

# Why Children Learn Better Than Adults

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Young children seem uniquely, insatiably, marvelously curious, even at risk of life and limb. You might think that this drive to explore helps children to learn so much so quickly. But is it really true that children explore more than grown-ups and that this helps them to learn?

It's not easy to test this idea scientifically. Grown-ups and children are so different that it's hard to compare them. But in [a new study](#) just published in the journal *Cognition*, the NYU cognitive scientist Emily Liquin and I found a way to give children and grown-ups exactly the same problem. Sure enough, the children explored more and learned more—but at a cost.

We used what's called a “learning trap.” When we grown-ups try something new, from oysters to opera, and get a bad result, we usually won't try it again. That might seem like the most basic kind of intelligence—even rats stay away from a path that leads to a shock. But it has an important downside. If we quickly conclude that all oysters and operas are indigestible, and reject them ever after, we will never learn that the world is more complicated than that. A stale clam or lame Aida may keep us from ever discovering the delights of a sparkling Belon oyster or a scintillating Magic Flute.

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