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Children's beliefs about parents drive their learning about the world

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Abstract

How do young children conceptualize parents' roles? And do these beliefs inform how children learn about the world? Across one study and a preregistered replication ($n = 136$), we examined whether 5- to 8-year-old children expect parents to protect children from harm and leverage this expectation to learn about unknown objects. Participants watched two vignettes of a child finding a novel object. Either the child's parent or friend ran and took the object away. Participants were more likely to say that the object was bad (vs. good) when the parent (vs. friend) took it away (E1: $b = -1.29$, $p < 0.001$; E2: $b = -1.44$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that children are not passive recipients of care: Rather, children hold rich theories about the care they receive from their parents (i.e., protection) that allow them to build sophisticated representations about their parents and, in turn, the world.