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Exploring Loophole Behavior: A Comparative Study of Autistic and Non-Autistic Populations

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Abstract

Sometimes people ask us to do things we do not want to do. We may try to avoid the aversive consequences of non-compliance by finding a loophole: an interpretation of the request that is consistent with its literal but not intended meaning. Exploiting loopholes requires an integrated understanding of pragmatics, goal alignment, and rational planning. This kind of complex social reasoning may be challenging for people with autism. Here we surveyed parents to study the prevalence and development of loophole behavior in childhood among autistic and non-autistic children. Neither the tendency to produce loopholes nor their developmental trajectory differed between autistic ($N = 200$) and non-autistic children ($N = 200$). These results are consistent with previous work suggesting the heterogeneous nature of autism and the difficulty of finding single tasks that distinguish high-functioning children with and without autism; the results also demonstrate that autistic children are capable of this kind of complex social reasoning.