Is it the Thought that Counts? How Children Allocate Rewards Based on Effort and Outcome

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Abstract/Intro
Do children think rewards should be based on effort or outcome?
• Infants expect that someone who helps put away toys will get more reward than someone who doesn’t (Sloane, Baillargeon, & Premack, 2012)
• 4-year-olds are able to allocate rewards based on merit, but often prefer to do so equally (Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallier, 2012).
• 6-year olds prefer to throw an extra resource away rather than give one person more than another, except when they are told that someone worked harder. For example, if children are told that Tim and John both cleaned their rooms, but John works harder, they believe that John deserves an extra reward.

Do children think the harder worker should be rewarded because the room got cleaner (a better outcome) or because he worked harder (better effort)?

Method
44 children, ages 4-8 ¼ were told six stories about two boys who cleaned their rooms. After hearing each story, the children were asked to allocate 6 erasers as prizes to the boys in the stories.

Example: I’m going to tell you a story about Mark and Dan. One day Mark and Dan’s mom said, “Mark and Dan, I want you to clean your rooms!” When Dan heard what she said, he went straight to his room, but Dan didn’t want to clean his room, so he played with his toys instead! But Mark did not hear his mom very well, so when his mom said, “I want you to clean your rooms, Mark thought she said, I want you to clean your brooms! Oh no, what a silly mistake!

Results

Discussion: These results suggest that both younger and older children allocate rewards based on outcome. Older children’s rewards are also affected by intention and/or effort. A similar shift has been found in children’s opinions about punishment (see Cushman, Shekoffet, Wharton, & Carey, 2013 for review). Since the children in the analysis understood the story, this pattern suggests a shift in what children believe is fair, rather than simply a shift in understanding Theory of Mind. Future studies should further specify whether children value effort versus good intentions.

Note: Only children who understood the stories were included in the analysis. (Children were asked comprehension questions at the end of the stories)