

# Young Children's Understanding of Social Norms and Social Institutions

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**Abstract** Children are born into a world abundant with social norms that prescribe how one should and should not behave. Social norms also form the basis of more complex social institutions such as ownership that create obligations, rights and duties. As adults we typically navigate our social world effortlessly and mostly unaware of the intricate web of social norms and institutions shaping our behaviour. But when and how do young children first become aware of the norms and institutions of their socio-cultural group? In this chapter, we will first provide a definition of social norms and institutions and explain their most important characteristics. We will then present empirical evidence that children as young as 3 years of age already understand some crucial aspects of social norms. We will further use the example of ownership to argue that it is one of the first social institutions that young children understand.

## 1 Introduction

We are born into a world full of norms that prescribe how we should and should not behave. Imagine going to a business meeting anywhere in Europe and instead of offering your business partner your hand for a formal handshake, you take her head and press your nose and forehead together. Under most circumstances this would be considered inappropriate behaviour. As a Maori in New Zealand, however, greeting a fellow Maori with this traditional hongi would convey your highest appreciation.

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This example is just one of many that can be used to illustrate how social norms pervade our everyday lives and regulate how we greet each other, eat our food, or talk to our children, parents, friends, and colleagues. Beyond shaping our daily social interactions, social norms also form the basis of more complex social arrangements such as money, marriage, or ownership (we call them “social institutions”, see Sect. 2).

As adults, we usually navigate our social world effortlessly and mostly unaware of the intricate web of norms that govern our behaviour. However, parents and educators may have experienced the need to hold back young children from crossing the street on a red light or from hugging and kissing strangers in the street. Also, parents may remember the time when they picked up their child from a friend’s house and discovered later that their child had helped herself to (or “stolen”) some of her friend’s toys. Despite these rough beginnings most of us adults will intuitively stop at a red traffic light, greet strangers respectfully, and only take what is ours or what we have paid for. When and how do children come to understand this intricate fabric of invisible social norms and become experts at navigating their social environment?

In this chapter, we will show that young children are already able to recognize, learn and apply the social norms of their environment. We will begin with a definition of social norms and sketch some of their most relevant characteristics (Sect. 2). Then, we will present empirical evidence that young children learn social norms quickly, understand that different norms apply in different contexts, and even (jointly) create their own norms (Sect. 3). Furthermore, we will use the example of ownership and demonstrate that it is one of the first more complex social institutions that children understand (Sect. 4). While children are equipped with the capacity to learn social norms just as they possess the capacity to learn a language, we recognize that the socio-cultural environment children grow up in plays a crucial role in shaping which social behaviour they will learn to view as correct (take our opening example of Western and Maori greetings). The majority of empirical studies to date have been conducted with children growing up in Western societies, but whenever possible, we will include cross-cultural findings.

## 2 Social Norms and Social Institutions

Social norms pervade our lives across environments and situations—in our homes, at work, and in public. They are rules that coordinate and constrain behaviour in a group and are based on agreements and expectations about how members of one’s group ought to behave (Bicchieri and Muldoon 2014). They are thus not just statements of personal preferences (e.g., people in this group like to wear red t-shirts) or descriptions of behavioural regularities (e.g., today most people in this group wear red t-shirts), but entail obligations and duties to conform to certain rules (e.g., people in this group ought to wear red t-shirts). Crucially, what distinguishes norms from other sets of rules or regularities is that group members can be

held accountable and sanctioned by others for violating norms, whereas there are usually no grounds for sanctioning people on the basis of their personal taste. That is, we may dislike it if someone wears a red t-shirt, but we have no right to demand of them to stop wearing red t-shirts (unless there are strict norms against wearing red t-shirts, for instance, at funerals). Norm violations may be sanctioned by bad looks or shunning or by more direct forms of punishment (e.g. fines).

