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Fairness: What it isn't, what it is, and what it might be for

by Alex Shaw

Fairness is an important concern in human society that guides the way both children and adults share; individuals want themselves and others to be rewarded equally for doing equal work. Here I demonstrate that children are so concerned with fairness that they will even discard resources in the trash to uphold fairness. I then explore some reasons why children might be fair, and present experiments that suggest part of the motivation behind children's fair behavior is a desire to socially signal to others that they are fair. I then present work which suggests that the desire to appear fair is really a desire to appear impartial; children will pay others unequally for equal work as long as they can use an impartial procedure to assign resources to others. I show similar effects in adults and argue that people develop a sense of fairness to avoid condemnation from others who might be upset about the favoritism evidenced by inequality.