

Concepts of fairness and inequality develop over time

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As part of a research study in experimental economics at NHH in Norway, 500 school children had to work and then decide how to share their earnings. Image courtesy of Knut Egil Wang

Young children are strict egalitarians, content to divvy things up equally among members of a group -- but, as those children progress from elementary school to adolescence, their sense of fairness changes to a more merit-based ideology, researchers report in the May 28 issue of *Science*.

Ingvild Alml's and colleagues used an economic exchange game and a large group of fifth- to 13th-grade volunteers to reach this conclusion. They suggest that more exposure to various achievement-based activities, like sports, could be one of the reasons why the older children eventually shift toward a more merit-based stance.

The researchers say that most adults believe that differences in individual achievements, as well as outside influences, can justify unequal distributions of income, but that they disagree on whether inequalities reflecting luck are fair or not.

Alml's and her colleagues used a modified version of the dictator game, which has been considered the standard experimental design for studying fairness preferences, to gauge the younger generations' concepts of fairness while the students were distributing wealth among group members.

The researchers found that the large majority of fifth graders were strict egalitarians, but the older students considered individual achievement increasingly important when dividing up their wealth.

The findings demonstrate that, as children get older, they seem to place a heavier emphasis on peoples' actual production—but not their luck—on pay day. They also imply that social experiences play a role in shaping [children's](#) concepts of [fairness](#).

More information: "Fairness and the Development of Inequality Acceptance," by I. Almas et al., *Science*.

Provided by AAAS

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