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Causal Explanations Guide Inferences about Children's Bizarre Behaviors

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Abstract: Lay people and experienced clinicians alike judge the abnormality of behaviors with reference to causal, explanatory events. However, different kinds of experience abound; for example, parents may encounter fewer exemplars than clinicians, but are experienced in reasoning about the real-world ramifications of children's behaviors. When reasoning about child behaviors, parents may therefore be more attuned to societal views of abnormality and their effects than are non-parents. We presented parents and non-parents with child behaviors of ambiguous abnormality, followed by a congruent, incongruent, or no explanation. Non-parents judged behaviors with congruent explanations to be more normal, common, culturally acceptable, and adaptive than those with incongruent or no explanations. Parents also judged behaviors with congruent explanations to be more normal and common than those with incongruent or no explanations. However, parents' judgments of cultural acceptability and adaptiveness were uninfluenced by explanations, reflecting their practical knowledge that explanations cannot change negative societal responses.