

# From Possible to Pause-able: Children's hesitancy may mark implicit skepticism of incorrect intuitive beliefs

Adani B. Abutto<sup>a, b</sup> Igor Bascandziev<sup>a</sup> Caren Walker<sup>c</sup> Elizabeth Bonawitz<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Harvard University <sup>b</sup>Stanford University <sup>c</sup>University of California San Diego

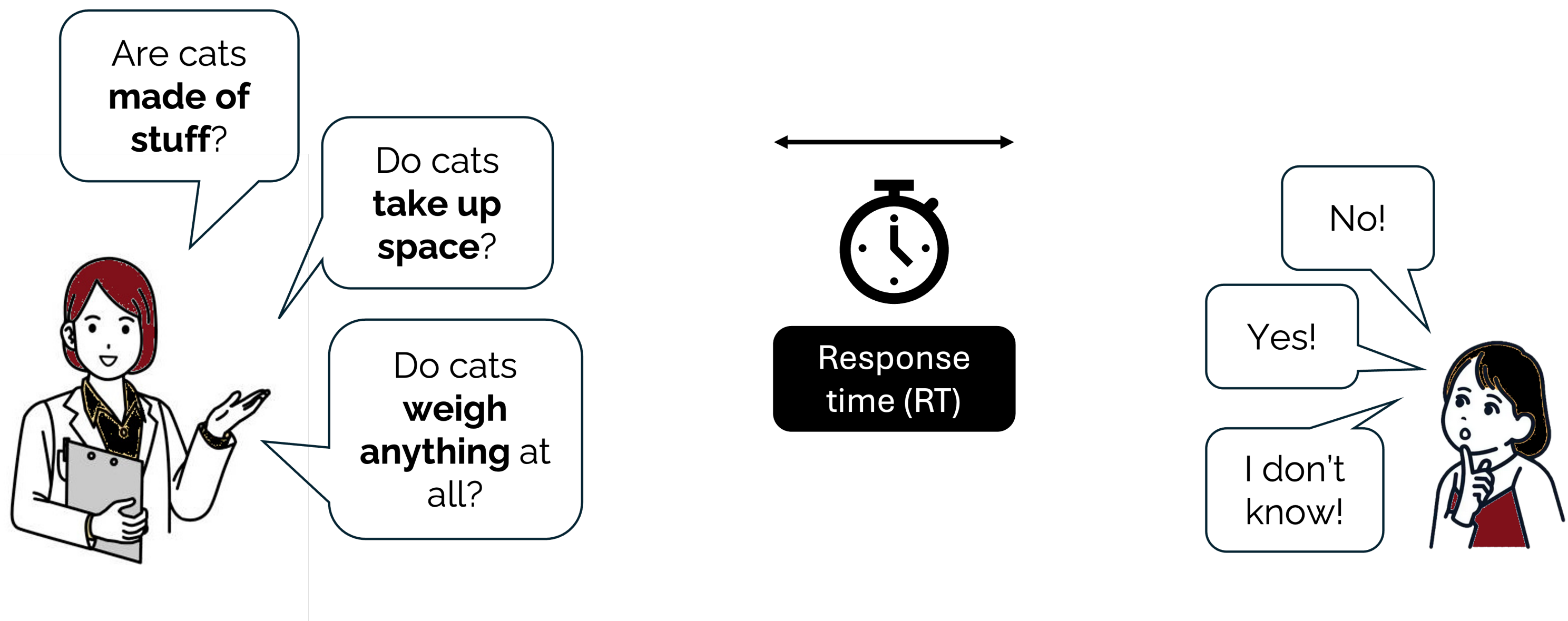
## BACKGROUND

- "Air is nothing:" Young children's naive, **intuitive beliefs** about the material world are theory-like but **often run counter to scientific understanding**<sup>[1, 2]</sup>
- "We need air to breathe:" **Even before** acquiring beliefs aligned with **scientific understanding**, learners' **other knowledge may be inconsistent with naive beliefs**
- This belief inconsistency may lead to slower answers to "incongruent" questions (naive answer  $\neq$  correct answer; typically undergoing change) than "congruent" questions (naive answer = correct answer)

Do children with burgeoning readiness to revise their naive beliefs about the material world show slower response times for "theory-incongruent" questions than "theory-congruent" questions?