A typical and much used example of a social norm is the norm to drive on the right (or left) side of the road. Members of a group with this norm will expect everyone to drive on the right side of the road, will adjust their own behaviour accordingly and have the right to hold others that do not conform to the norm accountable, for instance, by imposing fines on them. It is irrelevant for successful coordination and regulation of traffic whether the norm is to drive on the left or on the right side of the road, as long as there is one norm that everyone is aware of and adheres to. In fact, in continental Europe everyone drives on the right side of the road, while in the British Islands everyone drives on the left side of the road. That is, an important feature of norms is that they are context-specific (i.e. driving on the right is correct in France, but not in the United Kingdom; see e.g., Rakoczy and Schmidt 2013, for a review).

Social norms help coordinate behaviour not only in smaller groups such as sports club, groups of friends, families, but also in large ethnic or religious groups or whole nations. Essentially, a group can be any number of people that share a common set of values and/or characteristics and identify themselves with a particular group. Individuals are often members of more than one group (citizens of a nation, members of religious groups, families, sports or work teams, etc.) and these groups might adhere to distinct or even conflicting norms. Sometimes even categorizing people based on arbitrary features such as the colour of their shirt is sufficient to elicit identification with a group and show favouritism towards one's own group (Tajfel et al. 1971).

Group norms may regulate behaviour in different domains and it can often be useful to distinguish between norms that belong in the moral domain and conventional norms (e.g., Turiel 1983). Moreover, conventional norms can often be separated into regulative norms and constitutive norms (Lewis 1969; Searle 1996). We will explain each of these types of norms in the following paragraphs and provide examples to illustrate them.

Moral norms are usually norms that relate to harm and fairness. They may determine, for example, that hitting someone constitutes a harmful action whereas shaking someone's hand is a harmless action or that giving everyone the same share is fair while giving more to the tallest person is unfair. Some cultures or groups may also treat violations of norms pertaining to loyalty such as burning the flag of one's country or norms pertaining to sanctity such as eating certain "impure" foods as harmful and immoral acts (Shweder 1991; Haidt 2012).

In contrast to moral norms, regulative norms coordinate behaviours and usually have the goal of solving a coordination problem (Lewis 1969; Searle 1996). For example, in many places there are norms that regulate traffic to prevent delays and accidents. Traffic lights are one means by which traffic can be coordinated, but

giving way to the car that arrives first may achieve this goal just as well. Importantly, regulative norms are context-specific, that is, what may be considered appropriate behaviour in one context may be inappropriate in another. Contexts may be occasions (e.g., it is appropriate to wear a white shirt to a wedding but not to a funeral), relationships (e.g., it is appropriate to greet a friend with a hug but not a business partner) or locations (e.g., it is illegal to smoke in public places such as restaurants, but alright to do so in the privacy of one's home). In contrast, moral norms are less context-specific and often apply more generally. Hitting someone in the face is usually considered a harmful act, irrespective of whether it occurs at a wedding or a funeral, between friends or colleagues, and in public or in private.

A second type of conventional norms is called constitutive norms. These norms are termed “constitutive” because they give rise to other social norms or social institutions (Searle 1996). Constitutive norms make certain rights, duties or obligations possible, that is, without these norms these social entities would not exist. Take the example of money to illustrate what is meant by a constitutive norm: A piece of paper of a certain size and colour counts as a \$1 note in trading interactions. Crucially, the piece of paper cannot perform this function by its physical properties alone (e.g. its size, weight or colour), but there needs to be a collective agreement and recognized practice that this piece of paper functions as a “\$1 note” (e.g. a store will accept this piece of paper in exchange for goods “worth” \$1).

Ownership is another example of a social institution, which gives owners certain rights that determine what they are entitled to do with their property (e.g., use it, sell it, give it away, destroy it, etc.) and regulates what non-owners should or should not do with other's property (e.g. destroy it, taking it without permission, etc.; Honoré 1961; Snare 1972; Kalish and Anderson 2011). Social institutions thus create certain rights, duties, obligation, commitments, titles, and roles that would not exist without these social institutions (e.g., respect for other's property).

