

## Children's Sympathy and Sensitivity to Excluding Economically Disadvantaged Peers

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### Abstract

Economically disadvantaged children often lack the resources to purchase popular goods and participate in their preferred social groups' activities, creating difficulty with fitting in.

Meanwhile, children from middle socioeconomic status (SES) families may have additional influence over whether low SES children are included in such groups. We examined how a middle SES sample of 333 4- and 8-year-olds felt and reasoned about excluding a child who was economically disadvantaged (i.e., a needy child) versus a child who attends another school (i.e., a less needy child). We also examined whether children's dispositional sympathy was associated with their negatively valenced moral emotions (NVMEs) after hypothetically excluding. Older children reported feeling more NVMEs for both targets of exclusion. Furthermore, unlike 4-year-olds, 8-year-olds differentiated between the targets of exclusion by reporting more NVMEs after excluding a child who was economically disadvantaged. Lastly, children's sympathy was positively associated with their NVMEs after excluding a child who was economically disadvantaged, but not a child who attended another school. We conclude that with increasing sympathy and age, children likely become more sensitive to the needs of their disadvantaged peers—an effect with meaningful implications for improving peer relationships across socioeconomic spheres.

*Keywords:* peer exclusion; economic disadvantage; moral emotions; sympathy; development

### Children's Sympathy and Sensitivity to Excluding Economically Disadvantaged Peers

Poverty and related economic disadvantages affect children's lives in many ways, including their peer relationships and psychological well-being (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Ridge, 2011; Walker, Crawford, & Taylor, 2008). Because they lack resources, such as money and transportation, economically disadvantaged children are often unable to purchase popular goods and partake in activities central to their preferred social groups, leading to increased anxiety, fear, and frustration over fitting in with peers (Camfield, 2010; Hjalmarsson & Mood, 2015; Ridge, 2002). These children are also often stereotyped by their peers as being low in competence and status, making them targets for social exclusion and bullying (Elliot & Leonard, 2004; Hjalmarsson, 2018; Shutts, Brey, Dornbusch, Slywotzky, & Olson, 2016). As they develop, economically disadvantaged children also experience a narrowing of social and economic opportunities, such as involvement in organized clubs and employment prospects. Unfortunately, befriending other economically disadvantaged peers does little to mitigate these negative effects because they also lack access to resources (Attree, 2004, 2006).

Consequently, there has been an increased interest in understanding the feelings that promote children's social bonding across socioeconomic spheres (see Malti et al., 2017; Malti & Dys, 2017). At the same time, very little is known about how children from middle and upper-middle socioeconomic status (SES) families feel and reason about excluding economically disadvantaged children. This is important because middle SES children form the ingroup of many social groups from which low SES children are excluded. Compared to low SES children, middle SES children also typically face less prejudice and stereotyping, and hold higher status among their peers. As such, middle SES children likely have additional influence over whether low SES children are included in desired peer groups (Ridge, 2002). Probing the feelings of

middle SES children can reveal when in development they become sensitive to issues of economic disadvantage and apply such concerns to their social experiences involving economically disadvantaged peers. Therefore, we examined how children from middle SES families felt and reasoned in response to hypothetically excluding an economically disadvantaged peer compared to excluding a peer from another school.

### **The Development of Children's Emotions After Excluding Others**

Developmental research has investigated how children evaluate and feel about excluding peers based on several interindividual and intergroup characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, nationality, shyness, aggression, and disability (Gasser, Malti, & Buholzer, 2014; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Malti, Killen, & Gasser, 2012; Mulvey & Killen, 2015; Peplak, Song, Colasante, & Malti, 2017). This research has highlighted how social exclusion tends to be multifaceted and involves considering moral principles (such as fairness), social-conventions (such as group functioning), and personal concerns (Killen & Malti, 2015; Killen & Rutland, 2011). Although children typically judge straightforward exclusion as wrong, sometimes their judgments change with age as personal characteristics and social expectations shift in importance or salience (Killen & Stangor, 2001; Malti et al., 2012; Nguyen & Malti, 2014). For example, compared to 4-year-olds, 8-year-olds feel worse for excluding an outgroup peer, such as a child of the opposite gender (Peplak et al., 2017).

