

Game played in sync increases children's perceived similarity, closeness

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

What helps children who have just met form a connection? A new study shows that a simple game played together in sync on a computer led 8-year-olds to report a greater sense of similarity and closeness immediately after the activity.

Children who played the same game but not in a synchronous way did not report the same increase in connection.

The findings, published April 8 by *PLOS ONE*, give an example of how a [physical activity](#) performed in unison helps [children](#) feel more positively toward each other and could perhaps increase their [empathy](#).

"Synchrony is like a glue that brings people together—it's a magical connector for people," said lead author Tal-Chen Rabinowitch, a [postdoctoral fellow](#) at the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences at the University of Washington.

Synchrony occurs when people interact together in time. It's a fundamental prerequisite for activities such as playing music, singing, dancing and rowing.

But the impact of synchrony goes beyond the ability to coordinate activities with other individuals. In adults, synchrony has been linked to increased cooperation and teamwork, making work more efficient and productive.

Few studies have examined whether the same is true among children.

"We wanted to see if a synchronous, rhythmic interaction could influence the attitudes of children toward peers they had never met before," Rabinowitch said.

She conducted the study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, where co-author Ariel Knafo is a professor of psychology. The European Research Council funded the project.

In the experiment, Rabinowitch tested 74 8-year-old children in pairs of two boys and two girls. Seated in a quiet laboratory room, the

experimenter introduced herself and asked the children to introduce themselves to each other by name only.

After the experimenter explained the task, the children sat side by side in front of a video screen. An animated soccer ball bounced on both halves of the screen, and the children pressed a button whenever the ball on their side of the screen hit the floor.

For some pairs of children, the balls bounced in sync, so their fingers tapped the buttons simultaneously. Other pairs of children had out-of-sync bouncing, so they had asynchronous finger tapping.

They did two 90-second trials of the game, with a short break in between. After the game, the children filled out questionnaires about how similar and close they felt to the child they had been paired with. A control group of pairs of children answered the same questions, but did not perform the game.

Children in the synchronous group reported a greater sense of similarity and closeness.

The findings suggest that time-based synchronized activities, including in music, dance and sports, could be useful tools in bringing children closer together.

"The important ingredient is joint synchronized activity—it is a form of collaboration where individuals perform the same movements at the same time," Rabinowitch said.

Now at the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, Rabinowitch is studying in detail the underlying cognitive mechanisms that enable synchronous interaction in children to shift social attitudes and enhance cooperation.

Andrew Meltzoff, co-director of I-LABS, said: "This study gives important clues about how to promote pro-social behavior in children. There may be a deep truth in saying that children care about being 'in tune' with others or that two people are in synch with each other."

In her studies with Meltzoff, Rabinowitch hopes to reveal how music, and specifically [synchrony](#), is able to guide and improve social and emotional interactions between humans.

"The findings might be applied to formulate new strategies for education in our effort to build a more collaborative and empathic future society," she said.

And studying this phenomenon in children is especially important, Rabinowitch added, since the connection between music and social and emotional attitudes manifests itself so early in life.

Provided by University of Washington

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