

Do children use action frequency to infer social closeness?

Min Feldman

Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, United States

Mack Briscoe

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Ashley Thomas

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract

Children and adults alike use nonverbal cues to infer closeness, but how do they determine which actions signal close relationships? This study examines whether children use the frequency of an action to infer social closeness, and if they prefer to befriend those with fewer close relationships. Participants watched a central character greet four people using one novel action (e.g., toe tapping) and one person with a different novel action (e.g., hip bumping). Children ages 6-8, but not 4-6, identified the infrequent action as an indication of “best friends”, suggesting they associate rarer actions with closer relationships. Additionally, children preferred to befriend those with fewer close relationships. These findings suggest that older children use action frequency to gauge closeness and believe that closer relationships are less frequently occurring. We plan to conduct a followup study exploring whether the same effect is found with sound-based greetings as well.