Dear Parent,

We're grateful for your support of our research at the UM Conceptual Development Lab. When you and your children participate in our research you help us answer important questions about how children grow and learn. Without your help we couldn’t continue making discoveries about child development!

This is our Fall 2014 newsletter. Here we describe studies we’ve recently finished and are currently conducting. You'll see that we are investigating a wide range of topics, including studies on how children conceptualize social power and children's beliefs about how people come to have certain traits or skills. You'll notice that much of our research continues to happen at our on-campus lab in East Hall. You'll also see that we now conduct some of our studies in community based labs at the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum and the UM Museum of Natural History. We're excited that we can offer families a number of ways to participate in our research, and we hope to see you at one of our lab sites soon! Thanks again for your ongoing support of our research!

Don't forget that you can sign up online to participate in our research!

sites.lsa.umich.edu/gelman-lab/for-parents/sign-up-to-participate

Sincerely,

Susan A. Gelman
Heinz Werner Distinguished University Professor

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You Can’t Always Get What You Want

Learning to navigate the complex web of relationships between people and things is one of the most important early challenges faced by young children. In a study published this year, we found that preschool-aged children are actually quite good at separating what people want from what they own. For example, they understand that people might own things that they don’t want, like an ugly sweater they received as a gift, and that people want things that they do not own. This finding contradicts the traditional notion that young children believe that they own everything that they can get their hands on.

The extraordinariness of extraordinary giving

Imagine someone gave you one cookie. Do you think this person gave you their only cookie, or do you think they have some amount left? In this study, we tested preschoolers, older children, and adults on virtually identical tasks (similar to the example provided above) to investigate whether they expect generosity to reach exceptional levels. We find that that across a broad age range, children and adults find extraordinary giving to be just that: extraordinary. We are excited about following up on this result to determine how children and adults think about extraordinary giving, and when and why they expect it to emerge.
Beliefs about Personal Characteristics

What makes a person smart? Kind? Good at sports? You can probably easily come up with many kinds of explanations for why people end up with the abilities and characteristics that they possess. What about children? In one current study we asked elementary- and middle-school-aged children to give us their ideas about where various personal characteristics originate. We asked them to consider some specific options for why a characteristic might arise: A person’s genes, the environment, or because that person made a choice to be a certain way. (Because we didn’t expect children to know too much about genes, we also taught them some basics beforehand, including the idea that genes come from our parents, that they’re inside our bodies, and that they can cause various behaviors and physical features to emerge.) We also asked a comparison group of adults the same questions.

Results suggest some very clear developmental differences: Whereas adults are more likely to attribute characteristics like intelligence and athleticism to genes (more so than choice and environment), children are more likely to report that the environment and choice are more important factors in causing these characteristics to emerge. This is potentially an encouraging finding, because separate research (e.g., Dweck, 2000) indicates that believing that an ability is largely genetically controlled can lead to decreased motivation in the face of failure. (The reasoning might go something like this: “Well, I always thought I was smart because I was born with the right genes, but my F on this math test suggests I’m not actually smart at all. And because I can’t change my genes, I’m just going to avoid trying to get better.”) We are excited to continue analyzing children’s responses in greater depth, and we look forward to sharing more about this study in future updates!
"That's My Blankie": Children's Attachment to Particular Toys

Young children often have strong attachments to certain objects (e.g., security blankets). When parents try to offer an exact copy of their child’s attachment object, children often refuse the new object. Why do children form these strong attachments to objects? What does this tell us about child development? To explore these questions, we asked children to choose between their own toy and a newer, more attractive version (e.g., old blanket versus new blanket).

Thirty-four three-year-olds participated in the study. Each child brought three toys/objects from home: a sleep object (blanket, pillow, or attachment object), an animate toy (doll or stuffed animal), and an inanimate toy (e.g., toy truck). We purchased new versions of each of these toys/objects. On each trial, an old object was paired with the new version. We also included three control pairs that the children had never seen before (one old, one new).

In the Child Preference task, children were shown an object pair and asked, “Which one do you like best?” In the Experimenter Preference task, children were shown the same object-pairs and asked, “Which one do I [the experimenter] like best?”

We obtained four main results:

- Children easily identified which object in each pair was theirs, despite subtle differences in appearance.
- Children understood that their own objects have special value only to themselves. Children preferred old objects from home, but expected the experimenter to prefer new objects. This did not reflect an overall “old” preference on the part of children; for the control object pairs (the ones they’d never seen before), children preferred new objects.
- Children predicted that the experimenter would prefer the old control objects more than they themselves would, suggesting an early expectation that others develop their own special attachments.
- Children with attachment objects held stronger preferences for sleep objects than did children without attachment objects.
**Ongoing Studies**

**Friendship Choices**

How do we choose our friends? Friendships have a strong impact in our overall wellbeing and identity, but what information becomes most important when picking out who we will play with, share our toys with, and who we do not want to make contact with? Does the type of information that we find important when picking friends change over time as we become older?

