

We start caring about our reputations as early as kindergarten

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Kindergarteners don't use social media, but they do care about their public image. Research suggests that by the time kids go to elementary

school, they're thinking critically about their reputation. In a Review published on March 20 in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, psychologists Ike Silver and Alex Shaw consider how our fascination with social status begins around age five, when kids begin to consider how they are viewed by others and behave in ways that cultivate positive reputations.

"Psychologists have been long interested in how we construct our identities and the sorts of strategies that we use to present ourselves in society," says Alex Shaw, an assistant professor of developmental psychology at the University of Chicago. "We're finding that the kinds of complex and strategic self-presentation behavior we see in adults appear at a much younger age than previously known."

Research shows that a child's awareness of social standing cascades down from adults and spans across cultures, despite varying social norms and expectations. Like grownups, kids want to be accepted by those they admire. Interactive experiences like sharing toys, working in a team, and listening to a teacher may provide opportunities for children to learn about what constitutes a desirable reputation and the kinds of strategies that are effective for building a good reputation in their social environment.

"As a society, we're heavily focused on image construction and self-presentation, and our children get early, condensed exposure to the idea of image and [social status](#)," says Ike Silver, a doctoral student at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. "Children are sensitive to how those around them behave, including adults who highly value their reputations."

Five-year-olds aren't just aware of their reputations, they also behave strategically to alter their outward image. Researchers believe that children will vary their behavior in order to appear moral or socially

good in the eyes of key observers. While we know that adults use a large variety of traits to manage and create impressions, we don't yet know whether children understand and use the fact that different traits (bravery, wealthy, nonconformism) are valuable at different times to different audiences. It's important for us to further consider where in this process children succeed in controlling their reputation and where they struggle.

Scientists hope to further investigate how social environments and image-conscious cultures affect the emergence of reputation awareness in our youth.

"Moving forward, a question we're thinking about is, 'What happens even earlier than age five?' We don't believe [children](#) show up to the first day of kindergarten and have the idea of [reputation](#) suddenly pop into existence." Silver argues, "As we start to understand that reputational strategies emerge before the age of 9 as was previously believed, the next logical question is, 'what happens even earlier?'"

More information: Silver and Shaw: "Pint-sized public relations: The development of reputation management" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (2018). [www.cell.com/trends/cognitive- ... 1364-6613\(18\)30019-6](http://www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-...1364-6613(18)30019-6) , DOI: [10.1016/j.tics.2018.01.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.01.006)

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