



Children’s Understanding of Resource Allocation

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Thank you to the teachers, administrators, and parents who helped with this study, and thank you to the children who participated! We would like to share the results with you.

Background

Disputes over how to share toys fairly are one of the biggest causes of conflict in early childhood. Interestingly, adults must also weigh many considerations when deciding how to allocate resources. This process is difficult because there is often more than one way to divide resources fairly. Because of this, young children tend to be very focused on equality. The ability to consider other factors like need (how many resources someone has to begin with) or rights (how many resources someone is entitled to) develops with age. Our study investigated developmental changes in children’s consideration of needs and rights when allocating resources.



Interviews with young children.

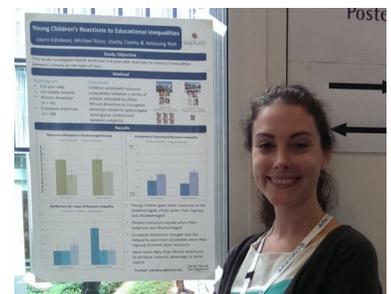
Our Study



In this study, kindergartners and fifth graders decided how to divide up boxes of school supplies between groups of kids who had received a lot of school supplies in the past and groups of kids who had received few school supplies in the past. They also gave reasons for their decisions. We focused on school supplies because of their importance for child wellbeing, and because this context gave participants an opportunity to consider other children’s needs and rights.

Results

- Most kindergartners divided school supplies equally between both groups, not yet taking into consideration the past history of inequality.
- Over 70% of fifth graders gave more school supplies to the group that had received *few* school supplies in the past, showing consideration of the groups’ needs.
- Many children reasoned about equality, and reasoning about children’s rights to educational supplies and the importance of school supplies for children’s welfare increased with age.
- Some children gave more resources to the group that had received *a lot* of school supplies in the past. These children tended to think that the school supply inequality was less wrong than their peers did.



Results from this study have been presented at professional conferences for developmental psychologists and researchers.



Ideas for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents

Children’s understanding of fair resource allocation takes time to develop. When there are many complex considerations to weigh, young children often assume that equality is the fairest way. Pointing out that some people have less than others to begin with can help kindergartners to take others’ needs into consideration. Fifth graders are ready to consider rights to resources on a broader level, but they are still learning about the consequences of inequality. Encouraging older children to recognize the wrongfulness of resource inequalities between groups can help them stand up for others’ rights.

