

Babies will 'deal with the devil'—when the price is right

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Turns out everyone does have a price—even babies.

Babies as young as 12 months will take a smaller offering from a Good Samaritan than a larger one from a wrongdoer. However, children are much more willing to "do business" with the bad guy when their offer is substantially higher than the do-gooder's, a new study published in the journal *Cognition* shows.

"It's a study I like to call 'the deal with the devil'" said Arber Tasimi, a [graduate student](#) in the Department of Psychology who led this study along with Yale psychologist Karen Wynn.

The experiment that Tasimi and Wynn designed was simple: When given the choice between a smaller and a larger offering, which do children and [babies](#) choose? Unsurprisingly, they almost always take the larger amount. But the researchers wanted to know if it matters who was doing the offering—a good guy or a bad guy.

In one experiment, five- and eight-year-olds were introduced to two characters, one described as

mean and the other described as nice. Children were then told that the mean kid was offering them more stickers (either two, four, eight, or 16) than the nice kid, who offered a single sticker. When the difference between the offerings was modest, most children were willing to reject the larger number of stickers and deal the nice kid. But, when the offer was upped to 16 stickers, most [children](#) were willing to "sell out" to the mean kid.

Even 12- and 13-month-olds seem to struggle with this [moral dilemma](#). Tasimi and Wynn showed babies a [puppet](#) show involving a puppet attempting, but failing, to open a clear box with a toy inside. On alternating trials, one puppet helped open the box, whereas another slammed it shut. Afterwards, the mean puppet offered two crackers and the nice puppet offered just one cracker. Remarkably, said the researchers, over 80% of babies took the single cracker from the nice puppet. But when the mean puppet's offer went up to eight crackers, babies showed a greater willingness to deal with a wrongdoer.

"When I tell people about these findings, they often joke that babies and kids are sellouts, but I think the message is less cynical," Tasimi said. "Even early on, we're willing to pay personal costs to avoid wrongdoers in favor of do-gooders."

And, what about those participants who reject any amount from bad guys?

"I think an exciting avenue for future research involves an understanding of how individual differences, even during the first few months of life, influence our judgments of good and bad, right and wrong," he said.

Provided by Yale University

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