

Infants distinguish between leaders and bullies

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PNAS September 18, 2018 115 (38) E8835-E8843; published ahead of print September 4, 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1801677115>
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Contributed by Renée Baillargeon, July 22, 2018 (sent for review January 31, 2018; reviewed by Alan P. Fiske and Lotte Thomsen)

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Significance

Prior research indicates that infants can represent power asymmetries and expect them to both endure over time and extend across situations. Building on these efforts, we examined whether 21-month-old infants could distinguish between two different bases of social power. Infants first saw three protagonists interact with a powerful character who was either a leader (with respect-based power) or a bully (with fear-based power). Next, the character gave an order to the protagonists. Infants expected the protagonists to continue to obey the leader's order after she left the scene, but they expected the protagonists to obey the bully's order only when she remained present. Thus, by 21 months of age, infants can already distinguish between respect-based and fear-based power relations.

Abstract

We examined whether 21-month-old infants could distinguish between two broad types of social power: respect-based power exerted by a leader (who might be an authority figure with legitimate power, a prestigious individual with merited power, or some combination thereof) and fear-based power exerted by a bully. Infants first saw three protagonists interact with a character who was either a leader (leader condition) or a bully (bully condition). Next, the character gave an order to the protagonists, who initially obeyed; the character then left the scene, and the protagonists either continued to obey (obey event) or no longer did so (disobey event). Infants in the leader condition looked significantly longer at the disobey than at the obey event, suggesting that they expected the protagonists to continue to obey the leader in her absence. In contrast, infants in the bully condition looked equally at the two events, suggesting that they viewed both outcomes as plausible: The protagonists might continue to obey the absent bully to prevent further harm, or they might disobey her because her power over them weakened in her absence. Additional results supported these interpretations: Infants expected obedience when the bully remained in the scene and could harm the protagonists if defied, but they expected disobedience when the order was given by a character with little or no power over the protagonists. Together, these results indicate that by 21 months of age, infants already hold different expectations for subordinates' responses to individuals with respect-based as opposed to fear-based power.