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Children Acquire Implicit Attitudes From Instructed, But Not From Experienced, Stimulus Pairings

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Abstract

From the earliest ages testable, children and adults show similar mean-levels of implicit social attitudes. Nevertheless, meaningful change may exist in how attitudes are acquired across the lifespan. This project explored developmental change in implicit attitude formation by comparing the separate and joint effects of two learning modalities: evaluative statements (ES; purely verbal information about upcoming stimulus pairings) and repeated evaluative pairings (REP; exposure to pairings of category members with valenced images). Like adults ($N=2,198$, $M_{age}=37$ years), children ($N=281$, $M_{age}=9$ years) rapidly formed robust implicit attitudes towards novel groups following ES and ES+REP interventions. Unlike adults, children showed no learning following REP. Follow-up studies suggest that inattention to category membership or stimulus valence are unlikely to account for no learning in REP. These findings demonstrate the early-emerging power of verbal instructions to create implicit attitudes, while also revealing developmental change in the capacity for supposedly low-level associative learning.