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Authors

Conine-Nakano, Aneesa
Marie-Rose, Andrea
Shannon, Katherine Adams
et al.

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Young children use offers of help to infer relative task difficulty and agent competence

Aneesa Conine-Nakano

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Andrea Marie-Rose

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Katherine Shannon

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Hyowon Gweon

Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States

Abstract

To learn effectively, young children must reason about how difficult a task is and the level of competence required to complete it. Prior research finds toddlers prefer helpers who assist individuals who are less competent or facing more difficult tasks, suggesting that children use these factors to evaluate who needs help. Here, we ask whether children make the inverse inference: Can children use offers of help as a cue to infer either an agent's relative competence or task difficulty? Study 1 finds that 4- to 6-year-olds ($N = 36$) infer a student who is offered help is less competent than one who is not (binomial test; $p < .001$). Study 2 suggests that children rate tasks as relatively more difficult if a student was helped on it ($N = 45$, $p < .05$). These results reveal how children use help as a salient cue to learn about others' competence and tasks in their environment.