In our definition of social norms and institutions, we have repeatedly mentioned that they are mutually agreed on rules, without further elaborating on this particular characteristic. From a psychological perspective, this feature is one of the core elements that sets social norms (and for that matter all types of norms) apart from other types of coordination rules or coordinated behaviour. Humans, unlike any other species on the planet, have a unique ability to create collectively shared norms and agreements and complex social and cultural institutions (Tomasello 2009; Tomasello et al. 2012; Wyman and Rakoczy 2011). These norms and institutions form part of our cultural common ground; that is the way we—as a group—do things and expect other group members to do them.

It has been argued that our ability to create (and adhere to) social norms is grounded in our capacity to engage in shared or “we” intentionality with other members of our species (Gilbert 1992; Searle 1996; Tomasello and Carpenter 2007). Shared or collective intentionality describes the ability to share psychological states with others and, in particular, to share a goal, an action plan to reach this goal, and an understanding of the different roles that are necessary to implement the action plan. For instance, you and I (“we”) intend to build a table together. We now have the shared goal to build a table, including a plan of how to procure the

materials, how to design it and when and where to meet to complete it (action plan) and a mutual understanding of the different roles needed to build it (e.g. I will be responsible for cutting the wood, you will be responsible for drilling holes, etc.). Importantly, the basic cognitive abilities needed to engage in shared intentionality emerge early in development, already during the second year of life. While children are not yet able to engage in complicated shared goals and activities like building tables (or skyscrapers), they begin to attend to things in the environment jointly with others (joint attention), to engage in cooperative communication (verbal and non-verbal), and to participate in collaborative activities and instructed social learning (see e.g., Tomasello and Carpenter 2007, for a review). These abilities rapidly improve, and by 3 years of age children expect a partner to return to a joint activity, wait for her before continuing an activity, and take on their partner's role when needed, but also acknowledge when they themselves leave a joint task (Gräfenhain et al. 2009, 2013). Furthermore, 3-year-olds will continue to help a partner in a collaborative activity (e.g., to get rewards) even after they have already received their own reward and could easily break off from the activity thus demonstrating their commitment to their partner to complete the joint activity (Hamann et al. 2012).

In summary, social norms are the collectively shared rules of a social group that coordinate and constrain behaviour in context-specific ways. They are thus rules that prescribe how someone ought to behave under certain circumstances, with violations of norms being subject to sanctions and punishment by the group. Next, we will elaborate on when and how young children begin to understand regulative and constitutive social norms (see Tomasello and Vaish 2013, for a review on children's understanding of moral norms).

### 3 Young Children's Understanding of Social Norms

Children's understanding of social norms can be studied using a range of different methods. Generally speaking, these methods either focus on children's reasoning about norm violations in hypothetical scenarios or they investigate children's reactions to norm violations in practical situations.

Researchers focusing on children's reasoning about norms usually present children with pictures or stories, in which a fictional child violates a norm, and then ask children questions about the protagonist's behaviour (Turiel 1983; Killen and Smetana 2013). These studies have found, for example, that 3- and 4-year-old children reason differently about violations of physical laws (e.g. "Can a little boy lift a heavy sofa?") and social laws (e.g. "Can a little boy wear his shoes in the bath tub?") (Kalish 1998). They have also shown that 3- and 4-year-olds view violations of moral rules (e.g., hitting another child) as more severe than violations of regulative norms (e.g., not sitting in the designated place during story time; Smetana 1981). These studies have in common that they focus exclusively on children's theoretical understanding—or their knowledge—of norms and their

violations, but reveal little about children's understanding of the normative force of norms (i.e., that one should do certain things). For the rest of this section, we will thus primarily focus on children's understanding of norms in practice and, in particular, on how young children react when they witness norm violations (Schmidt and Tomasello 2012; Rakoczy and Schmidt 2013). This will help us to identify under which circumstances children first learn about social norms, how they know that something is a norm, how they distinguish between different types of norms and how they themselves create their own norms.

