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# Lessons Learned: Young Children's Use of Generic-You to Make Meaning From Negative Experiences

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Learning from negative experiences is an essential challenge of childhood. How do children derive meaning from such events? For adults, one way is to move beyond the specifics of a situation by framing it as exemplifying a more general phenomenon. Here we examine whether children are able to make meaning in this way through their use of generic-you, a linguistic device in which people shift from the here and now to refer to people in general. Participants ( $N = 89$ , aged 4–10 years) listened to 2 stories depicting common conflicts and were asked to discuss what lessons the character could learn (Lessons Learned condition) and how the character felt (Relive condition). In the Lessons Learned condition, children were more likely to produce generic-you than in the Relive condition. These findings suggest that young children can make meaning from negative experiences by transcending the immediate context of an event to cast it as normative and general.

*Keywords:* meaning making, child development, language, emotional understanding, generics

From a young age, children must grapple with a range of negative experiences: They may fail to get what they want, endure social exclusion and conflict, witness injustices in the world around them, or suffer losses and disappointments both big and small. Learning from such events to inform future life experiences presents an essential challenge, but what psychological processes facilitate this capacity?

For adults, one route to making meaning from negative experiences involves moving beyond the concrete features of the situation to understand it within a broader, more abstract context (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Janoff-Bulman & McPherson Frantz, 1997; Orvell, Kross, & Gelman, 2017; Park, 2010; Park & Folkman, 1997). There are various ways to achieve this goal, but recent work has identified the generic usage of the

word you as a linguistic mechanism that supports this process by allowing people to reconstrue an experience as part of a broader, more normative phenomenon (Orvell et al., 2017).

Do children similarly draw on generic-you to help them move beyond the here and now to express generalizable life lessons? We address this question in the current research by asking whether children use generic-you as they attempt to make meaning from negative events.

## How “You” Makes Meaning

The word “you” is typically thought of as a second-person pronoun that is used to refer to an individual or set of individuals (e.g., “That turkey you made was delicious”). However, the word you can also be used to refer to people in general (e.g., “On Thanksgiving Day, you eat turkey”). This usage, known as generic-you, expresses generalizations that extend beyond a specific time or place (Bolinger, 1979; Kamio, 2001; Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990; Laberge & Sankoff, 1979).

Recent research with adults indicates that generic-you is used to express norms—general expectations for how things are or should be—about both emotional and nonemotional experiences (Orvell et al., 2017). For example, when asked to consider rules regarding commonplace behaviors (e.g., “What do you do on a rainy day?”), people were more likely to respond using generic-you (e.g., “You bring an umbrella”) than when they were asked to consider preferences, as indicated by responses including the word I (e.g., “I like to read on a rainy day”; Orvell et al., 2017). Adults also used generic-you to express norms when they were prompted to make sense of their negative experiences compared with when they were prompted to relive them (Orvell et al., 2017). For example, a person attempting to learn from a recent break-up concluded, “You have to accept that you cannot change people.” Using generic-you in this way allows the individual to construct a generalizable lesson surrounding their experience that extends beyond the self, thus enhancing psychological distance and promoting meaning making (Orvell et al., 2017).

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Children as young as 2 years old are also sensitive to nonemotional contexts in which generic-you is appropriate (Orvell, Kross, & Gelman, 2018). Similar to adults, when asked about norms for behavior (e.g., “What *should* you do with crayons?”; italics added for emphasis) versus preferences (e.g., “What do you *like* to do with crayons?”; italics added for emphasis), children between the ages of 2 and 10 years were more likely to interpret normative questions as general by answering using you (e.g., “You color with crayons”). In contrast, when asked about preferences, children were more likely to interpret the question as specific by answering using I (e.g., “I like to color in my coloring book”). However, whether children also draw on generic-you in the context of negative events to express norms and make meaning is unknown.

