

Young children actively transmit culture

November 7 2014, by Karene Booker



Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

A hammer has many uses – breaking, prying, bending – but we all know that hammers are supposed to be for hammering nails into wood. It turns out we not only learn such cultural conventions when we're very young, we can transmit them, too.

A recent Cornell study finds that toddlers notice subtle social clues to

figure out what actions of others may be socially or culturally important and then preferentially share this information with others.

The findings show that social context influences [children](#)'s transmission of information, perhaps playing a role in the dissemination of cultural conventions from a young age, say authors Christopher Vredenburg, graduate student in the field of [human development](#); Tamar Kushnir, the Evalyn Edwards Milman Assistant Professor of Child Development in the College of Human Ecology; and Marianella Casasola, associate professor of human development.

In their study, two-year-olds were shown two new toys that each light up and make a sound. One action was demonstrated by a person exploring the toy on their own without engaging the child, and one was demonstrated by a person using eye contact and child-directed speech, known informally as baby talk or "motherese," cues that children pick up on as signals that you are trying to "teach" them something culturally or socially relevant.

The toddlers learned and produced both actions, but when a new person who was not part of the initial demonstration asked them what the toy does, the toddlers were more likely to show the cued action first and to spend more time showing it.

"Children are rapid causal learners and precocious imitators and can learn about cause/effect by observing others making things 'go' with no additional cues, but they prefer to transmit the cued action in a new social situation," Kushnir said.

"They learn something additional about the cued effect – they learn that it may be something that is worth communicating to another person," she explained.

"This builds on prior evidence that children think that some causal properties of objects might also be socially or culturally relevant – it may be a way children learn about culture. Furthermore, it shows that even two-year-old children actively participate in culture by transmitting selectively to the new person only the 'relevant' information."

The study, "Pedagogical cues encourage [toddlers](#)' transmission of recently demonstrated functions to unfamiliar adults," was published online in *Developmental Science* (Oct. 5).

More information: "Pedagogical cues encourage toddlers' transmission of recently demonstrated functions to unfamiliar adults." *Dev Sci*. 2014 Oct 5. [DOI: 10.1111/desc.12233](https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12233). [Epub ahead of print] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25284008

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Young children actively transmit culture (2014, November 7) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-young-children-transmit-culture.html>

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