Children’s Perceptions of Fairness

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Background
An important part of social development involves learning how to be fair to others. In their everyday lives, for example, one challenge for young children is figuring out who can play with what, and when. Playtime conflicts often occur when children are still developing their skills at taking turns, sharing, and negotiating. In this study, we looked at how children think about situations like these.

Study
We read short stories to 3- to 8-year-old children at 13 schools, preschools, and centers in the Rochester area. For example, one story showed two characters coloring. One character had many more crayons than the other. The character with fewer crayons took some from the character with more in order to finish a special project. This made the arrangement more equal, but may have been unfair to the character whose crayons were taken away. Getting art materials from a shared box, for example, might have caused less conflict. We asked children questions like “Was that okay or not okay?” and “What do you think will happen next?”

Results
We compared children’s responses to stories where a character took things like stickers, erasers, or candy from another person versus from a shared supply.

- On average, children thought that taking an item from someone else was not okay.
- Compared to younger children, older children thought that taking an item from a shared supply was more okay, especially when the action crated equality between two peers.
- In a complex story where a character took an item from someone else in order to finish a special project, responses were split. Children who focused on ownership thought it was not okay (“She can’t just take gummy bears”). Children who focused on equality thought it was okay (“Now they both have the same”).

Ideas for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents
Understanding of concepts like ownership and equality takes time to develop. However, even the youngest children in this study showed interest in treating others fairly. Adults can play an important role in reducing peer conflicts by encouraging children to think about what they and others own, need, and want. The simplest action may not always be the fairest. By helping children consider others’ perspectives, we can promote positive environments for social development and emotional wellbeing.

For questions or comments about this study, please contact our Research Coordinator, Aya Bukres, at ayabukres@rochester.edu, or Dr. Elenbaas at laura.elenbaas@rochester.edu.