In an early study on children's understanding of social norms, Rakoczy and colleagues first introduced a simple new game to 2- and 3-year-old children (e.g., "This is how we play Daxing!") and then had children observe a hand puppet that played the game in an incorrect way (Rakoczy et al. 2008). Young children protested and criticized the puppet, and 3-year-olds often used language that referred to norms such as "No, one must not do it like that!" When the puppet did not violate any game rules (i.e., she announced that she would simply show the child something), children did not protest. This suggests that young children already understand that people who decide to play a game should adhere to the game's (arbitrary) rules. Young children thus do not just passively follow norms such as game rules. They understand that they might get into trouble if they do not abide to the rules set by adults. Indeed, between around 2 to 3 years of age, children begin to criticize norm violators and to actively enforce norms—even when they themselves are not affected at all by the reprehensible act. Importantly, such active enforcement of norms reveals that children understand that norms determine how one ought to behave and do not just copy an adult's behaviour without understanding the normative nature of this behaviour.

How do young children first learn about social norms? One context in which children may learn about norms is pretend play, in which they pretend that one thing is something else (Walton 1990). For instance, in the banana-phone game children pretend that a banana is a telephone and use it to "call someone", thus assigning a new function (telephone) in a context-specific way to an object. Rakoczy (2008) has investigated 2- and 3-year-old children's understanding of pretence acts: Children watched an adult perform different pretence acts such as pretending that a clothespin was a knife. When a puppet pretended to eat the object, children protested against the puppet's behaviour. However, when the object was declared to be a carrot in the pretend game, children did not protest when the puppet pretended to eat it. Furthermore, 3-year-olds, but not 2-year-olds, also understand that pretended identities can change from one location to another. For example, they understand that a stick may be treated as a toothbrush in one game at one table, but as a carrot in another game at a different table (Wyman et al. 2009). These findings suggest that young children understand that social norms are context-specific and not necessarily valid in all situations, i.e. they understand that an object can have one function in one context but another function in a different context.

Another important fact about social norms, as mentioned above, is that they are group-specific and often only locally recognized. For instance, many people in Western cultures use fork and knife, while people in other cultures may use

chopsticks. When do young children understand that such norms are not binding for everyone? Schmidt and colleagues (2012) investigated this question and found that 3-year-olds criticized and protested against moral norm transgressions (a puppet destroyed the experimenter's property) irrespective of whether the norm violator was someone from their own group ("in-group") or someone from a different group or culture ("out-group") (Schmidt et al. 2012). But interestingly, children enforced conventional norms (about simple game rules) only for in-group members, suggesting that they understand that conventional norms are specific to certain groups and hence not binding for members of other groups.

The above-mentioned studies indicate that between 2 and 3 years of age, children understand that social norms are context- and group-specific and thus already begin to grasp some of the essential features of norms. But how do young children identify that a particular action an adult performs is in fact normative (or intended to convey normative information)? Do children need explicit instructions ("Hey, look, now I am teaching you something about how members of this group eat their food.")? Or is it enough for them to observe a member of their group performing a certain act to make inferences about whether this action is a binding social norm (e.g., everyone eats food with chopsticks)? These questions are important since in everyday situations children do not always receive explicit teaching about "how we do things". In order to address this question Schmidt and colleagues assessed whether 3-year-old children understand some simple game actions as binding even though these acts are not explicitly introduced as a norm or a game (i.e., the model did not use any normative language such as "This is the correct way to do it."; Schmidt et al. 2011). Children incidentally watched as an adult confidently performed actions that looked like a game (e.g., using a piece of plastic to push a block across a board until the block falls into a gutter at the end of the board). That is, the model appeared to know how to play the game. Interestingly, children not only imitated the adult's action but later even protested against a puppet who performed a different action with the objects—that is, children inferred that this action must be something everyone should do. Children did not make this inference, however, when the adult demonstrated the action as if she had just invented it spontaneously. Hence it seems that young children are eager to learn norms and do so rapidly, even in the face of sparse evidence. These findings suggest that contrary to a recent theoretical account called "natural pedagogy" (Csibra and Gergely 2009, 2011), it does not seem to be the case that young children mainly use so-called "ostensive cues" (e.g., eye contact, calling the child by her name) to learn that a demonstrated action is normative. Rather, young children seem to pay close attention to the adult demonstrator's intentions and knowledge and the specific context in which acts are presented.