Prior research provides mixed clues as to when in development we may expect children to recruit generic-you to make meaning from negative events. On the one hand, research suggests that executive function capabilities, which are often viewed as the building blocks of regulatory capacities, are still developing between the ages of 6 and 12 years (Anderson, 2002; Hofmann, Schmeichel, & Baddeley, 2012). Relatedly, children’s theory of mind—the understanding that people experience individual beliefs, emotions, and perspectives—is also still developing during this period (see Lagattuta et al., 2015 for review). For example, in one study that tested how emotional comprehension develops by asking children about a hypothetical vignette, most children were able to infer the emotional states of the characters based on facial cues and their own knowledge of the world (e.g., falling down will make someone feel sad) by 5 years of age. However, it was not until around age 7 years that most children showed an understanding that changing one’s beliefs can change the nature of one’s emotions (Pons, Harris, & de Rosnay, 2004). To the extent that generic-you requires explicit reflective capacities supported by executive function or theory of mind, then we may not expect children younger than around 7 years of age to be able to use generic-you to make meaning from negative events.

On the other hand, some evidence suggests that children younger than 7 years do possess the ability to engage in perspective taking and generate strategies to help hypothetical characters cope with negative experiences. Davis and colleagues (Davis, Levine, Lench, & Quas, 2010) showed that when presented with familiar scenarios (e.g., not being able to go outside and play), 5- and 6-year-old children produced a variety of strategies that the character could use to make themselves feel better, including focusing on different goals or thinking about a situation differently (Davis, Levine, Lench, & Quas, 2010 for review).

To our knowledge, prior studies have not examined children’s ability to derive explicit lessons from personal or hypothetical experiences. Generic-you, by allowing a person to represent an event as an instantiation of a broader phenomenon, may provide a seamless way for children to formulate lessons. In support of this idea, literature on generic language demonstrates that young children have an early capacity to think about specific individuals as instantiating more general categories. Broadly, generics refer to categories (e.g., lions, girls, mothers) rather than individuals (e.g., Simba, that girl, my mother), and generic statements convey information about categories that is stable and broad (Gelman, Star, & Flukes, 2002; Prasada, 2000). Research finds that children produce generic statements by about 2.5 years of age (Gelman, Goetz, Sarnecka, & Flukes, 2008), and by 4 years of age, children

understand the implications of generic statements for inferences about groups (Hollander, Gelman, & Star, 2002). Furthermore, as summarized above, recent research suggests that children as young as 2 years old use generic-you (to refer to people in general) in response to questions about norms (Orvell et al., 2018).

In sum, prior research provides mixed evidence as to whether young children may be able to recruit generic-you as they attempt to make meaning from negative experiences. Given that generic-you is produced as early as 2 years of age (Orvell et al., 2018), it is unlikely to require explicit, reflective capacities; furthermore, prior research suggests that children have a grasp of generic language and the contexts in which it may be appropriate starting early in development. Given this, it is plausible that young children may use generic-you as a linguistic tool to construct generalizable lessons about negative events.

## The Present Study

In the present study, we addressed the question of whether children draw on generic-you to express norms and make meaning in the context of negative events by presenting children with two stories that depicted everyday conflicts. After each story, participants were asked one of two sets of questions: One set prompted them to reflect on what lessons the character in the story learned from the experience, and the other asked them to reflect on how the character felt during the story.

We predicted that instructing children to consider what lessons the character could learn (i.e., to make meaning from the event) would result in increased use of generic-you, indicating that children make meaning from negative events by generalizing beyond the individual experiencing the event to people in general (i.e., by treating the event as normative). Given varying perspectives from research on the development of emotional understanding, theory of mind, and children’s use of generic phrases, we recruited children across a wide age range (i.e., 4–10 years of age) in an effort to detect when this capacity arises.

## Method

### Design

We used a 2 (story)  $\times$  2 (condition), within-subjects design. All children were presented with two stories, both of which depicted everyday conflicts, and two sets of questions. One set of questions focused children on reliving how the character felt during the story (hereafter referred to as the Relive condition), whereas the other focused children on what lessons the character could learn from the experience (hereafter referred to as the Lessons Learned condition).

### Participants

Participants were 89 children (32 females) between the ages of 4.51 and 10.77 years,  $M = 7.62$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ . Data were collected in two waves (Wave 1 = 42; Wave 2 = 47). All participants were recruited from two children’s museums in a small Midwestern city. An additional three children did not complete the study, and an additional five children were excluded for failing to comprehend the stories (criteria described below).

