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Adults equate stillness with learning

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Abstract

Learning is difficult to measure because it is not directly observable. Even in formal educational settings it's hard to tell whether a child might be thinking through a difficult problem or daydreaming. The same is especially true in informal settings like while watching TV at home—it's difficult to know whether a child is meaningfully engaged with what they are watching or whether they are overstimulated and unable to disengage. Caregivers and educators regularly rely on behavioral cues to infer kids' learning. Physical engagement, or sitting still, is often treated as a reliable signal of learning. However, stillness during screen-based media is not synonymous with learning in young children and may in fact indicate overstimulation and disrupted learning (Shepherd & Kidd, 2024). We asked 200 adults whether they thought the same kid was more attentive and learning more from a video when sitting still compared to when making small fidgets, like twiddling their thumbs or tapping their fingers. Our results demonstrate that adults strongly believe that stillness indicates greater attention and learning in children. This has important implications for equity of opportunities in formal education settings, where an adult observer acts as a gatekeeper to learning opportunities for children that they may withhold from children who they misperceive to be learning less effectively because they are fidgeting.