NEWS | POSTED APRIL 23, 2025

New Research from Child Development Shows Fostering a Warm Home Environment Leads to Young People's Beliefs that the World is Safe

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on April 23, 2025

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Wednesday, April 23, 2025 7:09am

Predictors of Young Adults' Primal World Beliefs in Eight Countries

Read the Child Development article:

WILEY ONLINE LIBRARY

Contact:

Jessica Efstathiou, Public Relations

E-MAIL

Primal world beliefs (“primals”) capture understanding of general characteristics of the world, such as whether the world is “Good,” “Safe,” and “Enticing.” In a new study, researchers analyzed responses from children, mothers, fathers and then later, young adults in Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States to learn about their world beliefs.

Through a larger project called Parenting Across Cultures, children ages 8-16 years old (50% female) and their mothers and fathers, reported responses about neighborhood danger, socioeconomic status, parental warmth, harsh parenting, psychological control and autonomy. When the original child participants were 22 years old, they completed a questionnaire about their world beliefs and provided responses such as “The world is an abundant place with tons and tons to offer,” and “I tend to see the world as pretty safe.”

This research was featured in a new *Child Development* article with authors from Duke University (United States), the University of Miami (United States), the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (United States), UNICEF (United States), the Institute for Fiscal Studies (United Kingdom), University of Macau (China), the University of Pennsylvania (United States), University of Massachusetts Amherst (United States), Università di Roma “La Sapienza” (Italy), University West (Sweden), Chiang Mai University (Thailand), Maseno University (Kenya), Temple University (United States), King Abdulaziz University (Saudi Arabia), Universidad de San Buenaventura (Colombia), and Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines).

The study was led by Dr. Jennifer Lansford, SRCD’s incoming President and Research Professor in the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy and Director of the Center for Child and Family Policy. This is the first longitudinal and multi-country study of primal world beliefs advancing understanding of how beliefs about the world are related to experiences in childhood and adolescence. The findings showed that parental warmth during childhood and adolescence led to “Good,” “Safe,” and “Enticing” world beliefs.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Lansford about the research and her plans for her upcoming tenure as President of SRCD.

SRCD: Can you please provide a brief overview of the study?

Dr. Lansford: Primal world beliefs ("primals") capture individuals' basic understanding of what sort of world this is. For example, is the world dangerous or safe? Dull or enticing? Barren or abundant? A key question facing developmental scientists is to understand how primals form. We identified six possible predictors of primals on the basis of their salience in theoretical frameworks of child development and the empirical support for their importance as predictors of a range of developmental outcomes, although these constructs have not previously been tested as predictors of the development of primals. As primals characterize beliefs about the world, and these beliefs may be affected by the broad sociodemographic and cultural contexts in which people live, studying predictors of primals cross-nationally is particularly important, so we leveraged data from eight countries to test childhood and adolescence experiences as predictors of young adults' beliefs about the world. We interviewed children and their parents when children were ages 8 to 16 and then asked about the world beliefs of those same children when they were 22 years old.

SRCD: Did you learn anything that surprised you?

Dr. Lansford: Parental warmth during childhood and adolescence significantly predicted Good, Safe, and Enticing world beliefs, but it was surprising that other experiences during childhood and adolescence were only weakly related to young adults' beliefs about the world. For neighborhood danger, family socioeconomic status, harsh parenting, psychological control, and autonomy granting, the findings suggest that experiences during childhood and adolescence are not associated with the development of beliefs about the world in ways that might be expected. For example, growing up in a more dangerous neighborhood was not related to perceiving the world as being less safe.

SRCD: How does this research align with your mission and goals for your upcoming tenure as President of SRCD?

Dr. Lansford: To understand human development, it is important to study development in the wide variety of cultural contexts in which development occurs. An important part of SRCD's mission and my goals during my upcoming tenure as President of SRCD involves promoting rigorous science through diversity in the

research participants we study, in the policies and practices this research informs, and in the scientists who engage in this research.

SRCD: Can you please explain how this research might be helpful for parents and other caregivers?

Dr. Lansford: Our findings give hope to parents and other caregivers. Our findings are among the first indications that parents have an impact on their children's beliefs about the world. It is usually infeasible to simply increase one's socioeconomic status or to make one's neighborhood, let alone the entire world, substantially safer. But it appears that fostering a warm environment in the home fosters young people's belief that the world is safe, good, and enticing. Fostering warmth in the home is something that most parents can accomplish.

SRCD: Can you please address some of the research limitations?

Dr. Lansford: One limitation is that the samples were not nationally representative, so national-level inferences are not appropriate, and care should be taken not to generalize the findings beyond the cultural groups that were included in the samples. Another limitation is that primals were self-reported by young adults (as they would have to be to assess individuals' beliefs about the world), and some of the predictors also were self-reported. Thus, it is possible that if children already believed that the world is Safe, for example, the primal could have affected their reports of neighborhood danger or parental warmth. The data are correlational so causal relations cannot be asserted, and the question of where and when developmentally the primal came from in the first place remains open.

SRCD: What's next in this field of research?

Dr. Lansford: An important future direction will be to study primal world beliefs during childhood and adolescence rather than adulthood. Right now, we have a much better understanding of adults' beliefs about the world than children's and adolescents' beliefs about the world. Children and adolescents may describe the world differently from adults, and even if both children and adults describe the world as Good, their conceptualizations of what makes the world good are likely to differ.

SRCD: Where would you like to see SRCD grow in the next 3-5 years?

Dr. Lansford: SRCD has a lot of exciting potential areas of growth. One is with our new Child Policy Hub, which helps build connections between researchers and policymakers to lead to evidence-based policymaking. We will grow our rapid response process to enable policymakers to engage quickly with researchers to seek input on emerging policy questions. Another important area of growth for SRCD is in continuing to advance developmental science by fostering connections and collaborations among researchers from different disciplines, cultures, and countries. We can support the professional development of researchers at all career stages to build a truly integrative developmental science.

++

This research was funded by the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Fogarty International Center and the Templeton Religion Trust.

Summarized from an article in Child Development, "Predictors of Young Adults' Primal World Beliefs in Eight Countries," by Lansford, J.E. (Duke University, United States), Gorla, L. (Duke University, United States), Rothenberg, W.A. (Duke University and University of Miami Miller School of Medicine Mailman Center for Child Development, United States), Bornstein, M.H. (the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, United States, UNICEF, United States, and Institute for Fiscal Studies, United Kingdom), Chang, L. (University of Macau, China), Clifton, J.D.W. (University of Pennsylvania, United States), Deater-Deckard, K. (University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States), Giunta, L.D. (Università di Roma "La Sapienza," Italy), Dodge. K.A. (Duke University, United States), Gurdal, S. (University West, Sweden), Junla, D. (Chiang Mai University, Thailand), Oburu, P. (Maseno University, Kenya), Pastorelli, C. (Università di Roma "La Sapienza," Italy), Skinner, A.T. (Duke University, United States), Sorbring, E. (University West, Sweden), Steinberg, L. (Temple University, United States and King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia), Tirado, L.M.U. (Universidad de San Buenaventura, Colombia), Yotanyamaneewong, S. (Chiang Mai University, Thailand), Alampay, L.P. (Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines), Al-Hassan, S.M. (Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, United Arab Emirates), Bacchini, D. (University of Naples "Federico II," Italy). Copyright 2025 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.