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PRESS RELEASE

Child Development (May/June issue)

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE ON [May 17, 2005] (12:01 AM)

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New Research Finds Children Understand the Emotional Benefits of Following the Rules

Want to get your child to wear a bike helmet, quit playing in the street, and stop teasing her little brother? Try showing her how much pleasure *you* get from following the rules. A study published in the May/June journal *Child Development* found that between the ages of 4 and 7, children increasingly predict that people feel negative or mixed emotions when they break a rule, and feel positive or mixed emotions when they follow a rule, particularly if they remembered the rule on their own.

The study, conducted by Kristin H. Lagattuta, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, also found that the more children were able to focus on the importance of rules and future consequences when explaining emotions in rule situations, they more frequently they ascribed negative emotions to rule breakers and positive emotions to rule abiders.

Dr. Lagattuta conducted her study by presenting 64 adults and children (ages 4 to 7), with a series of stories featuring characters who really want to do something, but who know, or who are told by a parent, that they shouldn't do it (e.g., run into the street to retrieve a ball). In half the stories, the characters decide to break the rules to fulfill their desires (*transgression*), while in the other half they decide to follow the rules and inhibit their desires (*willpower*). The children and adults were asked to predict whether the child in the story "feels good" or "feels bad," and to explain why.

Whereas all children studied largely explained emotions as the result of getting or not getting what one wants (e.g., "She feels good 'cause she got what she wanted"), 7-year-olds also consistently explained emotions as caused by rules (e.g., "He feels bad because he didn't listen to the rule") or possible future consequences (e.g., "He feels bad because he thinks a car might come and hit him").

This heightened focus on the emotional impact of rules and the future at age 7 coincided with a significant increase in the frequency with which children acknowledged that acts of willpower can make a person feel good (despite not getting what they wanted) and that transgressing can lead to negative emotions (despite getting what they wanted).

Still, Dr. Lagattuta found, participants of all ages, even 4-year-olds, said that people felt good abiding by rules if they remembered the rule themselves, rather than had a parent order it.

"These findings have implications for research on theory of mind and moral reasoning, as well as practical applications for educators and parents," Dr. Lagattuta said. "First, between the ages of 4 and 7 children increasingly recognize that emotional satisfaction is shaped not only by immediate desire fulfillment (a potent cause of happiness even for adults), but also by obligations to abide by rules and by consideration of possible future consequences.

"From a practical standpoint, these data suggest methods to boost children's willingness to comply; namely, children believe that people feel happiest exhibiting willpower when they follow a rule that they remembered by themselves, consider the importance of the rule, and focus on how, by complying, they will successfully avoid a negative outcome or ensure a more positive future."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 76, Issue 3, *When you shouldn't do what you want to do: Young children's understanding of desires, rules, and emotions* by Lagattuta KH (University of California, Davis). Copyright 2005 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.