Most research has focused on examining the cognitive factors that may motivate children's exclusion decisions, such as their judgments and reasoning about exclusion (for a review, see Killen & Malti, 2015). These factors alone, however, do not fully explain why children exclude. Emotions also provide a window into understanding why children exclude because they motivate children to adhere to or disregard social and moral norms (Malti & Noam,

2016). For instance, children's self-conscious and other-oriented moral emotions (e.g., guilt, sympathy)—collectively referred to as negatively valenced moral emotions (NVMEs)—after excluding can motivate reparative actions, like comforting, and may later prompt children to include in similar situations (Malti & Dys, 2017; Tangney, Stuveig, & Mashek, 2007). From early childhood, children can experience NVMEs in response to excluding others—feelings which develop as children grow older and improve their social-cognitive skills (Chilver-Stainer, Gasser, & Perrig-Chiello, 2014; Gasser, Malti, & Buholzer, 2014).

To date, little is known about how children feel about excluding economically disadvantaged peers, how they reason about it, and whether these feelings and reasons change between early and middle childhood. This is an important period to study for multiple reasons. First, children's peer relationships and group memberships become increasingly important, while their intergroup attitudes take shape (Hay, Caplan, & Nash, 2009; Rubin et al., 2015; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Second, children increasingly understand economic inequalities: by age 3, they can distinguish poverty from affluence; by age 6, they can identify impoverished people by features such as clothing, housing, and possessions, and provide early causal explanations for why individuals are poor (Camfield, 2010; Leahy, 1981). Finally, children substantially develop their social-cognitive skills, such as theory of mind and self-conscious emotions during this period (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Malti, Gummerum, Keller, & Buchmann, 2009).

### **Sympathy and Feelings After Excluding Others**

It is likely that children's dispositional sympathy—the tendency to feel concern for others (Eisenberg, 2000)—is associated with how they feel about excluding peers. Specifically, dispositional sympathy is thought to promote children's self-conscious emotions, like guilt and

shame, or situational feelings of sympathetic concern by highlighting others' needs (Hoffman, 2000). Some empirical studies have supported the link between dispositional sympathy and NVMEs, albeit weakly (e.g., Daniel, Dys, Buchmann, & Malti, 2014); however, these studies only examined straightforward moral transgressions, such as property theft. The link between dispositional sympathy and NVMEs may be stronger in situations where a person's well-being is at greater risk. For instance, sympathy may play a greater role in response to excluding an economically disadvantaged child—as they are often in greater need of social inclusion—compared to excluding a child from another school—who is in less apparent need of social inclusion.

### **The Present Study**

This study had three aims: First, to investigate how 4- and 8-year-olds of middle to upper-middle SES feel and reason about excluding an economically disadvantaged peer. Second, to test whether children, with age, feel more NVMEs after excluding an economically disadvantaged child (i.e., a needy child) compared to a child from another school (i.e., a less needy child). Third, to examine whether dispositional sympathy is related to children's NVMEs in response to these situations and whether this relation is stronger for excluding an economically disadvantaged child compared to excluding a child from another school. Regarding our first aim, we expected most children—especially 8-year-olds—to report feeling NVMEs in response to excluding a disadvantaged child. For our second aim, we predicted that 8-year-olds would feel more NVMEs for excluding a child who is economically disadvantaged compared to a child who is from another school, whereas 4-year-olds would not. For our third aim, we expected children's sympathy to be related to their NVMEs in both stories, but more strongly to excluding an economically disadvantaged peer compared to a peer from a different school.

## Method

### Participants

We collected a sample of 177 4-year-olds ( $M_{age} = 4.58$  years,  $SD = 0.31$ ; 51% girls) and 156 8-year-olds ( $M_{age} = 8.53$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ ; 53% girls) from a major Canadian city ( $N = 333$ ). Our sample was ethnically diverse, with primary caregivers reporting backgrounds from the Middle East (31%), Asia (29%), Europe (15%), Central or South America (7%), or other (13%; 5% did not report). Most parents had earned a Bachelor's degree (43%), followed by a Master's degree (22%), college diploma (18%), high school diploma (6%), trades diploma or none (4%), or doctoral degree (3%; 4% did not report). Lastly, according to census data, the prevalence rates of low income in our city ranged from 8–16% across our 11 wards (Statistics Canada, 2013), suggesting that participants' contact with low SES peers was likely common and relatively homogenous, regardless of their home's location.