Although children adopt many norms of their social or cultural group, these norms are not always set in stone and may change over time (e.g., smoking used to be allowed in airplanes but is now strictly prohibited). That is, norms can be negotiated, created, and altered. While adults are certainly aware of this and create new norms, it is unclear whether children are already able to create their own norms. The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget analysed children's games of



marbles in great detail because he believed that this may be one context in which children actively teach and create their own norms (Piaget 1932). Inspired by this work, Göckeritz and colleagues examined in a recent study whether 5-year-old children would spontaneously create their own norms without any adult guidance (Göckeritz et al. 2014). Groups of three children faced an instrumental task (a marble run) in which they had to coordinate in order to get some reward. Children introduced norms for how to work together successfully and later transmitted these norms to peers who were totally ignorant of the task. They did so using generic normative language (e.g., “One must do it like this!”), suggesting that they understood these norms as binding for others, too.

Besides obligations to do certain things, we also have rights or entitlements to perform certain actions. Any entitlement is closely linked to what others are obliged to do (Rainbolt 2006): When someone is entitled to do something, then others may not just tell the person not to perform the act she is entitled to. In recent work, 3-year-olds’ understanding of entitlements was investigated (Schmidt et al. 2013). Children witnessed, as disinterested observers, how an individual forbade another person to play with a toy (and even took it away), even though that person was entitled to play with the toy (because the owner of the toy gave the person permission to use it). Children stood up for the person’s right and enforced her entitlement to play with the toy. This suggests that young children have some understanding about what it means to have an entitlement, in particular, in contexts that deal with physical property (We will elaborate on children’s understanding of ownership rights and entitlements in more detail in Sect. 4.2).

In summary, the reviewed research suggests that young children are equipped with capacities to rapidly learn the social norms of their culture and to understand the context-relativity and group-specificity of many norms—and this at a very young age. Moreover, young children even enforce norms when others violate them. This reveals something about their motivation to uphold social norms (not just to follow them), perhaps based on identification with their group (Schmidt and Tomasello 2012).

## **4 Young Children’s Understanding of Social Institutions: The Example of Ownership**

In the previous section, we have presented evidence that young children come prepared with a general capacity to acquire the norms of their socio-cultural environment. In this section, we will turn our attention to how young children come to understand social institutions, using the example of ownership. Let us begin with a brief definition of ownership and sketch its main characteristics.

Broadly speaking, ownership regulates the control and use of objects. Some philosophers have even claimed that norms of ownership are essential to maintaining peace and harmony by preventing disputes over possessions (Hume



1739/2000). Many scholars have highlighted the relational nature of ownership or as Jeremy Bentham put it (Bentham 1894): “There is no image, no painting, no visible trait, which can express the relation that constitutes property.” Importantly, ownership is not just a relation between one person and an object, but is a triadic relation between one person and (at least) another person with respect to objects (Christman 1994; Singer 2010). For instance, it is not sufficient that I claim or know that something is mine; it is also necessary that you recognize my claim and respect it.

