

New study explores social comparison in early childhood

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It has been shown (and probably experienced by all of us) that performing worse than our peers on a particular task results in negative self-esteem and poorer subsequent performance on the same task. How people respond when their peers perform better than they do has been studied in a variety of age groups and it turns out that preschoolers have thicker skin than adults do! Previous research has shown that preschoolers (4-5 year old children) maintain positive self-evaluations and high levels of performance even when they see that their peers have out-performed them. This is thought to occur because young children believe that achievement differences between themselves and their peers are adaptable; in other words, they think that if they try harder, they will be able to do as well as their peers in the future.

A new study by University of Michigan psychologists Marjorie Rhodes and Daniel Brickman questions these previously held conclusions about preschoolers' behavior, by demonstrating that young children do indeed respond negatively when they perform more poorly than a peer—if that peer is of the other gender (e.g., if a girl learns that a boy has performed better than her, or vice versa).

The participants (4- and 5-year-olds) were asked to complete a timed circle-tracing task (i.e. they were told to fill in circles as quickly as possible) and then were told that either a same-gender, other-gender or gender-unidentified peer performed better on the task than they did (i.e. completed more shapes). After receiving this information, the researchers made sure that the study participants understood the

comparison, and then asked them to evaluate how well they performed on the task. The children were then asked to complete the circle tracing task a second time—this time, they were told that they did better than the peer had done—and then were asked to assess their performance again.

The results, reported in the October issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, were intriguing. It turns out that preschoolers are very sensitive to gender information—children's behavior critically depended on the gender of the peer. Children who were told about a same-gender or gender-unidentified peer improved their performance across the two trials of the tracing task (i.e. they completed the task more quickly the second time). They also increased their self-evaluations after the second trial.

In contrast, the majority of children who were told about an other-gender peer performed more poorly on the second trial (i.e. they completed the task more slowly). Also, even though all children were led to believe that they performed better than the peer on the second trial, children who had been told about other-gender peers did not increase their self-evaluations. These results indicate that when preschoolers see that they have performed more poorly than a peer of the other gender—even just one time—there are lasting negative consequences on behavior and self-concept.

The authors conclude that "these findings have implications for the origins of social comparisons, category-based reasoning, and the development of gender stereotypes and achievement motivation."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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