

Young children quickly adopt ritualistic behavior, study shows

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(Medical Xpress)—Although rituals such as shaking hands or saying, "bless you" after a sneeze don't make practical sense, these arbitrary social conventions give people a sense of belonging in a particular social group. And according to a new psychology study from The University of Texas at Austin, even preschool children are quick to conform to ritualistic behavior.

The findings, published online in *Cognition*, offer new insight into how children learn the rituals and [cultural practices](#) of their communities.

"Attention to [social cues](#) and contextual information guides children's imitation, a key component of the development and transmission of cultural knowledge," says Cristine Legare, an assistant professor in psychology at The University of Texas at Austin and co-author of the study.

As part of the study, 259 children ranging from 3 to 6 years old watched videos of people performing a novel task (e.g, tapping pegs with a hammer on a pegboard in a particular sequence). The children viewed one of several types of videos featuring a single person or two people performing the task alone or simultaneously. For example, one person performed a particular action twice to get the peg out of the board. In another video, two people performed that action simultaneously. The verbal explanation preceding the demonstrations emphasized either the outcome of the actions (i.e., achieve a goal) or their social conventionality (i.e., engage in a [group behavior](#)).

When conventional language preceded two people performing the same actions simultaneously, children imitated the behavior with high levels of fidelity. They explained their actions by stating, "I had to do it how they showed me" or "I had to do it the way they did it." In contrast, when information about the outcome or goal of the actions preceded solo demonstrations, children were more likely to ignore the exact sequence of actions and felt less obligated to follow by example, claiming, "I can do whatever I want" or "I wanted to do it the way I did it."

The identical simultaneous actions suggested that the two people were from the same [social group](#), which may increase the drive to affiliate with others.

"Seeing two people do the same thing at the same time is a strong indication that the specific form of the activity—the exact way in which it is performed—is regulated by convention," Legare says. "We speculate that when such uniformity is detected, children are disposed to ascribe it to social factors—more specifically, to norms regulating how each person should act."

The researchers theorize that young children are already attuned to the difference between ritualistic behavior and goal-directed behavior.

"Our findings show that [children](#) come to social learning tasks ready to interpret them flexibly as opportunities for learning rituals or outcome-oriented behavior," Legare says.

More information: [www.ccdlab.net/sites/default/f...](http://www.ccdlab.net/sites/default/files/COGNITION.pdf)
[Legare COGNITION.pdf](http://www.ccdlab.net/sites/default/files/COGNITION.pdf)

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