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“It Depends”: How Children Reason about Stable and Unstable Causes

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Abstract

Adults have been shown to favor stable causal relationships – those that hold robustly across background contexts – in their actions and causal/explanatory generalizations (Vasilyeva et al, 2018). Here we explore how this preference develops. We present results from one study with 141 4-7-year-olds investigating whether children pay attention to causal stability when they explain observations and design interventions in novel contexts. We report developmental shifts in reliance on causal stability in a range of inferential tasks, highlight the important role of perceived average causal strength in determining children’s causal preferences, and discuss the implications of our findings for theories of early causal learning. To our knowledge, this is the first study exploring the role of stability in children’s causal reasoning.