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Brief Report

Children's decision making: When self-interest and moral considerations conflict



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ABSTRACT

When children's self-interests are at odds with their moral considerations, what do they do? In the current study of 5- and 6-year-olds ($N = 160$), we asked (a) whether children would select the offering of a do-gooder over a neutral individual at a personal cost, (b) whether they would reject the offering of a wrongdoer over a neutral individual at a personal cost, and (c) whether these two types of decisions involve comparable levels of conflict. In the absence of material considerations, children preferred a nice character to a neutral one, but this preference was easily overcome for material gain; children accepted a larger offering from a neutral source over a smaller offering from a nice source. In contrast, children's aversion to negative characters was largely unaffected by the same material consideration; they rejected a larger offering from a mean source in favor of a smaller offering from a neutral source. In addition, children's response times indicated that deciding whether or not to "sell out" to a wrongdoer for personal gain engenders conflict but that deciding whether to take a lesser gain from a do-gooder does not. These findings indicate that children weigh both their own material interests and others' social behaviors when selecting social partners and, importantly, that an aversion to wrongdoers is a more powerful influence on these choices than an attraction to do-gooders.

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Introduction

Long before they learn to talk, children judge individuals by how they treat others. From the first few months of life, infants prefer those who help rather than harm third parties (Buon et al., 2014; Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Scola, Holvoet, Arciszewski, & Picard, 2015). Such preferences are evident at all ages (Cosmides, 1989; Dahl, Schuck, & Campos, 2013; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Kenward & Dahl, 2011; Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010) and highlight the everyday human tendency to consider others as “good” or “bad” (Hamlin, 2013).

Despite the tendency to evaluate individuals based on their treatment of others, an open question is the developmental relationship between, and relative strengths of, the condemnation of antisocial behavior and the approbation of prosocial behavior. The dislike of wrongdoers is well documented; individuals who behave badly toward others are deemed as undesirable social partners across a number of situations (Baumard, André, & Sperber, 2013; Bull & Rice, 1991; Raihani, Thornton, & Bshary, 2012). A liking of do-gooders is also well documented; even before their first birthday, infants prefer helpful individuals to neutral ones (Hamlin et al., 2007). Importantly, the relative strengths of these two tendencies are not well understood. For example, in some experimental paradigms, an aversion to wrongdoers surpasses an attraction to do-gooders; children are less likely to help harmful characters than neutral ones, but they help neutral and helpful characters at comparable rates (Vaish et al., 2010). Consistent with this point, 3-month-old infants prefer neutral characters over harmful ones but show an equal liking for neutral and helpful characters (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010). However, other studies raise the possibility that, in some situations, the approbation of good eclipses the condemnation of bad. For example, adults have been shown to reward good behavior more often than they punish bad behavior (Almenberg, Dreber, Apicella, & Rand, 2011; Rand, Dreber, Ellingsen, Fudenberg, & Nowak, 2009).

The current study examined the relative strengths of children’s attitudes toward positive and negative individuals in situations involving material considerations. With this approach, we exploited the fact that people not only want to do good but also want to do well; even from a very young age, humans are motivated to make decisions that afford the greatest material gain (Cherries, Mitroff, Wynn, & Scholl, 2008; Feigenson, Carey, & Hauser, 2002). How do children incorporate these distinct desires into their social decision making, especially when they conflict? Recent work shows that school-aged children accept material sacrifices—but only up to a point—to interact with do-gooders rather than wrongdoers (Tasimi & Wynn, 2016). Children rejected two stickers from a wrongdoer in favor of one sticker from a do-gooder, but they were more likely to accept the wrongdoer’s stickers when the offer was larger. Thus, it seems that children base their social decisions on cost–benefit analyses weighing competing considerations.

Exploring the nature of children’s social decisions when their material self-interests are pitted against their moral considerations can provide insight into the cognitive processes that underlie such decisions. Specifically, we sought to advance an understanding of how children prioritize different factors as they confront choices involving competing considerations. Thus, in the current investigation, we asked (a) whether children would select the offering of a do-gooder over a neutral individual at a personal cost, (b) whether they would reject the offering of a wrongdoer over a neutral individual at a personal cost, and (c) whether these two types of decisions involved comparable levels of conflict. Because more acute moral dilemmas are associated with longer decision times (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Koenigs et al., 2007), we examined children’s decision times as an index of conflict. Following previous work showing that 5- and 6-year-olds are willing to incur personal costs to interact with do-gooders over wrongdoers (Tasimi & Wynn, 2016), we focused on children of these ages.

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