### Materials

Each participant saw an illustrated storybook containing three short stories. The first two stories described everyday conflicts and consti-

tuted our experimental stimuli. One story depicted a child whose sandcastle was destroyed by another child on the beach; the other described a child who was excluded on the playground. Each story was two sentences in length, spread across two pages, with an illustration on each page (see Table A1–A2 for full text). Illustrations were included to enhance the ecological validity of the task and to aid in comprehension and memory (Levin & Lesgold, 1978). We counterbalanced the order of the first two stories. Condition (Relive vs. Lessons Learned) was fully crossed with story and order. The last story always described a positive experience (going to a birthday party). Its purpose was solely to end the experiment on a positive note. Children were shown storybooks with characters that were the same gender as they. A sample page is presented in Figure 1.

## Procedure

Two experimenters administered the study at tables set up in the galleries of two children's museums. When parents and children approached the table, one experimenter (Experimenter A) obtained consent and asked the parent for permission to audiorecord the session. The other experimenter (Experimenter B) spoke with the child to ensure that they felt comfortable and obtained verbal assent. During the session, Experimenter A initiated audio recording and transcribed participants' responses while Experimenter B worked directly with the child to administer the protocol. The experimenters took turns performing these roles. When one experimenter was not present, a single experimenter completed all of the above duties ( $n = 22$ ). Children were tested individually.

**Main task.** To signal that the experiment was beginning, the experimenter told the child that they would now be reading stories together. After reading the first story to the child, the experimenter assured the child that there were no right or wrong answers. They then asked the child what happened in the story to ensure that the participant understood it; if the child was unable to recount the story, the experimenter reread it to the child. After data collection was complete, one coder assessed participants' responses to this retell question. To be included in the study, participants needed to mention that the character felt negative emotions and/or the main conflict in the story; five children (two 5-year-olds, two 6-year-olds, and one 9-year-old) were excluded for not comprehending the story based on these criteria.<sup>1</sup>

**Experimental manipulation.** Based on what order the child had been randomly assigned to, the experimenter then administered either the Relive condition questions, which focused on how the character felt, or the Lessons Learned condition questions, which focused on what the character could learn from the experience. The wording of the questions administered in each condition was fixed for both stories, with the exception of contextual details that were specific to the story (e.g., the character's name, the details of the conflict). In both conditions, children were then asked several exploratory questions (see Appendix for all questions administered in the protocol). We did not observe condition differences in response to the exploratory questions (all  $ps \geq .85$ ) and they are not discussed further.

The questions were asked in the same order for every trial so that children first received the questions that focused them on the relevant condition (Lessons Learned vs. Relive) because these were directly relevant to our hypothesis. The experimenter repeated the question if the child asked for it to be repeated or if the child appeared confused. If a participant interjected during the story or ques-

tions, the experimenter acknowledged the child's comment and swiftly redirected the child's attention to the task at hand.

After completing the questions associated with the first story, the experimenter read the other story to the child and then administered the questions associated with the remaining condition.

Once the child answered both sets of questions (i.e., regarding the two stories about conflicts), the experimenter read the final story about a birthday party and asked the child about the last time they had gone to a birthday party. Finally, the child was thanked for their participation and picked out a small toy as a thank-you gift. The experimenters then provided parents with a debriefing form and thanked them for their participation.

After the first wave of data collection, we made four changes to improve the study method. First, we added a short warm-up activity that encouraged children to speak in full sentences. Second, we removed one question from the Lessons Learned block: "What could *people* learn if something like this happened to them?" (italics added for emphasis), which we deemed to be a confound. We determined that this question was confounding because it explicitly asked for a general interpretation and thus may have inflated the usage of generic-you. Responses to this question generated by participants from Wave 1 were therefore excluded from all analyses. This question was presented last within the Lessons Learned block, so it could not have influenced children's responses to the other question in this condition. In Wave 2, this question was replaced with, "What did [character name] learn from what happened?" Third, we excluded children younger than 5 years 0 months because we observed that 4-year-olds had difficulty completing the task. Finally, we added an additional exploratory question at the end of the protocol, "What do you do when people are mean?"

This research was reviewed and approved by the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board.

