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## Young children are more willing to accept group decisions in which they have had a voice



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### ABSTRACT

People accept an unequal distribution of resources if they judge that the decision-making process was fair. In this study, 3- and 5-year-old children played an allocation game with two puppets. The puppets decided against a fair distribution in all conditions, but they allowed children to have various degrees of participation in the decision-making process. Children of both ages protested less when they were first asked to agree with the puppets' decision compared with when there was no agreement. When ignored, the younger children protested less than the older children—perhaps because they did not expect to have a say in the process—whereas they protested more when they were given an opportunity to voice their opinion—perhaps because their stated opinion was ignored. These results suggest that during the preschool years, children begin to expect to be asked for their opinion in a decision, and they accept disadvantageous decisions if they feel that they have had a voice in the decision-making process.

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### Introduction

Life is not always fair. We often face situations in which an authority figure makes a decision that does not favor us, and group decisions often require that we give up our advantageous position in

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favor of a compromise. In both cases, research has found that for adults it is easier to accept an unfavorable outcome if we have the option to state our opinion before a decision is made (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Ong, Riyanto, & Sheffrin, 2012). Whereas distributive justice or fairness has been quite widely investigated in both adults and children (Geraci & Surian, 2011; Jasso, Törnblom, & Sabbagh, 2016; Sloane, Baillargeon, & Premack, 2012), the phenomenon described here concerns another component of justice that has received less attention—procedural justice. Being able to voice an opinion that is considered during a decision-making process is important because (a) voicing our opinion gives us the sense that we are influencing the decision-making process (Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and (b) being able to voice an opinion gives us the sense that we are regarded as an equal and valuable group member (Tyler & Lind, 1992).

Research in developmental psychology has shown that sensitivity of procedural justice emerges during childhood (Gold, Darley, Hilton, & Zanna, 1984). Children are capable of evaluating the fairness of an interaction between another child and an authority figure as well as how fairly they are treated by their own mother—which affects their overall satisfaction with her (Fry & Corfield, 1983). Hicks and Lawrence (1993) found that adolescents' concept of justice was comparable to that of adults through a study relying on a procedural justice scale based on a questionnaire about a hypothetical court situation. Among other features of fair treatment, getting a say in the decision-making process and getting an explanation as to why the final decision was made were rated as very important. In an interview study by Killen and Smetana (1999), 5-year-old children reported that they thought they should retain control over personal decisions both while at home and while in their kindergarten group. This suggests that sensitivity for participation in group decision making—a key aspect of procedural justice—develops even before children reach school age.

Two more recent studies on procedural justice in children investigated children's sense for equality of opportunity and found that 5- and 6-year-olds already reject decision-making procedures favoring one individual over others but will accept unequal resource distributions once an impartial procedure is deployed (Große, Rossano, & Tomasello, 2015; Shaw & Olson, 2014). The latter is particularly surprising because it is known that 3-year-olds already react negatively to distributions that are unfavorable to them (LoBue, Nishida, Chiong, DeLoache, & Haidt, 2011), and from 4 years of age onward children are even willing to take a cost to avoid getting less of a distribution than a play partner does, which is interpreted as evidence for disadvantageous inequity aversion (Blake & McAuliffe, 2011).

The aforementioned studies on procedural justice allowed children to report on everyday experiences involving using their voice in a decision-making process (Fry & Corfield, 1983; Hicks & Lawrence, 1993; Killen & Smetana, 1999). However, the only experimental study directly confronting children with situations in which they could voice their opinion about a decision was conducted by Folger (1977). In that study, 10-year-old boys worked to obtain a resource that was then distributed by a "manager," a peer of the same age. The children were either allowed to communicate their preferred distribution to the manager (voice condition) or not (mute condition). In cases of unequal distribution, the children who were allowed to voice their preference were more satisfied with their outcome than the mute children. This result is in line with findings from adult research showing that procedural justice becomes important when outcome fairness is violated (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). A second measure of Folger's (1977) study showed a preference for getting to voice an opinion—even independent of the fairness of the outcome. When asked to evaluate the fairness of the procedure (manager dividing the resource), the children rated the voice procedure as fairer than the mute procedure both when their outcome was equal to the manager's outcome and when they received less. The reported studies show that school-age children expect and appreciate having a voice in decision-making processes just like adults do. However, studies on distributive justice demonstrate that children prefer and expect fairness way before they start school (DesChamps, Eason, & Sommerville, 2016; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). Whether they also develop a preference for fair decision-making processes (procedural justice), with regard to participation within their preschool years has yet to be investigated.

Therefore, we conducted a study with 3- and 5-year-old children playing a resource allocation game with two puppets. In this game, the group needed to choose between two distributions of stickers; one was equal (each player received two stickers), whereas the other was unequal—leaving a child at a disadvantage. In all conditions, the puppets always chose the option that was unfavorable toward

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