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Like me, or else: Nature, nurture and neural mechanisms of social emotion regulation in childhood

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Michelle Achterberg is a developmental neuroscientist with an interest in social emotional development. In her thesis, Michelle provides a comprehensive overview of the underlying mechanisms of social emotion regulation in childhood. Her studies show that the brain is prone to signal for socially relevant information. She revealed that the network of social saliency is already present in childhood, indicating that this might be a core social mechanism.

The thesis additionally shows that social rejection is often followed by behavioral aggression, and regulation of these retaliation emotions is related to control mechanisms of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Moreover, the results show that the vast architecture of functional subcortical-prefrontal brain connectivity is already in place in middle childhood and suggest fine tuning of (social evaluation) brain networks across childhood. These findings highlighting the need to incorporate childhood into developmental models of social emotion regulation.

Neuroimaging research, specifically neuroimaging in children, is prone to challenges and several methodological considerations need to be taken into account when studying the childhood brain. In spite of these difficulties, studying childhood brain development has the potential to provide important insights into a unique developmental window of opportunity.

