

Children in India exhibit religious tolerance, study finds

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A new investigation of how children reason about religious rules reveals a remarkable level of acceptance of different religions' rules and practices.

The study, appearing in the June 13 online edition of *Child Development*, found that both Hindu and Muslim [children](#) in India thought that Hindu children should follow Hindu norms and Muslim children should follow Muslim norms.

"Even in a region with a long history of high religious tension, we see impressive levels of religious tolerance among children," said study co-author Audun Dahl, assistant professor of psychology at UC Santa Cruz. "Children think that people in different religions should follow their own norms—and that's a starting point, a reason for optimism."

Very little research has been done on how children reason about religious norms, despite the fact that differences between religious norms underpin conflicts around the globe, including Catholic/Protestant clashes in Europe and differences among Sunni and Shia Muslims, noted Dahl. Religious norms dictate practices from clothing and land ownership to reproduction, he said, with adult adherents frequently wanting others to adhere to their norms.

"Children expressed preferences for their own religion, but we found no evidence of children rejecting the norms of the other religion," said Dahl, adding that such tolerance is the first step toward greater harmony.

Exploring religious tolerance

Dahl and coauthors Mahesh Srinivasan at UC Berkeley and Elizabeth Kaplan at Syracuse University wanted to see if children would extend their thinking about their own religious norms to other groups. In other words, would Hindu children think that all children should follow Hindu norms? And would Muslim children believe that all children should follow Muslim norms?

"As it turned out, both Hindu and Muslim children thought that the norms of a religion applied only to followers of that religion. For instance, almost no participants thought Muslim kids should follow Hindu norms, but at least half thought Muslim kids should follow Muslim norms," said Dahl. Rather than applying their own religious norms to all others, children endorsed the right of each religion to have its own religious norms.

The study took place in Gujarat, India, a region with a history of Hindu-Muslim violence. Investigators worked with 100 children ages 9 to 15, focusing on different Hindu norms, such as the prohibition against eating beef, and Muslim norms, such as the prohibition against worshipping an idol. They also asked the children about hitting people to explore the youngsters' reasoning around moral norms.

"The tendency to restrict the norms of one's own religion only to followers of that religion, and to expect members of another religious group to follow their own customs, may contribute to peaceful coexistence," said Dahl.

Religious norms as distinct from other social norms

The researchers also asked children about moral norms about how to

treat others. Fully 95 percent of children—regardless of religion—asserted that it's not okay to hit people. Perhaps more surprisingly, most children thought it was wrong to hit someone even if hitting was permitted by religious authorities or a god. Dahl said this speaks to the difference between religious norms and moral norms.

Yet, children also viewed religious norms as different from social conventions or personal preferences. "Religious beliefs are about truth and falsehood. They are about which god, or gods, exist, and which gods are right," he said. "They don't lend themselves to pluralism as easily as personal preferences or social conventions do."

Most religious people believe their god is the true god, so the researchers thought there was a good chance that Hindu children, for example, would think that Muslim children—as well as Hindu children—should follow Hindu norms.

"In the Hindu [religion](#), the cow is a holy animal, so you could expect Hindu children to say it is wrong for anyone to kill and eat cows," said Dahl. "But that's not what we found. Most Hindu children thought Muslims could eat beef, and should follow Muslim rather than Hindu norms."

Dahl and Srinivasan plan to further explore how children integrate religious norms as distinct from [social norms](#) regarding what's right and wrong, including hitting others. "Religions often aren't explicit about the scope of their norms and whether they apply to non-followers, so there's a question about how children apply the fundamental concepts to actual, complicated scenarios of real life," Dahl said. "It's fascinating."

These findings offer hope that exposure to conflicts over religious differences, like those experienced by children in many regions of the world, need not lead children to develop negative attitudes toward the

religious practices of other groups. "Rather, perhaps these levels of understanding will play a role in reducing conflict over time," said Dahl.

More information: Mahesh Srinivasan et al, Reasoning About the Scope of Religious Norms: Evidence From Hindu and Muslim Children in India, *Child Development* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13102](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13102)

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