## Transcription and Coding

We had clear audio data that were recorded with the use of an external microphone from 67 participants; an additional 16 participants had audio recordings that were less intelligible because of the lack of a microphone. Two participants had parents who did not give audio recording permission, and there were technical problems during which the audio did not record for four participants. When two experimenters were present during testing, Experimenter A transcribed participants' responses during the experiment. When only one experimenter was present ( $n = 22$ ), the child's responses were transcribed after the session was complete. A research assistant then checked all transcriptions for accuracy for participants with audio data. Once transcriptions were complete, two independent coders who were blind to the study design and hypotheses coded children's responses for the usage of generic-you. Reliability between the coders was high,  $\alpha = .93$ ; a third coder resolved all discrepancies. Once discrepancies were resolved, two sum scores were calculated for each participant indicating the number of times the child used generic-you in the Relive ( $M = 0$ ;  $SD = 0$ ) and Lessons Learned ( $M = .38$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) conditions, respectively.

<sup>1</sup> All results reported below remained statistically significant when including children who failed the comprehension check in the analyses.



Figure 1. Example page from the “Playground” story used in the study. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

To ensure that the Relive and Lessons Learned conditions focused children on the emotions that the character felt and on drawing lessons that extended beyond the immediate context of the story, respectively, we content coded children’s responses to the questions administered in each condition based on these criteria (0 = absent, 1 = present). Coders practiced on 10% of the cases; agreement on the remaining cases was high,  $\kappa_{emotional} = .97$ ,  $\kappa_{lessons} = .71$ , and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. As expected, participants mentioned emotional states more in the Relive condition than in the Lessons Learned condition (100% vs. 17%, respectively). Analogously, participants mentioned lessons more in the Lessons Learned condition than in the Relive condition (58% vs. 0%), demonstrating that our manipulations were effective.

### Overview of Analyses

Initial inspection of the data revealed that children never used generic-you in the Relive condition. Given that the data were not normally distributed, we transformed the generic-you responses into a dichotomous variable (0 = generic-you absent; 1 = generic-you present) and then analyzed the data using McNemar’s exact binomial test for repeated measures dichotomous variables (Adedokun & Burgess, 2012; Lowry, 2001–2018; McNemar, 1947).<sup>2</sup> Because we made slight changes to the methodology implemented across study waves to strengthen the design, we first analyzed data from each sample separately for our core analyses and then collapsed across the samples.

### Main Analyses

As predicted, participants used generic-you more in the Lessons Learned condition than in the Relive condition. This pattern was descriptively present in the first wave of data collection, Wave 1: 10% of participants used generic-you in the Lessons Learned condition, compared with 0% of participants in the Relive condition, McNemar’s exact binomial test,  $p = .125$ , and significant in Wave 2 of data collection: 26% of participants used generic-you in the Lessons Learned condition, compared with 0% of participants in the Relive condition, McNemar’s exact binomial test,  $p < .001$ . Combining the data from the two waves of data collection also yielded significant results, McNemar’s exact binomial test,  $p < .001$ . Specifically, 18% of participants in the Lessons Learned condition used generic-you in their responses across both waves of data collection compared with 0% in the Relive group (see Table 1 e.g., responses). Among the subset of participants who generated lessons according to our manipulation check coding, however, rates were higher: 31% of children used generic-you in the Lessons Learned condition. The majority of participants who used generic-you did so only once (63%); the maximum number of times a participant used generic-you in their response was eight.

<sup>2</sup> Conducting the analyses using McNemar’s test with a  $\chi^2$  distribution yielded similar results. The only substantial difference was that on the  $\chi^2$  distribution, the findings for Wave 1 were statistically significant,  $p < .05$ . We report the results using the exact binomial test following recommendations for the low frequencies we observed in cells b and c of the  $2 \times 2$  contingency table.

Table 1  
*Sample Responses Including Generic-You From Children in the Lessons Learned Condition (e.g., "What Did [Character Name] Learn From What Happened?")*

That it is okay if somebody destroys **your** castle.  
 She learned how it feels to have something **you** worked really hard on wrecked and **your** feelings hurt.  
 That sometimes people won't let **you** play.  
 That **you** should be kind to one another.  
 That sometimes people will exclude **you**.  
 That **you** can't play with people all the time and **you** have to make new friends.

