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Children use positive prescriptive information when asked to predict random samples

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Abstract

Previous work has found that when adults are asked for “the first thing that comes to mind”, they will provide something that falls between the descriptive average and the prescriptive ideal. In two experiments, we tested whether children would also be influenced by prescriptive information in their first-to-mind judgments, but also when they were asked to predict a randomly sampled item. In Experiment 1, providing information about whether being longer or shorter made a fictional tool better or worse led children to provide judgments that were biased toward the prescriptively ‘best’ tool, regardless of what they were asked for, while adults ignored prescriptive information when asked for a random sample. Experiment 2 replicated this result but further showed that the effect was specifically driven by information about which objects were prescriptively good, and did not also arise when the only salient information was about which objects were prescriptively bad.