

When will children disobey parents? It depends on the rule

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As all parents know, children often want to do exactly what their parents don't want them to do. In three areas that children often consider parts of their personal domain -- clothing, friendship, and leisure activities -- having a degree of choice over decisions is important for children's sense of identity and mental health. A new study that considered connections between control over issues within children's personal domain, identity, and emotional well-being has found that children make important distinctions between different kinds of rules.

The study was carried out by researchers at the University of California, Davis, the University of Illinois, Chicago, and Brock University in Ontario, Canada. It is published in the March/April 2010 issue of the journal [Child Development](#).

The researchers looked at the beliefs of 60 4- to 7-year-olds about how child characters in role-playing situations would act and feel when a parent forbids them from engaging in a desired activity. At times, the parent's [rule](#) intruded on the child's personal domain (as in, you shouldn't play with a particular friend, take part in a certain activity, or wear certain clothes), while in others, the parent's rule fell within the moral domain (as in, you shouldn't hit or steal).

From ages 4 to 7, children's predictions that the characters would comply with moral rules (such as prohibitions against stealing) and feel good about doing so rose significantly, suggesting that between these ages, children become increasingly aware of the limits to legitimate

disobedience. In stark contrast, children of all ages predicted that the characters would frequently break parents' rules when those rules intruded on the personal domain and that this disobedience would feel good, particularly when the desired activities were described as essential to the character's sense of identity.

"The findings suggest that children make important distinctions between different kinds of rules when reasoning about decisions and emotions," notes Kristin Hansen Lagattuta, associate professor of psychology and the Center for Mind and Brain at the University of California, Davis, who led the study. Previous research has shown that "although the particulars of what gets defined as the personal domain can vary across cultural settings, the establishment of a zone of personal choice and privacy appears to be culturally universal," she adds.

"These results have practical implications for [parents](#) and educators," Lagattuta suggests. "Foremost, they argue for balance in promoting morality in young [children](#)—not only restricting actions that they shouldn't do, but helping them identify situations where they can assert personal control."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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