

Young Children Take Authoritarian Cues From Their Parents

April 15, 2014

Some people bridle at the very idea of having to bend to authority. Others, however, value following a leader and playing by the rules, a trait that researchers refer to as “authoritarianism.” Studies suggest that a person’s level of authoritarianism is correlated with various sociopolitical orientations, and they further indicate a strong link between young adults’ and their parents’ levels of authoritarianism.

And yet, “research on the topic has rarely examined or even anticipated early-childhood manifestations of authoritarianism,” says psychological scientist Michal Reifen Tagar of the University of Minnesota.



[Tagar and colleagues hypothesized](#) that these individual differences in authoritarianism likely emerge in early childhood, manifesting as a “greater responsiveness to cues of status and of deviance when determining whom to learn from.”

The researchers brought 40 3- and 4-year-old children into the lab and had them watch video clips of adults naming various objects.

Some of the clips showed an adult providing conventional names, labeling a shoe as a “shoe,” for example. Other clips showed an adult providing unconventional names, such as labeling a shoe as a “ball.” And additional clips showed an adult providing some conventional and some unconventional names for the objects.

The children were then shown another series of clips in which the adult introduced and labeled completely novel objects. The researchers wanted to see the extent to which the kids would trust these new labels, given the clips they had already seen.

Results showed that the children were more likely to trust the speaker that gave conventional labels than the one who gave unconventional labels. But the findings were qualified by parental authoritarianism: Speaker conventionality had a much stronger effect on trust for the kids who had high-authoritarianism

parents.

And kids whose parents rated high in authoritarianism or social conformity placed greater trust in the ambiguously conventional speaker, suggesting that they placed greater weight on the speaker's adult status (i.e., "adults are to be trusted") even though their labels were unreliable.

According to Tagar and colleagues, these results "reveal emerging manifestations of authoritarianism at an early age."

The results suggest that there are "systematic individual differences in selective trust" that "can be reliably predicted from the psychological characteristics of the children's parents," though the researchers note that it's not clear whether the link is driven by genetics, socialization, or a combination of both kinds of factors.

Reifen Tagar, M., Federico, C., Lyons, K., Ludeke, S., & Koenig, M. (2014). Heralding the Authoritarian? Orientation Toward Authority in Early Childhood. *Psychological Science*. DOI: [10.1177/0956797613516470](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613516470)