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## Brief Report

# “Next to you”—Young children sit closer to a person following vicarious ostracism



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## ABSTRACT

Seeking proximity to another person immediately expresses affiliative intentions. These are highly relevant after experiencing social exclusion. Through a novel task, the current study investigated the relation between proximity and observed ostracism during early childhood. A sample of 64 children ( $M_{\text{age}} = 58$  months) first watched priming videos either depicting ostracism or not. Subsequently, children saw four seats of varying distances from an interactant's seat and chose where to sit. Children who observed social exclusion selected seats with higher proximity. The results suggest that young preschoolers can immediately express the threatened need to belong by literally getting closer to even a stranger after witnessing ostracism. The task provides new opportunities to test reactions to social exclusion during early childhood.

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## Introduction

“But you will sit a little closer to me, every day.” This is what the fox tells the little prince to do, in *De Saint-Exupéry's* (1943) eponymous novel, if he wants to “establish ties” (p. 67). People approach those with whom they have intimate relationships and remove from those with whom they feel uncomfortable. Proxemics is the study and a form of nonverbal communication that uses space to regulate interaction. Therefore, increasing proximity or distance to another person sends powerful messages of inclusion or exclusion (Andersen, Gannon, & Kalchik, 2013). The current work focused on the connection between observed ostracism and proxemics during early childhood.

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Being ostracized is being ignored or socially excluded by others (Williams, 2007). Although group coherence can be strengthened by punishing or eliminating undesirable behavior through ostracism (e.g., Benenson, Hodgson, Heath, & Welch, 2008), experiencing it is painful and threatening. Even being left out of a computer ball toss game induces distress and threatens fundamental needs for belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). Social exclusion activates brain areas usually associated with physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003) and also affects cognitive processing (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002) and even perception of animacy (Powers, Worsham, Freeman, Wheatley, & Heatherton, 2014). From the evolutionary perspective, it was critical to regulate social acceptance because it provided fitness benefits (e.g., protection, reproduction). This may explain why humans react in a particularly sensitive manner to the slightest signs of social exclusion (Leary & Cottrell, 2013).

Research with children suggests that social exclusion poses a greater threat to children's adjustment than bullying (Conway et al., 2013). The quality of early peer relationships fundamentally affects academic success (McDougall, Hymel, Vaillancourt, & Mercer, 2001; Rigby, 1999), children's well-being (McDougall et al., 2001), and even health condition during adulthood (Gustafsson, Janlert, Theorell, Westerlund, & Hammarström, 2014).

Due to the far-reaching consequences for development, it is of vital importance to better understand how children perceive and react to ostracism during early childhood. Fanger, Frakel, and Hazen (2012) observed 4- to 6-year-olds playing outdoors and recorded their verbalizations. They found that also at this young age social exclusion occurs, even more frequently than nonexclusionary forms of social aggression. Nearly all previous studies (Over & Carpenter, 2009; Song, Over, & Carpenter, 2015; Watson-Jones, Legare, Whitehouse, & Clegg, 2014) at preschool age have investigated the effects of vicarious ostracism (but see Watson-Jones, Whitehouse, & Legare, 2016, for effects of directly experienced ostracism by in-group members in 5- and 6-year-olds). By providing comparable effects to those of direct ostracism (Masten, Eisenberger, Pfeifer, & Dapretto, 2010; Wesselmann, Bagg, & Williams, 2009), vicarious ostracism still allows examining the sensitivity and reaction to it but without needing to exclude someone directly. This is of particular importance when testing young children.

To prime 5-year-olds with ostracism, Over and Carpenter (2009) did not even show exclusion of individuals but rather used animated shapes. Children watched either short videos in which a group of shapes excluded one single shape or control videos in which no ostracism was shown. Subsequently, children who were primed with ostracism imitated more actions of a model compared with children who watched control videos (see Watson-Jones et al., 2014, for similar results in 3- to 6-year-olds). The authors interpreted children's imitative behavior in affiliative terms: after being indirectly exposed to social exclusion, children's elevated motivation to affiliate led them to demonstrate more precisely that they are *like* the model.

Instead of using an imitation task, Song et al. (2015) presented the same priming videos as in Over and Carpenter (2009) and asked 4- and 5-year-olds to draw a picture of themselves and their friend. In addition, the authors verbally assessed children's explicit comprehension of the priming videos. Predominantly older children reported that there was social exclusion in the videos, and all children recognized negative effects of ostracism, which emphasizes the usefulness of the priming videos (Song et al., 2015). Relative to the control, in the ostracism condition all children drew themselves and their friend standing closer together and only older children were more likely to draw figures touching each other. According to the authors, these results provide strong evidence that children's reactions to ostracism primes are based on affiliative motivation. Because imitation tasks include additional demands such as increased encoding and recall of sequentially presented actions, it is not clear whether imitation-based responses to ostracism solely reflect increased motivation to affiliate.

Song et al. (2015) way of examining children's drawings undoubtedly contributes to a clearer classification of children's reactions in terms of increased affiliation because the authors focused on depictions of social relationships. However, drawings are per se indirect responses because of their representational nature. Considering the variety of possible outcomes, it is highly critical to have a systematic definition of valid responses. This is linked to children's comprehension of the instruction (e.g., understanding the concept of friendship) as well as their motor abilities, making it difficult to examine children whose drawings would be too rudimentary (e.g., due to motor difficulties or low

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