

Defend Your Research

HBR puts some surprising findings to the test

Adults Behave Better When Teddy Bears Are in the Room



Sreedhari Desai is a research fellow at the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University and an assistant professor at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The finding: Adults are less likely to cheat and more likely to engage in “pro-social” behaviors when reminders of children, such as teddy bears and crayons, are present.

The research: Sreedhari Desai and her research partner Francesca Gino had people play classic psychology games in which the subjects controlled how much money other people earned and could earn more themselves if they lied. Half the participants were either in a room with children’s toys or engaged in children’s activities. Across the board, those participants lied less and were more generous than the control subjects.

The challenge: Could the simple presence of toys really make people behave more ethically? Should we stock boardrooms with stuffed animals? **Professor Desai, defend your research.**

Desai: In all our lab studies, we found that when subjects were near toys or engaged in activities like watching cartoons, the number of cheaters dropped almost 20%. In several studies we had participants play games in which they filled in missing letters to complete words. Those who were primed with childhood cues were far more likely to form “moral” words like “pure” and “virtue” than those who weren’t. In addition, people behaved better in the presence of childhood cues even if they weren’t feeling particularly happy.

HBR: To us, these lab games often feel completely detached from reality. How do you know people will behave better in the real world based on this?

Larry Lessig, my boss at Harvard’s ethics center, had the same question. He asked me point-blank, “Can you demonstrate this kind of effect in the field?” So we took KLD’s massive database of corporate information and cross-referenced it with geographical data, and we found that if companies have five or more day-care centers, nurseries, or kindergartens

within a two-mile radius of their headquarters, their charitable giving increases significantly.

How can you link charitable giving to day-care centers in the area? There are a lot of variables at work here.

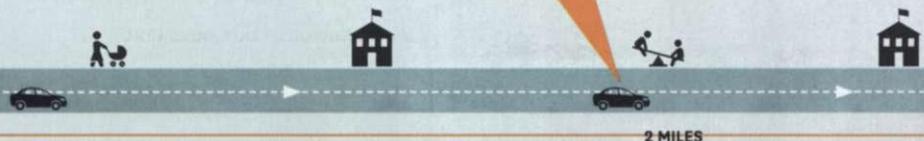
We ran a regression analysis that controlled for firm-specific variables—size, age, risk, business performance. And we controlled for population density, because research has shown that people are somewhat meaner in very dense places. Even after controlling for all this, the more day-care centers and kindergartens there were, the more likely the company was to engage in charitable behavior. This was so exciting. For someone who does lab work, it was nice to see the same pattern of results in the real-world data.

What do you think is happening here?

Our hypothesis focuses on the idea of purity. Child-related cues might unconsciously activate notions of goodness and drive us to get to a pure state and not want to pollute it. Think about it: As a parent, you behave differently around kids. You don’t swear as much. You don’t want oth-

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THE CONNECTION TO CORPORATE CHARITY



A Positive Influence on Honesty

20%

In Desai's studies, the number of people who cheated dropped by 20% when subjects were near children's toys or engaged in children's activities.

ers to swear. But we're finding that it's not only the presence of a child that makes us feel this way; it's the idea of a child.

It just seems so unlikely that the mere presence of crayons would be enough to change complex adult behavior.

There's mounting evidence. It's been seen in primates. Male Barbary macaques use their infants in this way, carrying them around to encourage cooperative behaviors within the group, such as mutual grooming. Neuroscience has shown that oxytocin is released when people are exposed to kids, and oxytocin is associated with pro-social behavior.

Does it matter whether the toys present are for younger children or older ones?

We struggled with this a lot. We used cues that evoked children ranging from infancy to eight or nine years of age. We can safely say cues from that range seem to work. But what happens beyond it, we don't know.

Is there any useful application here?

Should we put children's items in our meeting rooms and work areas?

One suggestion is to put day-care facilities on corporate campuses. Not only would it make parents more relaxed about their kids, but it might also have a positive influence on everyone's behavior. It could lead to a more ethical climate. And yes, perhaps pictures of children in cubicles would

encourage people to act better. Or maybe elevators should pipe in child-related music rather than that dull easy-listening music. What if we used colored ink sometimes or colorful fonts in messages? Would we act more ethically? I don't know, but it's possible.

Where else do you want to take this research?

In all these studies we looked at financial, ethical, and pro-social behavior. We want to look at more nonfinancial areas. Would cues related to children of different races lead to more diversity, less discrimination, less stereotyping? The other direction is to see if childlike features trigger anything. Children have certain physical attributes—large eyes, big foreheads, small chins, and chubbiness. Do we subconsciously assume that companies headed by baby-faced CEOs are less likely to dump chemicals in rivers or commit fraud? To me that's the dark side. It's the same with marketing. We've looked at lots of ads that use children in frankly bizarre ways—babies drinking soda, old cigarette ads with kids talking about what brand their daddy smokes, toddlers shaving, the "E'Trade baby." There's a fast-food chain whose logo is a girl with pigtails. In light of this research, what do we understand now about the effect these ads may have?

There's an image of a teddy bear on this page. We're doing our part to improve the behavior of business leaders.

Put a teddy bear on the cover! Think of the pro-social behavior you'd create in boardrooms!



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