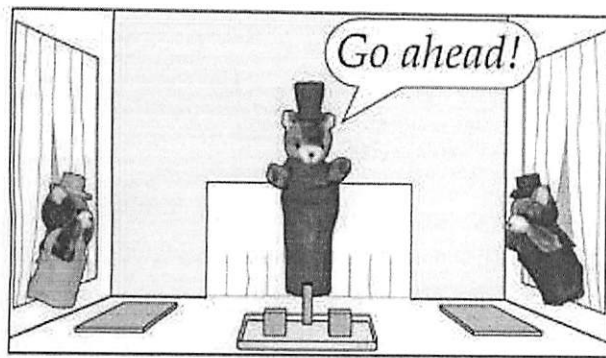
The protagonist then responded in one of two ways: by intervening and returning the toy to the victim; or speaking to each bear but not returning the toy. In some experiments, the protagonist was presented as the leader due to its behavior or physical cues. In others, it

was inferred all bears were equal.

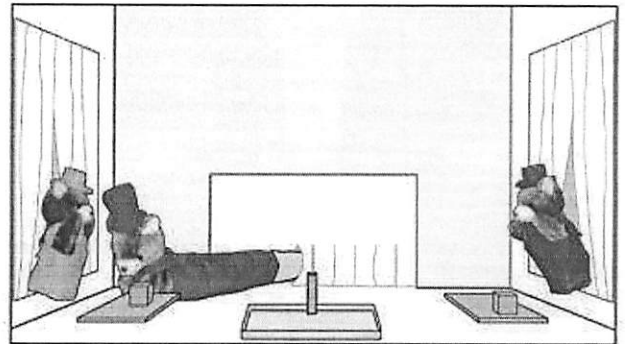
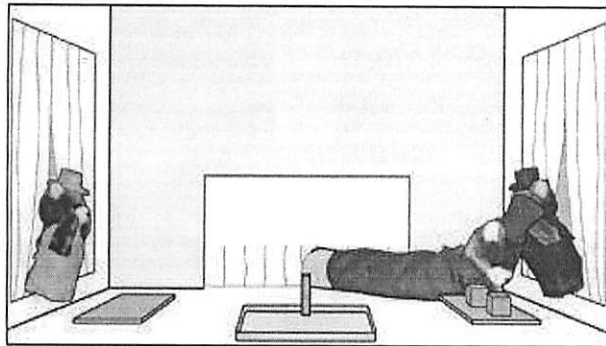
Children who observed the leader not intervening looked at the scene for "significantly longer suggesting that they expected the leader to intervene and rectify the wrongdoer's transgression," the authors of the study published in the journal *PNAS* wrote.

But the kids in the experiment where no bear was a leader looked equally at the events. The researchers believe that's because the children had no expectations from specific members when there wasn't the suggestion of a social hierarchy.

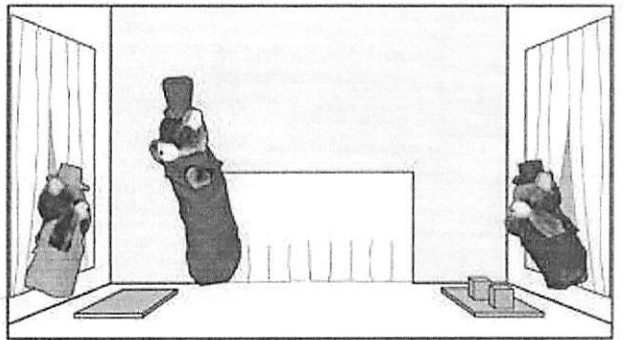
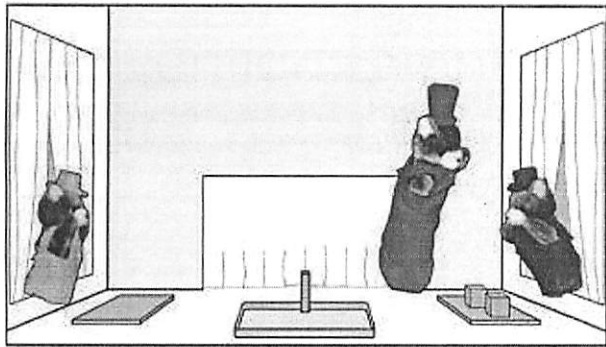
Another experiment saw one bear saying she didn't want a toy, and the other bear taking both. This time, the infants stared longer when the leader made sure each bear had a toy.



Intervention Event



Non-Intervention Event



Infants in the study watched as a protagonist bear, in red, either intervened to redress a wrong perpetrated by the bear in blue against the bear in yellow, or ignored the transgression.

RENEE BAILLARGEON

"It was as if the infants understood that in this case there was no transgression, so they viewed it as overbearing for the leader to redistribute one of the toys to a bear who had made it clear she didn't want one," co-author Maayan Stavans, a graduate student at University of Illinois, commented in a statement.

Stavans told *Newsweek*: "Adults have expectations regarding leaders' behaviors toward

their followers. Specifically, we expect leaders to have responsibilities toward their followers. When leaders behave in ways that go against our expectations, we hold them accountable.

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Co-author and University of Illinois psychology professor Renée Baillargeon told *Newsweek*: "We knew from previous work that children this age have specific ideas about how followers will behave toward their leaders.

"Now we see that they also have complementary expectations about how leaders will behave toward their followers."

As the children were 17 months old, the team aren't sure where these expectations come from, Stavans told *Newsweek*. It could be that infants pick up this knowledge by watching social interactions where authority figures intervene to right wrongs, and applied this knowledge to the puppet shows.

"Another possibility is that such role-expectations are part of our human endowment," she argued.

"These evolved over the course of human history since humans survived by living in groups, and leaders emerged to facilitate group-living. From this perspective, we should be predisposed to include role expectations when we think about leaders, and our research suggests that this pre-disposition can be traced at least by 17-months of age," she argued.

Ashley Thomas from Harvard University did not work on the paper. She examines how infants perceive social relationships and, told *Newsweek* she found it striking that the findings suggest that toddlers have a sophisticated understanding of social hierarchy that goes beyond thinking about hierarchy in terms of dominance.

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"Other studies have shown that toddlers differentiate between bullies and leaders: they prefer those who are deferred to in conflicts, but not those who use force to get their way and they expect others to follow the orders of leaders but not bullies," she said. "These studies show that toddlers even expect leaders to intervene in conflicts, which is a very important benefit that leaders provide to groups."

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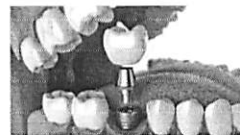
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Francesco Margoni, of the department of psychology and cognitive sciences at Italy's University of Trento, who recently the study finding infants differentiate between leaders and bullies, told *Newsweek*: "This finding thus further strengthens the hypothesis that we all possess early-emerging representations of legitimate authority and, most importantly, indicates that early in life we can intuitively understand one of the most crucial aspects of the relational dynamics between leaders and subordinates, that is, that leaders are expected to ensure that cultural and moral norms are respected."

Asked what parents can take from the study when it comes to raising children, Stavans suggested: "Given that parents and other authority figures have a great impact on shaping children's thinking, the best we can do is make sure we're behaving in ways consistent with these early expectations, so we don't infuse our children with confusing examples and inadvertently change the way they conceive of leaders and the way they behave when reaching leadership positions later in life."

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