### Measures

**Negatively Valenced Moral Emotions.** We assessed children's NVMEs in response to two hypothetical vignettes about excluding a peer, which were adapted from measures which have repeatedly shown validity (Malti et al., 2009). Each child was presented both vignettes (a within-subjects design) in a randomized order. In the vignettes, children could include two peers in an activity, but decide to exclude one. In one story, they exclude an economically disadvantaged peer and in the other, they exclude a child from a different school. We presented each vignette with two images, in which we matched the gender and skin tone of the characters to those of the participating child.

Our economic-based exclusion story went as follows: "Imagine that you're on the school bus on your way to school. Two children want to sit beside you on the bus. One child, in the

orange shirt, lives in a fancy house, while the other child, in the green shirt, lives in a rundown house. You're allowed to have three people in one seat, but it would be really uncomfortable. Both children get onto the bus. You choose to only let the child from the fancy house sit beside you." Our school membership exclusion story read: "Imagine that school is over and you're painting for fun. A child from your school, in the blue shirt, and a child from another school, in the green shirt, both want to paint with you. You have two extra paint brushes, but it's a small painting and you choose to only let the child from your school paint with you."

In line with previous studies, we then asked children how they would feel if they had done this and why (Malti et al., 2009). Whenever children answered, "I don't know," their responses were probed by the interviewer. We also asked children how strongly they would feel their reported emotion using an age-appropriate visual 3-point scale (1 = *not strong*, 3 = *very strong*). Although we recorded up to two emotions, we only coded children's first reported emotions because they seldom reported multiple emotions (15%)—when they did, these emotions often fell under the same category (e.g., sad and bad).

**Coding.** Children's responses were coded using a system that has repeatedly shown validity (Malti et al., 2009). We coded children's emotion-related responses as either *negative* or *positive/neutral* in valence. We collapsed within valence because a variety of negative moral emotions are believed to promote moral behaviors, such as including disadvantaged others (Hoffman, 2000; Malti et al., 2018; Tangney et al., 2007). We coded children's reasons for their reported emotions as *universal ethical principles* (i.e., reference to: 1) violating principles of fairness, justice, or harm, 2) another person's welfare, or 3) counterfactual moral behavior—how the child could have behaved in a morally constructive way; e.g., "It's not fair", "He'll be sad", "I could have let them both sit with me"), *nonethical* (e.g., "I get to sit with the girl from the

fancy house”, “I’ll get in trouble by the teacher”), or *other/undifferentiated* (e.g., “I would never do that”, “Because”).

Only responses with negatively valenced emotions and justifications referring to universal ethical principles (i.e., fairness, welfare, or counterfactual moral reasons) were considered NVMEs. In line with related research, responses with positive or neutral emotions, or nonethical reasons were scored as 0, while responses with other reasons or no reasons at all, regardless of emotion, were omitted from analyses (see Malti et al., 2009). To add further gradation, we factored in how strongly children reported feeling NVMEs, generating a 4-point scale (0 = positive emotions, non-moral reasons, or both; 1 = *not strong NVME*; 2 = *somewhat strong NVME*; 3 = *very strong NVME*). To ensure reliability of our categories, two raters independently coded a random subsample (15%) of the data. The coders were highly reliable with Cohen’s  $\kappa$ s of 1.00 and .97 for emotions and reasons, respectively. All discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached, after which the rest of the data were coded.

**Sympathy.** We assessed children’s dispositional sympathy using five items from a sympathy scale that has been repeatedly shown validity (Eisenberg et al., 1996). Children reported whether each statement was like them. If it was *not like them*, it was scored as 0; if it was like them, children were asked if it was *sort of like them*, which was scored as 1, or *really like them*, which was scored as 2. A sample item was: “When I see another child who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them.” The scale was internally reliable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ ).

