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Are toddlers intrinsically motivated to explore their own competence?

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Abstract

Children are keen explorers of the world: They systematically explore surprising findings and test hypotheses during play. However, less is known about whether toddlers are similarly driven to learn about the self. Here, we ask whether toddlers are intrinsically motivated to explore their own competence. In ongoing work, 2-year-olds ($N = 12$) play Montessori practical life games along with their parents; toys were verified to be equally appealing and challenging to toddlers in an independent norming experiment ($N = 14$). Within each pair, parents guide the toddler's hands while playing with one toy, which provides ambiguous information about the toddler's competence, and take turns playing with the other toy independently, which provides unambiguous information. Toddlers are then offered both toys to freely explore independently. Preliminary results show that toddlers explored the ambiguous toy first in 71% of the 31 trials, suggesting that toddlers seek out opportunities to learn about their competence.