*Note.* Instances of generic-you appear in bold.

### Exploratory Analyses

Although our experiment was not explicitly designed to examine developmental effects associated with the production of generic-you, we explored this issue in a supplementary set of analyses. We combined the data across the two waves of data collection to enhance our power for detecting any effects associated with age. We then performed a median split on age and reran a McNemar's exact binomial test for participants below and above the median age of the sample (median = 7.59 years).<sup>3</sup> The results of this analysis indicated that both younger ( $n = 45$ ),  $p = .031$ , and older ( $n = 44$ ),  $p = .002$ , participants used generic-you significantly more in the Lessons Learned condition than in the Relive condition; specifically, 13% of younger participants and 23% of older participants in the Lessons Learned condition used generic-you, compared with 0% of participants in both age groups in the Relive condition.

### Discussion

A central premise guiding this research is that moving beyond the here and now to understand negative events within a broader context is a fundamental way that people make meaning from experience (Frankl, 1966; Janoff-Bulman & McPherson Frantz, 1997; Kross & Ayduk, 2017; Park, 2010). One powerful indicator of this is generic-you, which allows adults to understand a negative event as not just tied to the individual it involves but rather as an exemplar of a normative experience that others may similarly undergo (Orvell et al., 2017). This study tested whether children also derive meaning from negative experiences in this way. Our results indicated that they do.

It is important to point out that children could have generated many lessons concerning what the character learned without using generic-you. Indeed, the questions in the Lessons Learned condition focused specifically on the individual character himself or herself (e.g., "What did *Alex* learn when another girl told her she couldn't play?", italics added for emphasis). Thus, it would have been entirely appropriate for children to generate lessons that were focused on the specific event and character. For example, they could have surmised that the child in the story should not build sandcastles on the beach or that the child should never build a sandcastle near other people because they might break it, both of which were actual responses provided by children in our sample. Thus, it is notable that some children in the Lessons Learned condition extrapolated from this specific, hypothetical story to formulate generalized norms about what people in general—not just the character in the story—could learn from such a situation.

At the same time, an important unresolved question is how to interpret the finding that only around one fifth of children in the Lessons Learned condition used generic-you. One possibility is that use of generic-you in emotional contexts increases with development. On a conceptually related task in which adult participants were instructed to make meaning from a negative, autobiographical experience, adults produced generic-you at greater than twice the rate of children in our sample (46% vs. 18%, respectively; Orvell et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the relatively low rate for children in the present study may partly reflect that they were talking about a third-party vignette. Prior work indicates that the intensity of a negative experience is correlated with generic-you usage (Orvell et al., 2017), suggesting that this tool comes online as the need for making meaning is greater. Thus, it is possible that if children were prompted to make meaning from an autobiographical experience, rates of generic-you usage would be higher. Regardless of the reasons for the relatively low rates of usage, the present findings indicate that children, like adults, view generalizing to others as a way to draw lessons from negative events.

Moreover, this pattern of results held among both the younger and older children in our sample. As a caveat, we were underpowered to detect finer-grained developmental patterns, and only a small number of 4-year-olds were included in our sample. Still, these results suggest that starting at a young age, children are able to use language to make meaning from negative events, even as some of the cognitive processes that are thought to underlie this capacity are still developing (Anderson, 2002; Lagattuta et al., 2015). Future research should continue to explore this issue. It should also examine precisely when in development children begin to generalize from negative experiences and whether individual differences (e.g., executive function, vocabulary) covary with generic-you usage.

From an applied perspective, these findings have implications for parents and teachers. It is well established that children often struggle to move beyond the immediate situation and become overwhelmed by their emotions in challenging circumstances (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Research with children suggests that achieving psychological distance when faced with such difficult situations is one way to help children regulate their emotions more effectively (Kross, Duckworth, Ayduk, Tsukayama, & Mischel, 2011; Mischel & Rodriguez, 1993; White et al., 2017; White & Carlson, 2016). Generic-you may provide parents and teachers with a linguistic tool that they can use to help children learn lessons from their experience by encouraging them to view negative events as normative rather than tied to the specific situation. Modeling lessons in this way with generic-you may help children transcend the immediacy of a situation (i.e., achieve psychological distance) and cope more effectively. Relatedly, observing children use generic-you to talk about their own negative experiences may serve as a useful linguistic indicator that they have effectively made meaning from a negative event. In summary, generic-you may provide a relatively effortless but powerful way to promote coping and meaning making in young children.

