

Children understand sharing norms early, but follow the rules only from age 7 onward, study says

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Children as young as three know the rules of equal sharing but if sharing involves a cost to the self, they only follow the rules when they are older, according to research published March 20 in the open access journal *PLOS ONE* by Craig Smith from the University of Michigan and colleagues from other institutions.

The authors note, "People who spend time with young children will know that they often favor themselves when sharing, but surprisingly they endorse equal sharing not just by other people but also in their own case. In our research, we were able to rule out a number of explanations for this early gap between word and deed."

When the researchers gave 3-8-year-olds stickers they valued and asked them about sharing, children of all ages readily asserted that they themselves should share equally, and others should as well. However, when given the chance to actually share, children failed to follow the norms they endorsed until the ages of 7-8. In a second test, older children aged 7-8 correctly predicted that they would [share](#) equally, while 3-6-year-olds clearly stated that they would favor themselves while sharing; thus, children of all ages were accurate in predicting what they would do. The study concludes that though younger [children](#) know the norm of equal sharing, the importance they attach to it increases with age.

More information: Smith CE, Blake PR, Harris PL (2013) I Should but I Won't: Why Young Children Endorse Norms of Fair Sharing but Do Not Follow Them. *PLOS ONE* 8(3):e59510.

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