Moreover, ownership gives owners a set of rights and duties over their property (Honoré 1961; Snare 1972). Such rights may include the right to exclusively use one's property (e.g., I can use my pencil whenever I like without having to ask anyone for permission), to transfer ownership (I can sell my pencil, gift it to someone etc.), and to exclude others from using it (e.g., to prevent you from using my pencil—unless you explicitly ask me for permission) (Snare 1972). Ownership is thus a social institution that imbues owners with different rights (and duties) that they would not possess otherwise (Kalish and Anderson 2011).

Ownership is not limited to tangible objects such as toys, cars, clothes, land, but may also extend to intangible objects such as ideas. Even though in many Western countries ownership is often understood as private ownership, our definition of ownership applies to other types of ownership such as collective or group ownership, too. But note, that most of the developmental research we discuss in this section focuses on personal or individual ownership.

Ownership is a complex social institution; yet it has been suggested that it is one of the first social institutions that children begin to grasp (Kalish and Anderson 2011). In fact, possession and ownership of objects play an important role early on in life: In Western culture most of young children's conflicts with peers occur over the possession of toys or other objects (Hay and Ross 1982; Shantz 1987; Dunn and Munn 1987; Ross 1996; Hay et al. 2011). In order for young children to develop an understanding of ownership, they need to develop the ability to recognize property relations (e.g. to distinguish their own things from others and to know who owns what) and to acquire the different social norms and rights regulating ownership relations in their socio-cultural group (e.g., the types of property different people are allowed to own, what one is allowed to do with one's property, etc.). We will now look at the development of young children's understanding of ownership, beginning with their ability to relate owners to their possessions and focusing in the main part of this section on their understanding of property rights and norms.

#### ***4.1 Identifying and Inferring Ownership***

Before 1 year of age, and thus before they are able to speak, infants probably associate persons and objects on a visual basis. For instance, by seeing someone repeatedly with an object they may form expectations about how this person relates to the object in her possession (Blake and Harris 2011). When infants learn to speak

during the second year of life, “mine” is often among the first and most frequent words infants utter—at least in Western cultures (Tomasello 1998; Hay 2006). Towards the end of their second year of life, infants are able to identify objects of owners that they are familiar with: for example, when being asked to get their mother’s shoes or their own toothbrush they will usually return with the correct object (Fasig 2000; Rodgon and Rashman 1976). By two and a half years of age, children are also able to learn ownership relations between objects and unfamiliar people or people they have never met: for instance, when they are shown a photograph of John and told that a toy belongs to John, they will later fetch or point to the correct object when asked to find John’s toy (Blake and Harris 2011; Gelman et al. 2012).

Yet, young children are not always directly told about ownership or know about ownership from repeated experiences with an object (e.g., their own objects or objects belonging to their family members). Often children have very little or only ambiguous information about ownership available to them. For instance, when children see someone playing with a toy, that toy could either belong to the child currently playing with it or to a friend, a sibling, the kindergarten and so forth. Children (and for that matter, adults, too) often have to make an informed guess about who owns an object. Studies with 3- and 4-year-olds (in some cases also 2-year-olds) in North America, the UK, China and Japan have found that children infer that the person who held a toy at the beginning of an interaction (e.g. in a story, cartoon or short video-clip) owns the toy; that is, they will infer ownership based on first possession (Friedman and Neary 2008; Kanngiesser et al. 2015a). From 6 years of age children will also apply this principle to ideas (Shaw et al. 2012). Moreover, young children seem to pay special attention to cues relating to an object’s history such as who could have feasibly had an object first or acquired it first (Gelman et al. 2012; Friedman et al. 2013; Nancekivell and Friedman 2014). They also prioritize verbal information (e.g., being told that this is John’s car) over visual information (e.g., seeing Peter with a car) (Blake et al. 2012).

Based on the evidence to date, it has been claimed that the first possession principle is one of the earliest (possibly even innate) principles that children use to make inferences about ownership (Friedman 2008; Friedman and Neary 2008). However, in a recent study, 5- to 10-year-old children from a non-industrialized small-scale agricultural group, the Kikuyu (Kenya), watched videotaped interactions of two women playing with an object. Kikuyu children did not apply the first possession principle until 9 to 10 years of age, suggesting that children’s socio-cultural environments play an important role in shaping children’s use of this principle (Kanngiesser et al. 2015b).

