

What Children Reveal About Human Nature

Written by Bryan Caplan.

One of my pet theories is that children reveal the true nature of man. They have the same emotions as adults; they're just terrible at hiding them. Even when their emotions are monstrous, kids either just blurt out whatever they're thinking, or bend the truth so blatantly that you know exactly what they have in mind.

A classic case: A kid does something bad. He gets caught. He wants to avoid punishment. So what does he say? "I'll never ever ever do it again." Kids pass out this extreme promise like candy, even when the compliance cost would be astronomical. The kid will "Never complain again"? "Never get mad again"? "Never ask for anything ever again"? I've heard all these promises, and more.

Kids say stuff that sounds good to avoid negative consequences. In other words, they're acting just like adults.

What's going on? The charitable theory is that at the moment they're speaking, the kids are sincere. Why don't they keep their promises? Self-control problems; though they want to stay good, it's just too hard in practice. But the charitable theory conflicts with two ugly facts.

First, kids casually leap to their extreme promises when they sense they're in danger of punishment. They're not forming a long-run plan to be better kids; they're implementing a short-run plan to get off the hook.

Second, once the danger of punishment recedes, the kids don't struggle, then fail, to live up to their promises. Instead, they forget their promises as casually as they made them

But don't kids often plead lack of self-control? Sure: "I just couldn't help myself." But the real story isn't lack of self-control, but **Social Desirability Bias**: Kids say stuff that sounds good to avoid negative consequences. In other words, they're acting just like adults, minus the subtlety. As I've explained before:

Part of the reason why people who spend a lot of time and money on socially disapproved behaviors say they "want to change" is that that's what they're supposed to say.

Think of it this way: A guy loses his wife and kids because he's a drunk. Suppose he sincerely prefers alcohol to his wife and kids. He

*still probably won't **admit** it, because people judge a sinner even more harshly if he is unrepentant. The drunk who says "I was such a fool!" gets some pity; the drunk who says "I like Jack Daniels better than my wife and kids" gets horrified looks. And either way, he can keep drinking.*

Fortunately, there's a lot more to human beings of all ages than weaseling. Kids' love and excitement are just as transparent as their pettiness and anger. Which makes me hopeful about the inner lives of adults as well.

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