

What studying children's attitudes can tell us about gender-based pay inequity

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A new study led by John Corbit, a postdoctoral fellow at Dal, evaluated how children respond to boys and girls being paid an unequal number of candies for the same work around their classroom. Credit: Kristine Wook photo/Unsplash

Children as young as five recognize the unfairness of gender-based pay inequality and appear willing to incur a personal cost to ensure both boys and girls are paid equitably, according to a new study by a Dalhousie

researcher.

John Corbit, a postdoctoral fellow in Dalhousie's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, wanted to explore the question of when children begin to understand pay inequities and what they would do, if anything, to level the playing field.

His findings, published recently in *Child Development*, provided some surprises.

"We knew going in that children are remarkably concerned with [fairness](#), but they are also subject to biases in fairness behavior. In this case, fairness won out and we saw no evidence of [gender](#) bias in this age range and in either of these societies," says Dr. Corbit, who for the last decade has studied the development of fairness across diverse societies.

"What these finding tell us about gender-based [inequality](#) is that this form of inequality is not likely to have its roots in an early-emerging feature of our psychology."

Dr. Corbit and his co-authors conducted a series of studies presenting scenarios to children between the ages of four and nine in Boston, Mass., and a small, [rural village](#) in the highlands of Peru. They evaluated how children respond to boys and girls being paid an unequal number of candies for the same work around their classroom. The children were then asked if they would like to give up some of their candies to redistribute the pay. The overwhelming majority of participants chose to intervene against gender-based inequality and redistribute the candies equally.

The researchers expected to see one of three responses: one, that children would show early signs of the gender pay gap and intervene more when males received less; two, that both boys and girls would show

a preference for their own gender; and finally, that children could prefer equity and correct both forms of gender-based inequality.

"This is exactly what we saw in both the U.S. and Peru—children were willing to pay a cost, by giving up some of their own candies, to ensure that everyone received equal pay," he says.

The study is the first to show that not only do children show a motivation to rectify gender-based inequality; they do so regardless of whether the inequality gives an advantage to someone of the same gender.

Dr. Corbit says they knew from previous work that children's fairness preferences varied across these groups in Peru and Boston, as does the relative gap in gender pay within each [society](#). Using such distinct participant groups would thus provide a strong test of their hypotheses, he says.

One group included 123 children from the metropolitan Boston area and the other involved 115 children from a village in the highlands of Peru. Both societies experience a documented gap in gender pay, but this gap is relatively higher in rural Peru where women earn an average of 68 cents on the dollar compared to men.

"So, it was remarkable to find such a strong preference for gender pay equity amongst children in both of these populations," he says of the research, which suggests that despite developing in societies with gender pay inequalities, children in middle childhood strongly favor equality.

The research also found that the [children's](#) preference for fairness grew stronger as they got older.

"This is hopeful, but some findings with adults are not so encouraging so we must strive to understand this problem both at the level of individual

psychology and also in the way our societies are structured," he says.

More information: John Corbit et al. Children in the United States and Peru Pay to Correct Gender-Based Inequality, *Child Development* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13505](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13505)

Provided by Dalhousie University

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