## **Procedure**

We combined data obtained from two projects for which we received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board (titled “Children’s Attentional Control and Emotions”, approval #30633, and “Longitudinal Study of Emotions, Aggression, and

Physiology”, approval #28256). Children and their caregivers visited the research laboratory where caregivers provided written informed consent for their child’s participation in the study, while children provided verbal assent. Children were read the vignettes and interviewed about them. At the end of the study, children were debriefed and received an age-appropriate book and certificate of participation. All testers were undergraduate psychology students who had been trained in developmental interview techniques.

### Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for our study and demographic variables are reported in Table 1. Across stories, for children reporting NVMEs, the distribution of discrete negative emotions was: 51% bad, 39% sad, 4% angry, and 6% other (e.g., sorry, guilty, embarrassed). The distribution for children’s reasons was: 41% universal ethical principles, 26% nonethical, 26% other or unelaborated, and 7% provided no reason. This rate of other or unelaborated reasoning is comparable to previous findings using similar age groups (e.g., 27% in Malti, Gasser, & Buchmann, 2009). Across stories, 67% of responses (emotion and reason pairs) were codable, while 55% of children provided codable responses to both stories. Among children who provided codable responses, 64% and 52% reported NVMEs in response to excluding a disadvantaged peer and excluding a child from another school, respectively.

### Age-Related Differences

First, we tested how children’s NVMEs (in response to our exclusion stories) and dispositional sympathy varied by age group, using independent samples t-tests. Consistent with our predictions, we found that 8-year-olds scored higher in NVMEs to economic and school membership exclusion, *Welch’s t*(174.62) = -13.03,  $p < .001$  (4-year-olds:  $M = 0.39$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ; 8-year-olds:  $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) and *Welch’s t*(223.21) = -8.90,  $p < .001$  (4-year-olds:  $M =$

0.48,  $SD = 0.97$ ; 8-year-olds:  $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), respectively, and sympathy, *Welch's*  $t(317.15) = -13.94$ ,  $p < .001$  (4-year-olds:  $M = 0.70$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ; 8-year-olds:  $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ).

### **Exclusion Target and Age-Related Differences**

Second, we tested how children's NVMEs varied by age group and exclusion target while controlling for gender and parental education using a mixed analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). As expected, 8-year-olds reported more NVMEs overall,  $F(1, 175) = 94.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, the predicted interaction effect between age group and exclusion target was significant,  $F(1, 175) = 11.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . As illustrated in Figure 1, 4-year-olds did not differ in their NVMEs across targets of exclusion,  $p = .15$ , while 8-year-olds reported more NVMEs for excluding based on economic factors (versus excluding based on school membership),  $p < .001$ .

### **Links with Sympathy by Exclusion Target**

Third, we tested whether children's sympathy (independent variable) was related to their NVMEs (dependent variable; for both vignettes), while controlling for age, gender, and parental education, using hierarchical linear regression analyses. For our economic disadvantage vignette, our control variables were significantly related to NVMEs,  $R^2 = .43$ ,  $F(3, 201) = 50.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . As expected, sympathy was also associated with NVMEs,  $\Delta R^2 = .05$ ,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.14, .40]. Higher-order interaction terms were not significant. For our school membership vignette, our control variables were significantly related to NVMEs,  $R^2 = .19$ ,  $F(3, 226) = 33.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . Contrary to expectations, sympathy was not associated with NVMEs,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $p = .09$ , 95% CI [-.02, .28]. Higher-order interaction terms were not significant.

Finally, we examined whether sympathy was more strongly associated with NVMEs for our vignette on economic disadvantage versus school membership by testing the equality of

regression coefficients. To do this, we tested whether the standardized difference between the slopes of sympathy for each vignette was different from 0. Confirming our hypothesis, sympathy predicted NVMEs more robustly in the economic disadvantage vignette than the school membership vignette,  $p = .03$ , 95% CI [.02, .34].

### **Discussion**

Economically disadvantaged children face many challenges in forming and maintaining positive peer relationships (Hjalmarsson & Mood, 2015; Ridge, 2011). Because they are often ingroup members, middle SES children may have influence over whether low SES children are included in their desired peer groups. For these reasons, we examined how middle SES 4- and 8-year-old children felt and reasoned about hypothetically excluding an economically disadvantaged child and whether their dispositional sympathy was related to their anticipated emotions and justifications. We examined children's NVMEs because they motivate children's decisions to include and reflect their sensitivity toward the excluded child. We focused on 4- and 8-year-olds as this range encompasses a key period for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Killen & Malti, 2015).

