



Defend Your Research: Adults Behave Better When Teddy Bears Are in the Room

by [Sreedhari Desai](#)

Comments (9)



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.