

# Kids grasp that you get what you pay for

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From a young age, children have a nuanced understanding of fairness.

New University of Michigan research indicates that children as young as 5 incorporate market concerns—the idea that what you get is in line with what you give or offer—into their [decision making](#), and increasingly do

so with age.

Some people think children are innately selfish—they want to get goodies for themselves. Other people think children are innately altruistic—they care about helping others. Most people think children are both.

"The trick is knowing when and how to balance self interest and concern for others—what is appropriate in different circumstances," said lead author Margaret Echelbarger, a recent U-M psychology doctoral graduate.

By studying how children engage in different types of exchanges, researchers can discern the origins of these behaviors, as well as their developmental course.

"This in turn tells us a bit more about ourselves as adults," Echelbarger said.

The U-M research included 195 children ages 5-10 and 60 adults helping a giver distribute stickers to friends. They distributed stickers equally between friends when offers were the same, but unequally when different offers were made.

There were times when the participants distributed more stickers to the friends offering more money, which meant children—as they aged—were willing to abandon equal norms for distribution. More specifically, [older children](#) distributed more stickers to friends who paid more even when the other [friend](#) wanted to pay but couldn't.

"These findings are especially interesting in light of young children's limited exposure to market/economic instruction," Echelbarger said.

"We show that, from a young age, children are developing an

understanding of the 'rules' of market exchanges."

Echelbarger and colleagues also found that children are sensitive to the reasons underlying the different offers. Children penalize recipients refusing to pay more than recipients willing but unable to pay, she said.

The findings, which appear in *Child Development*, are also consistent with prior research that [children](#) incorporate equity concerns, such as merit and need, into their distribution decisions.

**More information:** Margaret Echelbarger et al. Getting What You Pay For: Children's Use of Market Norms to Regulate Exchanges, *Child Development* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13088](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13088)

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