



Children's moral judgments and moral emotions following exclusion of children with disabilities: Relations with inclusive education, age, and contact intensity

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ABSTRACT

We investigated relations between children's moral judgments and moral emotions following disability-based exclusion and inclusive education, age, and contact intensity. Nine- and 12-year-old Swiss children ($N=351$) from inclusive and noninclusive classrooms provided moral judgments and moral emotion attributions following six vignettes about social exclusion of children with disabilities. Children also reported on their level of sympathy towards children with disabilities and their contact intensity with children with disabilities. Overall, children condemned disability-based exclusion, attributed few positive emotions to excluder targets, and expressed high sympathy for children with disabilities, independent of age and educational setting. However, younger children from inclusive classrooms exhibited more moral judgments and moral emotions than younger children from noninclusive classrooms. Moreover, children who expressed high sympathy towards children with disabilities were more likely to report frequent contact with children with disabilities. The findings extend existing research on social exclusion by examining disability-based exclusion and are discussed with respect to developmental research on social and moral judgments and emotions following children's inclusion and exclusion decisions.

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1. Introduction

Based on increasing international efforts to promote the rights of persons with disabilities (Rights for Persons with Disabilities, 2006), the number of children with disabilities who join inclusive educational settings has increased in the United States and in Europe in recent years (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2008). The present study focused on Switzerland. Although Switzerland still has one of the highest rates of noninclusive education in Europe, children with disabilities have been increasingly integrated into mainstream education since 2005 (Sermer Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012). One premise of inclusive education is that children without disabilities learn to reduce disability-related stereotypes and increase tolerance towards diversity through interactions and contact with children with disabilities (e.g., Cameron & Rutland, 2007). However,

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what do children without disabilities think and feel about children with disabilities, and which role do moral considerations play in their thinking and feeling about disability-related social conflicts?

In order to promote children's sensitivity towards social inclusion, researchers have emphasized the need to better understand children's perceptions of social exclusion (Killen & Smetana, 2010). Nonetheless, despite the bulk of research on children's attitudes towards children with disabilities (Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007; for reviews, see Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002; Scior, 2011), developmental research on children's understanding and feelings about social inclusion and exclusion of children with disabilities is very scarce.

The present study aimed to fill these research gaps and was guided by two main research objectives: first, we investigated how children's moral judgments and moral emotions about social exclusion of children with disabilities are related to educational setting (inclusive vs. noninclusive) and age (9-year-olds vs. 12-year-olds). Second, we investigated the role of moral judgments and moral emotions in children's contact intensity towards children with disabilities.

1.1. Disability-related moral judgments

Although the call for mainstreaming children with disabilities is frequently justified with references to moral concepts such as social justice and equal rights (e.g., Lindsay, 2007), only very little research to date has investigated how children judge disability-based exclusion and how moral judgment is related to their inclusive or exclusive behavior towards children with disabilities. One of the few exceptions is a study by Corwadin (1986), which revealed that higher levels of moral judgment predicted greater social acceptance of classmates with mental disabilities in a sample of adolescents from inclusive classes. However, this study assessed moral judgments by asking children about dilemmas concerning general moral issues (e.g., Heinz Dilemma) and, thus, does not allow for conclusions regarding children's judgments of situations, which specifically relate to moral conflicts about the inclusion or exclusion of children with disabilities. Yet, children's weighting of moral and non-moral considerations when reasoning about moral conflicts not only depends on individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender) but also on the specific features of the context to be judged (Smetana, 2006). In this respect, it might be problematic to characterize children's disability-related attitudes as homogenous orientations (i.e., as being uniformly positive or negative). For example, research on children's attitudes towards children with disabilities has revealed that the valence of attitudes varies as a function of disability type (Nowicki, 2006); that is, disabilities that are less apparent (e.g., mental disabilities) are judged more negatively than disabilities that are more apparent (e.g., physical disabilities) (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002). In addition, children's attitudes may differ in regards to the specific features of the context presented to assess disability-based attitudes (Nowicki, 2006). For example, adolescents report less of a desire to interact with children who have disabilities for activities that are highly intimate (e.g., talking about personal issues) or require advanced cognitive or social competences (e.g., homework) than for less intimate or demanding activities (e.g., lending a pencil) (Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, & Widaman, 2007). Thus, children's moral judgments of disability-related moral conflicts may be expected to vary across contexts.

In this study, we assessed moral judgments by children's evaluations and moral reasoning about disability-based exclusion. We took account of contextual influences by assessing moral judgments in situations entailing social inclusion and exclusion of children with two different disabilities (mental vs. physical) with respect to different group activities (academic, social, athletic). Previous social domain research has investigated how children judge about the social exclusion of a non-stereotypical child and how their judgments and reasoning depend on varying contextual conditions such as intimacy of relationships (e.g., exclusion from friendships vs. exclusion from school) or qualification of the excluded non-stereotypical child (e.g., non-stereotypical child threatens or facilitates effective group functioning; Killen & Rutland, 2011). However, this research has focused primarily on how children judge and reason about exclusion based on gender, race, or nationality, and has not included disability (e.g., Killen, Margo, & Sinno, 2006; Malti, Killen, & Gasser, 2012).

The earliest evidence for children's ability to take account of context when reasoning about disability-based exclusion has been provided by two studies including kindergarten children from inclusive classrooms (Diamond & Hong, 2010; Diamond & Tu, 2009). In these studies, children had to decide if they would like to include a child with a physical disability in a group activity ("Who do you think should get to play?"). The majority of children opted for the inclusion of children with disabilities (67%). However, these studies also found that preschoolers were more likely to accept exclusion of children with physical disabilities in situations in which the disability interfered with the activity (e.g., kicking a ball) than in situations in which disability did not affect group functioning (e.g., drawing). In the present study, we extended this research by investigating children's moral judgments and reasoning about exclusion of children with disabilities, and by examining the role of moral judgments in children's contact intensity with children with disabilities.

1.2. Disability-related moral emotions

Research has shown that moral judgments alone do not account for socially inclusive behavior. Rather, researchers have argued that moral emotions are indicative of whether the child focuses on moral, other-oriented concerns or selfish interests in a given situation (Malti, Gasser, & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010; Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009; Malti & Krettenauer, 2012). As such, moral emotions serve as motives for morally relevant behavior (Malti et al., 2009). Developmental researchers have defined moral emotions as self-conscious or self-evaluative emotions, as they are evoked by the individual's understanding and evaluation of the self (Eisenberg, 2000; Malti & Latzko, 2010, 2012). In contrast, moral

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