

# According to Kids, the Moral Obligation Against Harm Doesn't Apply Equally

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Research shows that we tend to show an *in-group bias*, favoring the interests of our own social group over those of another group. But how do we perceive these biases when they occur in other people?

Psychological scientists Marjorie Rhodes and Lisa Chalik of New York University hypothesized that children would view other people as morally obligated to help members of their own group, regardless of the circumstances, but they speculated that children might see the obligation as more flexible when it comes to other people's encounters with an out-group.

Their findings are published in the June 2013 issue of *Psychological Science*.

Preschool-aged children were presented with a brief story about two separate groups defined by their shirt color, the Zazzes (red) and the Flurps (blue). In one version of the story, a Zaz was mean to another Zaz — teasing him, for instance. In another version, a Zaz was mean to a Flurp instead.

In some of the scenarios, there was no mention of explicit rules about teasing, so the children were left to believe that teasing was bad; in other scenarios, the researchers mentioned that teasing was an acceptable behavior. After listening to the story, the children were asked to rate how bad the behaviors were.

In both kinds of scenarios, children viewed a Zaz teasing another Zaz as bad behavior. Similarly, children thought that a Zaz teasing a Flurp was also bad behavior when they were left to believe that teasing was “against the rules.”

But a difference emerged when the researcher told the children the rules had changed. When they were told that teasing was acceptable, children rated a Zaz teasing a Flurp as less bad, indicating that, for young children, between-group harm is viewed as more acceptable when there aren't explicit rules forbidding it.

These findings were confirmed in additional studies with preschool children and older 9-year-olds.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that both preschool and elementary school children believe that members of a social group have a moral obligation to treat their peers with respect, and this obligation exists even when explicit rules about being friendly are removed. But this trend doesn't follow in cases of harm between groups — children are more likely to condone harm between different social groups when the explicit rules are removed.

Rhodes, M., & Chalik, L. (2013). Social Categories as Markers of Intrinsic Interpersonal Obligations. *Psychological Science*, 24, 999-1006. DOI: [10.1177/0956797612466267](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612466267)