Most children expressed NVMEs in response to hypothetically excluding an economically disadvantaged child, while some did not. The latter children's positive feelings may reflect their orientation toward the included, economically advantaged child—whom children likely preferred due to his or her material possessions. Consequently, focusing on the included child may draw children's attention away from the excluded, economically disadvantaged child (Horwitz, Shutts, & Olson, 2014; Malti & Dys, 2017). With age, however, children better coordinate their understanding of norms with their emotional responses, leading

older children to report fewer positive and more negative feelings after excluding (Malti et al., 2009).

Interestingly, 8-year-olds expressed more NVMEs in response to excluding a child who is economically disadvantaged as compared to a child from another school, whereas 4-year-olds did not show differences in NVMEs across exclusion targets. Younger children may lack the social-cognitive skills and understanding of poverty to realize that the economically disadvantaged child may be socially excluded more often, and thus lack sensitivity to excluding disadvantaged children. By contrast, 8-year-olds better understand the causes and consequences of being economically disadvantaged (Mistry et al., 2016; Sigelman, 2012). In addition, by middle childhood, children's emotional reactions are more influenced by others' needs and well-being (Hoffman, 2000). Compared to younger children, 8-year-olds more frequently consider the needs of the recipient when allocating resources (Malti et al., 2016). For these reasons, older children are more aware of and likely to rectify resource inequalities between disadvantaged individuals and groups, and their advantaged counterparts (Elenbaas & Killen, 2016; Shaw, Choshen-Hillel, & Caruso, 2016).

Consistent with this idea, we also found that children's dispositional sympathy was related to their NVMEs after excluding an economically disadvantaged child, but not after excluding a child from another school. Compared to the self-conscious emotion of guilt, the other-oriented emotion of sympathy may not arise as frequently in response to committing transgressions as it does not involve a sense of ownership over the act; still, it may promote such emotions by highlighting the adverse outcomes experienced by the excluded child. Specifically, sympathy may promote an understanding of the consequences of economic disadvantage as well as the needs of children from these backgrounds. Indeed, children's sympathy has been

positively linked to social justice values in late childhood, suggesting that other-oriented concern sparks their broader concerns for socially unjust treatment (Daniel et al., 2014). Relatedly, sympathy also plays an important role in reducing stereotypes about economically disadvantaged children (Mistry, Brown, Chow, & Collins, 2012).

As with all studies, this one comes with its limitations. First, we assessed children's NVMEs in response to hypothetical vignettes, so it is possible that their real-life emotions may differ from what they reported. Still, this approach to understanding children's social and emotional development has been extensively used and has shown validity across numerous studies, proving it a useful tool for gaining insight into children's affective experiences of social dilemmas (Malti et al., 2009; Malti et al., 2012). Second, we did not experimentally separate story content (i.e., letting children sit versus paint with you) from exclusion target. While it is possible that the content of either story could have impacted our findings, we find it unlikely, in part, because children's reasons did not appear to depend on the story's situational features: for example, children who reported happiness did not justify their feelings by saying that the disadvantaged child would be worse to sit with or the child from another school would be worse at painting. Third, we did not directly assess children's understanding of economic disadvantage. There is, however, evidence that children as young as 3 understand basic differences between poor and wealthy individuals (Ramsey, 1991). Fourth, a portion of children did not provide codable reasons for their emotions, reducing our final sample, although our frequency of unelaborated reasoning is expected, especially among 4-year-olds (e.g., Malti et al., 2009). Fortunately, our original sample was quite large, so our analyses remained adequately powered. Lastly, our study was cross-sectional and correlational, which prevents us from making any causal claims.

