**Infants distinguish between two different bases of social power, fear and respect**

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We all know well the difference between a bully and a leader. We can easily spot the difference between a power based on fear, coercion, and violence, and a power based on mutual respect. We may call the latter authority or leadership, and the former bullying.

It is commonly agreed that the capacity to recognize authority and reason about when people are expected to obey or disobey occurs late in the development, surely not within the first two years of life. With respect to the capacity to navigate the social world and understand social power asymmetries, people often think that infants are not aware of many aspects that characterize social relationships. However, research in infant cognition is providing us more and more evidence that infants are smarter than long believed.

First, there is now a growing consensus that infants are able to tell helping from harming actions or fair from unfair actions, and this ability indicates an early-emerging moral sense. Second, there is evidence that infants are sensitive to power asymmetries and can detect them by using several cues. Overall, infants can represent dominant and subordinate individuals when witnessing situations in which one individual prevails over another in a conflict.

Given these encouraging results, we asked whether infants around the second half of the second year can also understand something which is crucial for our social lives: that (a) power may be based on fear and violence or may be based on respect and legitimacy; and (b) individuals respond differently to these two types of social powers.

To answer this question, we presented our infants with computer-animated events in which three protagonists interacted with a character who was portrayed either as a leader or as a bully. Infants who saw the leader watched the three protagonists play with a ball in a field next to a house; the character then arrived, and the protagonists bowed to her reverently and then gave her their ball. Infants who saw the bully again saw the three protagonists play with the ball until the character arrived; this time, however, the character hit each protagonist in turn and then stole their ball.

In the test phase, infants watched an obey and a disobey event. At the start of each event, the three protagonists were again playing in the field when the character arrived and ordered them to go to bed (“Time for bed!”). The protagonists initially obeyed this order and went into their house (they could be seen through the front window). Next, the character left the scene, and either the protagonists continued to obey and closed their eyes, as though going to sleep (*obey event*), or they left the house and returned to the field (*disobey event*). We measured how long infants looked at the obey and disobey events in both the leader and bully conditions.

We found that infants looked longer at the disobey event than at the obey event when the leader character gave the order. Many findings in the infant literature show that looking times may depend on infants’ expectations and longer looks reveal that infants have noticed a violation of such expectations. In accordance with this explanation, we inferred that infants found disobedience surprising and, thus, expected the protagonists to continue to obey the leader’s order even after she left. By contrast, infants looked about equally at the two events in the bully condition, suggesting that they viewed both outcomes as plausible: the protagonists might decide to obey out of fear or they might decide to disobey as the power of the bully character weakened in her absence. A set of control studies confirmed and strengthened our interpretation of the results.

Our findings suggest that children, before their second birthday, already hold different expectations for how individuals respond to leaders and bullies. In particular, we showed that infants expect people to obey leaders even when momentarily absent, but expect people to comply with bullies only out of fear of reprisal.

The current findings represent a first step towards the demonstration that a principle of authority is part of the early-emerging and basic structure of human moral cognition. Assuming our results are replicated and extended, parents and educators will need to keep in mind that very young children may understand power asymmetries and generate expectations about obedient behaviors long before they develop sufficient self-control skills to consistently obey orders from leaders.