

Toddlers Object When People Break the Rules

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We all know that, for the most part, it's wrong to kill other people, it's inappropriate to wear jeans to bed, and we shouldn't ignore people when they are talking to us. We know these things because we're bonded to others through social norms – we tend to do things the same way people around us do them and, most importantly, the way in which they expect us to do them.

Social norms act as the glue that helps to govern social institutions and hold human societies together, but how do we acquire these norms in the first place?

In a new article published in the August 2012 issue of [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), researchers Marco Schmidt and Michael Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology aim to get a better understanding of this important 'social glue' by reviewing research on children's enforcement of social norms.

"Social norms are crucial for understanding human social interactions, social arrangements, and human cooperation more generally. But we can only fully grasp the existence of social norms in humans if we look into the cradle," says Schmidt.

Schmidt and Tomasello were specifically interested in understanding children's use of a type of norm called constitutive norms. Unlike other norms, constitutive norms can give rise to new social realities. Police, for example, are given their power through the 'consent of the governed,' which entitles them to do all sorts of things that we would never allow an average citizen to do.

Constitutive norms can be found in many places, but they are especially important in rule games like chess – there are certain norms that make chess what it is. So, for example, if you move a pawn backward in a game of chess, you're not just violating a norm by failing to follow a particular convention, you're also not playing the game everyone agreed upon. You're simply not playing chess.

In recent years, Schmidt and Tomasello, along with Hannes Rakoczy of the University of Göttingen, have conducted several studies with the aim of examining how children use constitutive norms and identifying the point at which they stop thinking of game rules as dictates handed down by powerful authorities and begin thinking of them as something like a mutual social agreement.

In one study, 2- and 3-year-old children watched a puppet, who announced that she would now 'dax.' The puppet proceeded to perform an action that was different from what the children had seen an adult refer to as 'daxing' earlier. Many of the children objected to this rule violation and the 3-year-olds specifically made norm-based objections, such as "It doesn't work like that. You have to do it like this."

In another study, Schmidt, Rakoczy, and Tomasello found that children only enforce game norms on members of their own cultural in-group – for example, people who speak the same language. These

results suggest that children understand that ‘our group’ falls within the scope of the norm and can be expected to respect it. And research also shows that children don’t need explicit teaching from adults to see an action as following a social norm; they only need to see that adults expect things to work a certain way.

Together, these studies suggest that children not only understand social norms at an early age, they’re able to apply the norms in appropriate contexts and to the appropriate social group.

“Every parent recognizes this kind of behavior – young children insisting that people follow the rules – but what is surprising is how sophisticated children are in calibrating their behavior to fit the circumstances,” says Tomasello.

Schmidt and Tomasello hypothesize that children enforce social norms as a way of identifying with their community’s way of doing things. Enforcing social norms, then, is an integral part of becoming a member of a cultural group.

The researchers are planning on conducting more research in this area. Understanding social norms, they argue, “is essential to understanding the social and cooperative nature of the human species.”