Young children's sense of self is similar to that of adults

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Young children's sense of self is similar to that of older kids and adults, a team of psychology researchers has found. The results show that our ability to reason about our self-worth as individuals develops early in

life, but also suggest that failure can instill discouragement sooner than previously thought.

"Young children's self-concepts are not qualitatively different from those of older children and adults," explains Andrei Cimpian, an associate professor in New York University's Department of Psychology and the study's senior author. "Young children can think of themselves as possessing abstract traits and abilities, and they can also reason about their self-worth, which has implications for self-esteem.

"However, this level of maturity in reasoning about the self also means that young children can become dispirited in the face of failure and are not the undaunted optimists that previous theories have described. In light of this new work, we need to think carefully about, and investigate, ways of supporting young children's motivation and engagement with important—but often difficult—activities such as school."

The study, which appears in the journal *Child Development*, also included Matthew Hammond, a faculty member at New Zealand's Victoria University of Wellington, as well as Giulia Mazza and Grace Corry, who were undergraduate researchers at the University of Illinois when this research was conducted.

It has long been thought that young children think of themselves in concrete, behavioral terms and, unlike adults or older children, are cognitively incapable of reasoning about their traits or their worth as individuals.

The researchers tested this belief, aiming to understand if young children can think about themselves in terms of general traits and abilities (e.g., "I'm smart") and judge their global worth as individuals—or if they are largely focused on concrete behaviors and outcomes (e.g., "I got a good grade").

To answer this question, the researchers conducted a series of studies of children ranging from four to seven years old. The participants were presented several hypothetical scenarios—commonly employed in psychology research for this age group—that varied in several respects. In them, the children were asked to imagine they could not complete a task (e.g., solving a puzzle) despite "trying really hard." In some cases, they were told the task was easy (e.g., drawing the sun) and in others that it was difficult (e.g., drawing a horse). In addition, some children were informed the task was done at the request of an adult (a parent or teacher) while others were told it was self-initiated.

They were then asked questions about their abilities (e.g., "Does not drawing the sun/horse right make you feel like you're good at drawing or not good at drawing?") and their global sense of self-worth (e.g., "Does not finishing the puzzle make you feel like a good boy/girl or not a good boy/girl?"). At the end of the sessions, children acted out positive scenarios and were debriefed.

The results showed that children as young as four can flexibly reason about their abilities and their global sense of self-worth based on the context of their behavior. For example, children lowered their estimation of their abilities, but not their global self-worth, when told they failed an easy, as opposed to hard, task. Conversely, they lowered their estimation of their global self-worth, but not their abilities, when informed they failed an adult-requested (vs. self-initiated) task—in other words, adult involvement could negatively affect self-esteem, independent of the task.

"This evidence reveals surprising continuity between young children's self-concepts and those of older children and adults," Cimpian observes. "However, more importantly, our findings show the impact others can have on young children's sense of self-worth at a very young age.

"It is therefore important for both parents and educators to understand that our children may become more discouraged than we previously realized and find ways to foster a productive learning environment."

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