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Must there be an explanation? Children and the Principle of Sufficient Reason

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Abstract

Children exhibit sophisticated explanatory judgments: they expect, value, and judge explanations of salient facts. Do children also believe that everything must have an explanation? If so, they would exhibit a metaphysical explanatory judgment conforming to what philosophers have called the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). In this study, 6-9-year-old children ($N = 80$, $M_{age} = 7.92$, $SD_{age} = 1.21$) were shown statements across domains (Psychology, Biology, Nature, Physics, Religion, and Supernatural) and asked if they agree that each statement must have an explanation. As a foil, children were also asked about coincidences, which, putatively, aren't apt for explanation. Indeed, children conform to the PSR: children of all ages believed that the statements must have an explanation. Notably, 7-9-year-olds thought coincidences don't have to have an explanation, while 6-year-olds didn't differ between the statements and coincidences. This is the first step at uncovering a developmental change in our metaphysical explanatory judgments.