## PROCEDURE

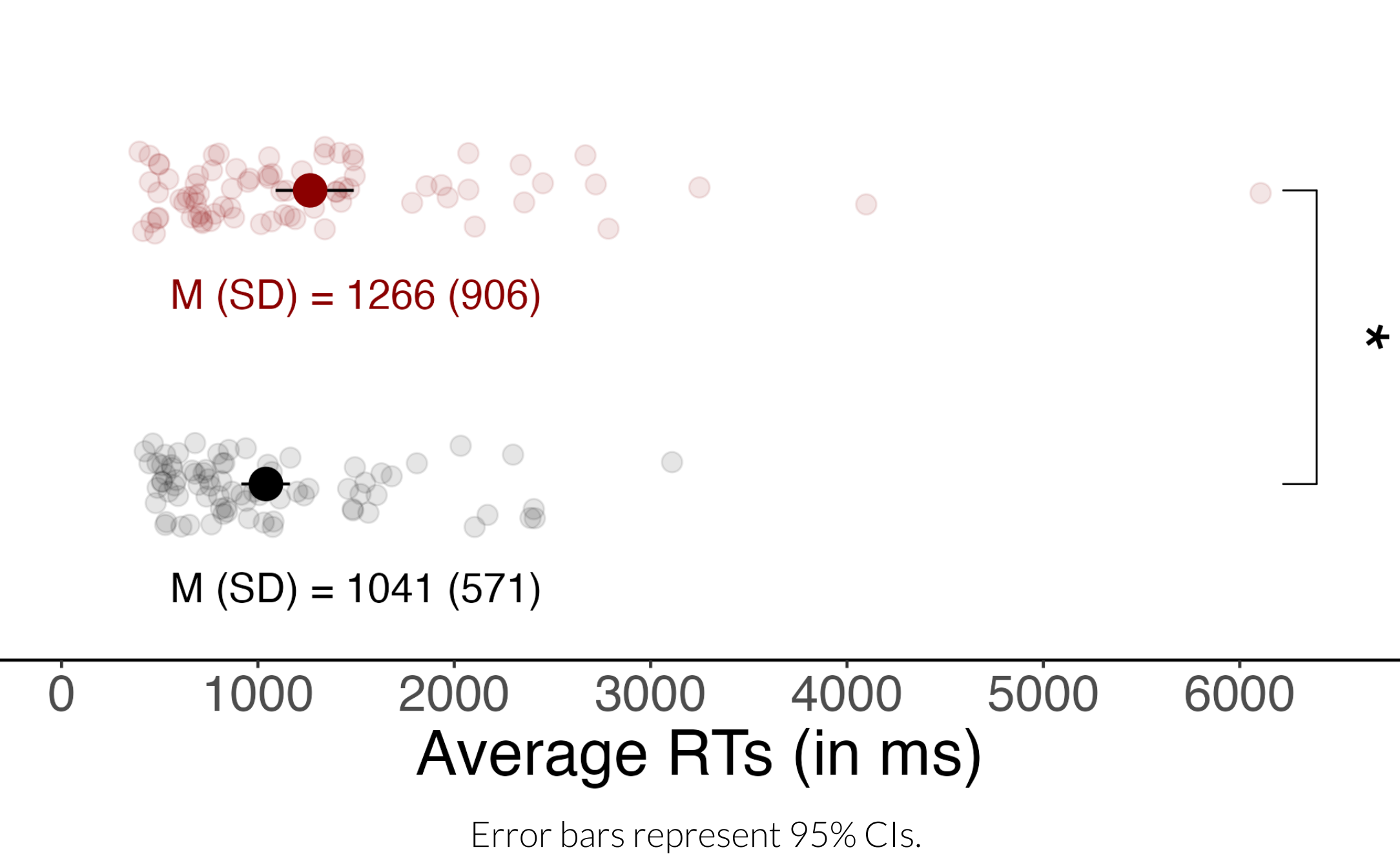
Children answered 36 forced-choice questions about 10 entities and their physical properties (e.g., cats, rocks, shadows; air, steam, electricity)



- Based on **video**, we **coded children's RTs** (time between end of question and start of response)
- Selected subset: **Congruent** questions ( $k = 5$ ) were those **most children answered correctly**; **incongruent** questions ( $k = 5$ ) were those **fewest children answered correctly**
- We excluded children's RTs for inaccurate (congruent) and accurate (incongruent) responses

## RESULTS

Score ● Mean Congruent Items ● Mean Incongruent Items



OSF AS PREDICTED

N = 79 five- to nine-year-old children (M = 7.4 yrs)

- Children were **marginally slower when incorrectly answering incongruent questions** ( $d = 0.24, p = .041$ )
- RTs **correlated moderately with EFs and domain knowledge** ( $r = .28, p = .021$ ;  $r = .31, p = .005$ )
- No correlation between variance in RTs and children's error monitoring or cognitive reflection abilities
- Second coder coded 100% of RT data; ICC = .84 (congruent); .95 (incongruent)

## DISCUSSION & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Children's RTs may be reflective of their being at the cusp of overturning their naive beliefs about the material world

- **Even before acquiring a scientific understanding** of matter and its properties, **elementary schoolers show signs of hesitancy** when producing responses invoking incorrect naive beliefs
- **Learners vary in their degree of hesitancy**; individual differences relate to levels of EF and overall domain knowledge
- We plan to replicate and extend this finding using a question set a) including items beyond the physical reasoning domain, and b), explicitly controlling for age of acquisition and processing-relevant variables (word frequency and length, no. of syllables)

## REFERENCES

[1] Carey, S. (2009). The Origin of Concepts. Oxford University Press.  
[2] Shtulman, A. (2017). Scienceblind: Why Our Intuitive Theories About the World Are So Often Wrong. Hachette UK.