In summary, children as young as 2 years of age already have the ability to relate owners and their property and to make (basic) inferences about who owns what. But does this also mean that young children have an understanding of ownership rights and entitlements? We will turn to this question in the next section.

## 4.2 *Ownership Norms and Rights*

Observational studies of ownership conflicts in young Western children have found that parents are often inconsistent in enforcing ownership rights (Ross 1996; Ross et al. 1996, 1990): Parents support the owner of an object equally or even less often than the non-owner. They also frequently stress sharing rather than to support the owner in her right to decide what to do with her object. Since parental interventions influence the outcome of these disputes (e.g., Ross 2013), young children receive conflicting messages about what kind of rights they have over things they own.

Early interview studies seemed to support the idea that an understanding of ownership rights develops late. Hook (1993) asked children between 4 and 15 years of age to judge the badness of a character who does not want to return an object to the first owner after having “stolen”, “borrowed”, or “found” it or “received it as a gift”. While younger children judged all scenarios as equally bad, from 8 years of age children distinguished between stealing and receiving a toy as a gift in their ratings.

However, recent empirical evidence shows that even young children understand something about ownership rights. Rossano and colleagues studied 2- and 3-year-olds' reactions to violations of ownership rights (Rossano et al. 2011). Specifically, they studied if children would intervene if a puppet violated the rights of the child and of a third-party by stealing and throwing away their personal property (e.g. a hat or a scarf). They found that two- and 3-year-olds protested when their own belongings were at stake, while only 3-year-olds sanctioned the puppet for violating the third-party's property rights. Using a similar procedure, a recent study found that 2- and 3-year-old children also protested and made spontaneous reference to ownership for objects that the children had created on the spot (i.e., pictures or play-dough shapes; Kanngiesser and Hood 2014). Young children thus already possess an understanding of ownership rights for their own objects (e.g. intervene when non-owners try to take or throw away their belongings) and generalize these rights to third parties by 3 years of age. This normative understanding of property rights emerges at an age where children begin to develop a general sense of the normative nature of social rules (see Sect. 3).

Young children do not only actively enforce ownership rights, they also apply them when presented with stories about ownership conflicts. For example, a recent study found that from 3 years of age children give priority to owners rather than current users in conflicts about who should get to use an object (Neary and Friedman 2014). In addition, 4- to 8-year-old children believe that borrowers and finders do not acquire the rights to use the property against the wishes of the original owners (Kim and Kalish 2009).

While the previous studies investigated owners' rights, researchers have also studied whether young children understand that ownership rights can be transferred from one person to another. Blake and Harris (2009) presented 2- to 5-year-old children with stories about a child giving away a gift at a birthday party or about a child stealing a toy in the park. From 2 years of age children correctly assumed that

stealing does not transfer ownership. In contrast, only 4- to 5-year-olds replied that gift giving transfers ownership to the recipient. Similarly, Kim and Kalish (2009) found that 4-year-olds believed that ownership rights transferred via gift giving; yet, they did not fully understand that ownership rights could be also transferred by selling an object.

Besides these very salient and highly ritualized ways of transferring ownership, Kanngiesser and colleagues investigated in a series of experiments with 3- and 4-year-olds from the UK and from Japan whether they would transfer ownership on the basis that someone had invested labour into creating a new object (Kanngiesser et al. 2010, 2014). British and Japanese children rarely transferred ownership after they (or the experimenter) had only played with the other person's play-dough, that is, they thought that the owner of the materials retained ownership. However, many children transferred ownership to creators that had invested effort into creating something new. Young children thus do not only understand ownership transfers that occur in ritualized ways like gift giving or selling. They also believe that ownership can be transferred after someone has invested labour into creating something new.