<sup>3</sup> McNemar's test precluded us from examining the effect of age continuously. We chose to conduct a median split because we did not have a large enough sample to examine condition effects within finer-grained age groups.

As suggested above, another important question for future research concerns whether children also spontaneously use generic-you as they attempt to draw lessons from their own personal negative experiences in addition to hypothetical third-person scenarios, such as the ones used here. Crafting personal narratives, particularly those surrounding moral conflict or negative experiences, has been identified as an important process for promoting meaning making and learning among children (Baker-Ward, Eaton, & Banks, 2005; Fivush, Hazzard, McDermott Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2002; Fivush, McDermott Sales, & Bohanek, 2008; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Tappan & Brown, 1989). It is possible that guiding children to form narratives surrounding negative events may provide a way for them to more easily discover a generalizable lesson that they can draw from their experience, using generic-you.

Starting at a young age, children are confronted with negative experiences that they are driven to make sense of. This study demonstrates how language may support this meaning-making process by providing children with a tool that allows them to move beyond the here and now and derive generalizable life lessons.

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## Appendix

### Materials and Measures

Table A1  
*Questions Administered for the “Beach” Story*

“Beach” story	
<p>Story text: Sammy is at the beach and spends a long time making a big sandcastle. Just when he/she finishes, another boy/girl comes over and steps on Sammy’s sandcastle and breaks it.            Experimenter: Now it’s your turn to tell me the story. What happened to Sammy?            If child cannot retell story, reread story to child.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Relive condition</p> <p>Experimenter: How did Sammy feel in the beginning, when he/she was building the sandcastle? <i>[point to corresponding picture]</i>            Experimenter: How did Sammy feel at the end, when the boy/girl kicked over his sandcastle? <i>[point to corresponding picture]</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Lessons Learned condition</p> <p>Experimenter: What did Sammy learn when another boy/girl kicked over his/her sandcastle? <i>[point to corresponding picture]</i>            Experimenter: What did Sammy learn from what happened?*</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Exploratory questions</p> <p>Experimenter: How do you think Sammy feels now? <i>(show child 5-point scale with faces from unhappy to happy)</i>            Experimenter: What do you think Sammy will do next?            Experimenter: What do you think Sammy will do next time if this happens again?            Experimenter: What do you do when someone is mean?***</p>	

\* In Wave 1 of data collection, this question was instead: “What could people learn if something like this happened to them?” \*\* Administered only in Wave 2 of data collection.

*(Appendix continues)*

Table A2

*Questions Administered for the “Playground” Story*


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“Playground” story	
Story text: Alex is outside on the playground and sees his/her friends playing ball. He/she asks he he/she can play, too, but they say, “No, Alex, you can’t play with us. We don’t want to play with you.” Experimenter: Now it’s your turn to tell me the story. What happened to Alex? If child cannot retell story, reread story to child.	
<div style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: small;">Relive condition</div> Experimenter: How did Alex feel at the beginning, when he/she was watching the other kids play? <i>[point to corresponding picture]</i> Experimenter: How did Alex feel at the end, when the other kids said he/she couldn’t play? <i>[point to corresponding picture]</i>	<div style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: small;">Lessons Learned condition</div> Experimenter: What did Alex learn when another boy/girl told him/her he/she couldn’t play? <i>[point to corresponding picture]</i>  Experimenter: What did Alex learn from what happened?
<div style="font-weight: bold; font-size: small;">Exploratory questions</div> Experimenter: How do you think Alex feels now? <i>(show child 5-point scale with faces from unhappy to happy)</i> Experimenter: What do you think Alex will do next? Experimenter: What do you think Alex will do next time if this happens again? Experimenter: What do you do when someone is mean?	

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\* In Wave 1 of data collection, this question was instead: “What could people learn if something like this happened to them?” \*\* Administered only in Wave 2 of data collection.

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