

Regret helps children to make better decisions

July 28 2017, by Aidan Feeney



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Regret gets a bad press. It is a painful emotion experienced upon realising that a different decision would have led to a [better outcome](#). And it is something that [we strive to avoid](#). In sharp contrast, [our recent research](#) on children's decision making emphasises that the ability to experience regret is a developmental achievement associated with

learning to make better choices. The results of this research suggest a different, more functional relationship between regret and decision making.

How does one go about studying [regret](#) in [children](#), given that they may not have the term "regret" in their vocabularies? Developmental psychologists ask children to make simple [choices between two options](#). Outcomes are engineered so that once they have received a small prize associated with their choice, they see that they could have obtained a better prize had they chosen the other option. Using this task, the ability to experience regret can be tested for by asking children to express how they feel about the outcome of their decision on a child-friendly rating scale before and then after they see what they could have won instead. Feeling worse in the light of information about what they would have won had they decided differently is interpreted as evidence of regret. This goes beyond the child merely feeling sad or frustrated that they haven't won the best prize.

Age and regret

[Studies using this method](#) show that regret doesn't emerge until about six years of age and most samples of six-year-olds will contain children who are able to experience regret and children who are not yet able to experience the emotion. This means that we can examine the consequences of experiencing regret for [decision making](#) in a sample of these children. If regret is involved with learning how to make better decisions then we should see more adaptive decision making in children who experience regret than in those who do not. Adaptive decision making requires decisions that are sensible in the light of the child's earlier experience.

[To test this hypothesis](#), we ran a two-day procedure. On the first day, children completed the regret task described above. On the second day,

we presented children with exactly the same decision that they made the day before. We found that those children who experienced regret over their decision the previous day were significantly more likely to make a different choice on day two. They were more likely to choose the box that contained the better prize on day one than children who did not experience regret. This effect holds when we controlled for age and for cognitive ability.

Interestingly, the association between experiencing regret and switching choices doesn't seem to be a consequence of whether children can remember the contents of the boxes: we found that almost every child, when prompted, could tell us what was in the boxes at the start of the day two procedure and having remembered, most of them decided to switch the [choice](#) they made on day one. This suggests that the role of regret is to help children spontaneously remember bad choices so that they can be avoided in the future.

We have [extended these findings](#) to more complex tasks and to tasks which assess children's ability to defer reward. For example, as yet unpublished experiments show that children who experience regret upon learning they would have received a larger prize if they had selected an option that required a longer wait, are more likely to choose to wait when faced with the same [decision](#) the next day. The ability to defer reward in childhood has been [linked to a variety of important outcomes in adulthood](#), and this finding may help us understand how children learn how to decide to wait and how we might help them to learn how to defer reward.

The upside of regret

Regret is a particularly perplexing emotion; it is painful and often seems to serve no purpose, particularly as we get [older](#). Our research suggests that there may be very important functions of the ability to experience

regret in childhood. It also suggests that emotion and thinking may be intertwined in different ways at different points in development. For example, adolescents are [sometimes thought to make risky decisions](#) because there is a gap between their [emotional](#) and cognitive development. However, our research demonstrates that in younger children, the developing ability to experience an emotion such as regret leads to better decisions. Not only do our findings suggest an upside to regret, they prompt questions about the [role played by regret in adolescent decision making](#) and the broader role played by emotion in decisions made by [children, adolescents and adults](#).

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

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