Finally, owners do not only have the right to exclude others from using their property or to transfer ownership rights to others, they may also relinquish or give up their ownership rights. Rossano and Tomasello (2014) asked whether children would accept that ownership of an object could actually be given up. 3- and 5-year-old children generally resisted "finders-keepers" claims (i.e., someone claiming ownership of an abandon object) and believed that the original owner retained ownership of an object. However, they could be convinced that someone relinquished ownership of an object when she publicly declared her intention to do so and deposited it in a culturally marked location for this purpose: a trashcan. This is in line with above-mentioned findings that young children uphold ownership of the original owners and resist assigning ownership to finders, unless very explicit communication has occurred.

Taken together, research on young children's understanding of different ownership rights has revealed that young children already grasp some ownership rights and distinguish between ownership transfers that are temporary (e.g., borrowing, playing with some- one's objects) and transfers that are permanent (e.g., gift giving, creating something new). Of course what counts as ownership rights and transfers, who may be entitled to ownership (individuals, groups, etc.), and what entities can and cannot be owned may vary between socio-cultural groups. But as we have argued in the previous section (Sect. 3) children come prepared with the ability to acquire the specific ownership norms (just as all other norms) of their group.

## 5 Conclusion

We have presented evidence that children from a young age have the capacity to learn, apply and even create their own social norms. The ease with which we navigate our social worlds as adults is thus rooted in our early childhood experiences. As adults we may often be unaware of the norms that shape our own behaviour and influence how we expect others to behave—unless we are confronted with violations of these norms. We usually note when people do not know the rules of how “we” behave. Similarly, young children will already take note and actively correct others if they fail to comply with norms (e.g., play a game the wrong way or take things from other people).

As a species we are predisposed to create normative worlds and socialize children into them. However, children's socialization does not just occur in their family's home. Indeed, it has been found that young children will receive conflicting information about social norms (e.g., parents may tell their child to share and not enforce their child's ownership rights, see Sect. 4.2). As soon as children are exposed to a wider world of other people and particularly to their peers (e.g., when entering kindergarten or preschool), their normative horizon will broaden. Jean Piaget has proposed that interactions with peers are important for developing a fully autonomous understanding of morality and moral behaviour that goes beyond mere obedience to adult authority (Piaget 1932). We suggest that this may apply to most of children's normative understanding and behaviour. In fact, we have presented evidence indicating that young children already create their own norms with peers (see Sect. 3) and that frequent ownership conflicts with siblings and peers may be important for developing a sense of ownership (see Sect. 4.2).

The research reported in this chapter shows that already between 2 and 3 years of age children show an understanding of social norms and ownership rights. This is of particular importance because it suggests that at that young age children are aware (and potentially retain memories) of events that led to violations of their own property rights, of the rights of their family and friends and of the norms that they have learned to adhere to.

To conclude, as every child learns to speak, every child learns the rules of her socio-cultural group. This is not to say that normative behaviour is set in stone and immune to change (in fact, following some norms may turn out to do more damage than good). And certainly as adults there are mechanisms available to us that allow us to attempt to change and challenge the norms of our environment and to set new normative standards for following generations.

### Five Questions

1. How do children learn social norms (and which ones) if normative standards (e.g., everyone should wait at a red traffic light) and people's actual behaviour (e.g., people rarely wait at red traffic lights) do not line up?
2. How do children deal with conflicting information about social norms (e.g., Mum says one should wear sandals to school but the head-teacher says it is not allowed)?

3. How easily do young children overwrite social norms they have already learnt and adopt new norms (e.g., the colour of their school uniform has changed and it is no longer correct to wear a red sweater to school)?
4. Why do children sometimes fail to respect others' rights and entitlements (e.g., respect other's ownership rights)?
5. Are there differences across socio-cultural groups in how willing children are to actively sanction violations of social norms (or how they sanction norm violations)?

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