In a one-time visit of 30 minutes, children will see pictures of children and hear them speak. After seeing and hearing these other children, the participants then predict which children will become good friends. We are interested in the factors that influence children's predictions. Please let us know if you are interested in taking part in this research. Children older than 4½ are welcome to participate!

**Children's Thinking about the Stability of Traits and States**

Young children know that certain categories are stable across time. For instance, they reason that a boy will grow up to be a man, and that an English-speaking child will grow up to be an English-speaking adult. What do children think about the stability of emotions and race? Do they think that one is more stable than the other? In this brief study, children are shown images of children and adults with different emotional expressions and skin colors. Children are asked to show which adult each child will grow up to be; they have the option of matching on the basis of emotion or race. We expect that older children will be more likely to match on the basis of race. This study will add to our knowledge of how children reason about the people around them. If you’re at the Hands-On Museum, look for us on the first floor. The study is fun (for parents and children) and only takes about 5 minutes!
**Children’s Understanding of Scarcity**

Children, like adults, make a large number of decisions each day, and many of these decisions are affected in some way by concerns over scarcity. We know that scarcity can play a role in adults’ decision-making, but much less is known about the role it can play in children’s decision-making. For example, do children view scarce items as more desirable? Do children think that scarce items are worth more than non-scarce items? Finally, what factors affect the choices that children make with respect to scarce items?

In a brief, single-visit study, children between the ages of 3 and 12 years are asked to make some choices for different recipients, including themselves. Children are then asked to explain some of the choices that they made. Parents are also asked to complete a short questionnaire about their child. Look for this study in the Hands-On Museum!

*Sample items used in the scarcity task (adapted from Horst, 2009)*
What Will You Want Tomorrow?

Our current states can interfere with our forecasts about what we will want or feel in the future. Adults who shop for groceries on a full stomach tend to buy less compared to adults who haven't just eaten. Children who love pretzels predict wanting water the next day if they are thirsty (the current state of thirst makes it hard to imagine wanting pretzels).

It's not uncommon to see parents trying to help children in situations where a child might make such an error. For example, a parent might say, "I know you're hot now, but please take your coat with you, since it's cold outside!" We are conducting a study to see whether children accept this type of input from parents.

Children are given pretzels in order to induce thirst. They then have a chance to agree or disagree with their parent about something external: pictures of hybrid animals. For example, the child might see the picture below and hear the parent label it as either a bird (the seemingly more correct label) or a fish (the seemingly less correct label).

While still munching on pretzels, children also make predictions about what they would want in a variety of situations (e.g., in a hot desert).

After this, the parent is cued to give an opinion about what the child might want the next day: pretzels or water. The child then gets to offer their own prediction about their own future desires. We are interested in whether the parent's input has an effect on children's predictions, or if children disregard what parents say and stick with their own intuitions. The other tasks in the study provide more context about whether children are generally open to parental input about other things, and whether children can appropriately plan for the future when a current state isn't influencing that planning.
Who’s the Boss?

You’ve probably experienced power struggles with your kids at times, or at least observed them in situations where there was a power imbalance. For example, you may have noticed that sometimes in kids’ group play, there are those children who lead the group and set the rules for the game, and those who follow the leaders. Such play situations are not all that different from the way in which adults experience power in their everyday social interactions. In fact, children may learn in these early experiences the different ways in which people may become powerful, and how power differences affect social roles and relationships. However, power is a complex concept that involves multiple facets, like the ability to access and control resources (wealth) and the ability to achieve goals. We know very little about how children become aware of the different ways in which a person or a social group may become powerful.

We have been exploring this question in a series of ongoing studies. In our studies, we tell kids fun, illustrated stories and ask them to decide who is in charge and why. So far, we have been finding that even the youngest kids (3-4 years) have clear concepts of what makes a person powerful, although their reasoning about social power does not become adult-like until around 7 to 9 years of age. For example, younger children are very good at judging who is powerful in a situation where one character in the story gets more candy than the other. However, the same group of kids are not that good at understanding who is more powerful in situations where one character is giving orders to another character to clean up, or where one character is dictating what another character should wear. Our study is important in that it shows that social power may not be a unitary concept, and that children may understand different parts of it at different points in development. As part of the Living Lab at the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum, we invite children aged 3 to 9 to participate in our short study. It only takes about 10 minutes, kids enjoy participating, and get to pick out a prize at the end! So, if you’re at the Hands-On Museum and you would like to contribute to science, look for our table on the first floor!
Contact Us!

If you would like more information about our studies, or are interested in participating, please contact Natalie Davidson at conceptlab@umich.edu, or call 734-647-2589. We are located in B464 East Hall at 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.

If you schedule a visit to our on-campus lab, we provide free on-campus parking and your child receives a small gift for participating. You will also be compensated $10. All of your children are welcome to come along for the visit. Our research staff are happy to play with siblings in our playroom while your participating child completes the study.
Recent Publications


We would like to thank all of our wonderful undergraduate research assistants and research staff for their hard work and dedication in making our research possible!