

Kids prefer friends who talk like they do

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Children tend to prefer to be friends with other children who speak with the same local accent as they have, even if they grow up in a diverse community and are regularly exposed to a variety of accents, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"It's [common knowledge](#) that adults unconsciously discriminate against others based on the way they speak, but we wanted to understand when, how and why these biases develop," said lead author Melissa Paquette-Smith, Ph.D., of the University of California, Los Angeles.

The findings were published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

Previous research has shown that children as young as 5 years old prefer to be friends with peers who speak like them and that these preferences are so strong that they can override preferences for friends of the same race, according to Paquette-Smith. She and her co-authors wanted to extend the existing research and explore whether regular exposure to a wide variety of accents might change these preferences.

The researchers conducted three experiments with nearly 150 5- and 6-year-old English-speaking children living in the Greater Toronto Area, one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse metropolitan areas in the world. More than half of the residents there were born outside of Canada and close to 50 percent learned a language other than English from birth, the study noted.

In experiment one, 5- and 6-year-olds were shown pairs of children on a computer screen. One child in each pair spoke English with the local Canadian [accent](#) and the other spoke English with a British accent. After listening to both speakers, children were asked to pick which child they wanted as their friend. The researches also examined whether the amount of exposure children had to different accents in everyday life influenced these preferences. Given the diversity in the community, most of the children reported moderate to very frequent contact with non-local accents, whether it was because they lived with someone in their home or had a daycare provider or teacher with a different accent.

"Even though they were regularly exposed to a variety of accents,

Canadian children still preferred to be friends with peers who spoke with a Canadian accent over peers who spoke with a British accent. The amount of exposure children had to other accents in everyday life did not seem to dampen these preferences," said Paquette-Smith.

Paquette-Smith and her colleagues then wanted to see how children's friend preferences would be affected if they did the same task with children who were not native English speakers.

The second experiment used the same number of English-only speaking children and again, most reported having medium or high exposure to non-local accents. The set-up was the same, except that instead of British children, the participants listened to voices of children who were born and raised in Korea and who had learned English as a second language.

As in the first experiment, the children showed a [preference](#) for their Canadian-accented peers, but the effect was even greater in the second experiment, according to Paquette-Smith.

"There are a number of reasons why this may have been the case," said Paquette-Smith. "It could be that the Korean kids were less fluent in English or that the Canadian participants had a harder time understanding them, or that the British accents were simply harder to distinguish from the Canadian accents."

For the final experiment, the researchers investigated the possibility that children's ability to tell apart the two accents could have played a role in these preferences. The team predicted that the children would be better at identifying their Canadian variety of English when it was compared with a Korean accent and that they would have more difficulty distinguishing between the Canadian and British varieties of English.

The children listened to the voices of the Canadian, British and Korean

speakers used in experiments one and two. After the voices were played, the experimenter asked the child, "Who talks like you? Like they grew up here?" and then the children made their selections.

"Our predictions were right, children had an easier time differentiating between the Canadian and Korean and British and Korean speakers," said Paquette-Smith. "The most difficult comparison for the children to make was between the Canadian and British speakers. We believe this is because children are better at distinguishing their local accent from a non-native accent compared with a regional accent."

Paquette-Smith cautioned that a preference for friends with similar accents does not necessarily mean that the [children](#) were biased against those with non-native accents.

"It is possible that preferences seen in early childhood may be driven more by familiarity than a dislike for people who speak differently," she said. "This work is an important step towards understanding the complex relationships that exist between exposure and preference in [early childhood](#) and how these preferences might translate into biases in adulthood."

More information: "The Effect of Accent Exposure on Children's Sociolinguistic Evaluation of Peers," by Melissa Paquette-Smith, PhD, University of California, Los Angeles; Helen Buckler, PhD, University of Nottingham; Katherine S. White, PhD, University of Waterloo; Jiyoung Choi, PhD, Sookmyung Women's University; and Elizabeth K. Johnson, PhD, University of Toronto at Mississauga. *Developmental Psychology*. Published online January 24, 2019.

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