Nonetheless, our study provides valuable insight into middle to upper-middle SES children's feelings in response to excluding an economically disadvantaged peer and adds to a growing body of research examining how children think and feel about excluding peers based on other categories (e.g., race, gender; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Møller, & Tenenbaum, 2011). Our findings suggest that with increasing age and sympathy, children become more sensitive to the consequences of excluding low SES children, leading them to experience NVMEs. Stimulating middle and upper-middle SES children's NVMEs via their sympathetic concern may motivate them to increasingly include low SES children—an approach that may be a valuable first step in rectifying some of the negative consequences experienced by children living in economic disadvantage.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations Among Study and Demographic Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	NVME EC	NVME SM	Symp	Age	Gender	Edu
NVME EC	1.54	1.30	—					
NVME SM	1.26	1.31	.61***	—				
Symp	1.09	0.66	.53***	.40***	—			
Age	6.43	2.00	.66***	.53***	.62***	—		
Gender	1.48	0.50	-.03	-.07	-.01	-.01	—	
Edu	4.79	1.04	-.01	.02	-.06	-.04	.09	—

*Note.* NVME EC = negatively valenced moral emotions for economic-based exclusion. NVME SM = negatively valenced moral emotions for school-based exclusion; Symp = Sympathy; Edu = parental education. Gender: girls = 1, boys = 2. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

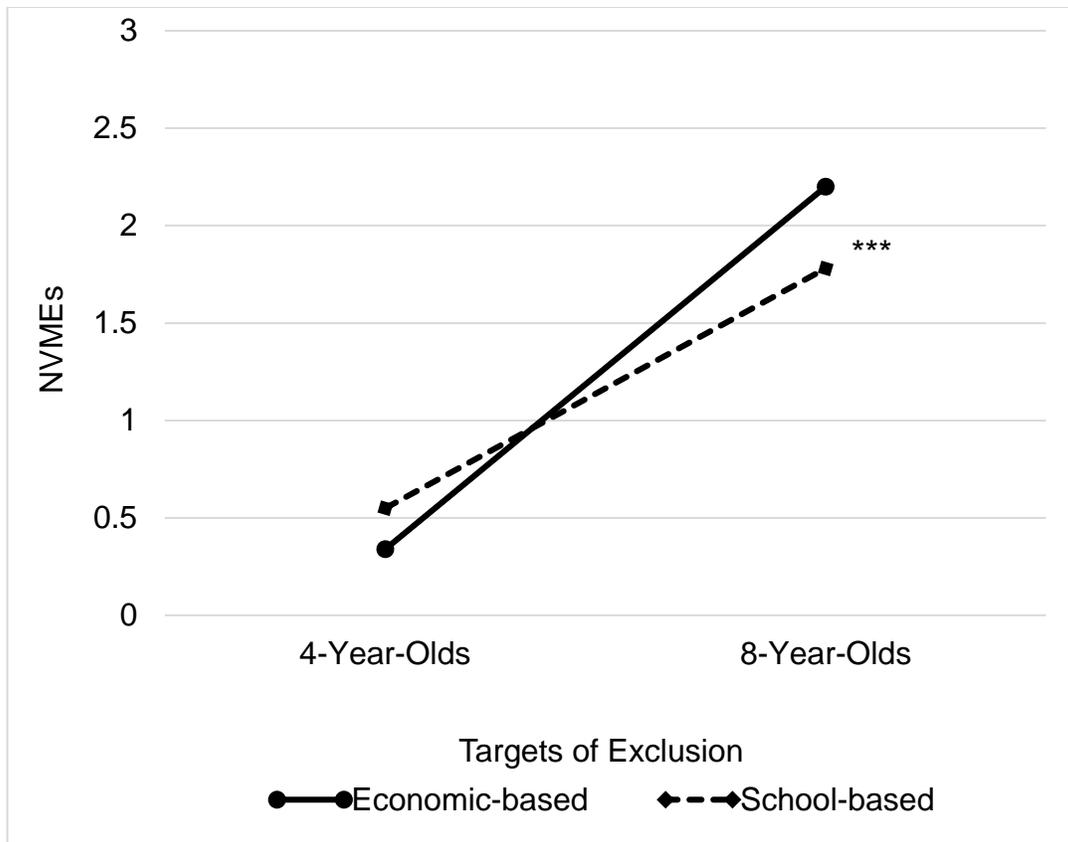


Figure 1. Differences in children's negatively valenced moral emotions (NVMEs) between targets of exclusion by age group controlling for gender and parental education. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .