

# Naughty or Nice:

## Does meanness or niceness distract from relevant expertise in children's trust decisions?



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### INTRODUCTION

- People rely on others' testimony to gather useful information for which they may lack direct knowledge or evidence. Recent work in psychology has demonstrated that children have a natural disposition to trust testimony (e.g., Harris, 2002)
- That said, not all informants that we encounter are equally likely to provide reliably accurate information (e.g., Perner, 1991), and sometimes their claims conflict with one another.
- As people are not always prepared with enough knowledge to evaluate conflicting claims, they may evaluate characteristics of the informants providing the claims. Recent social psychology research suggests that when people evaluate others, they focus on two dimensions of social cognition: benevolence and competence (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Mascaro & Sperber, 2009).
- When adults evaluate informants who vary on benevolence and competence, they prioritize benevolence in emotional situations and competence in non-emotional situations (e.g., White, 2005).
- The current research, then, investigates the relative importance of benevolence and competence in children's evaluation of sources providing conflicting claims. To do this, we manipulated two indicators of benevolence and competence: niceness and expertise.

### Research Question

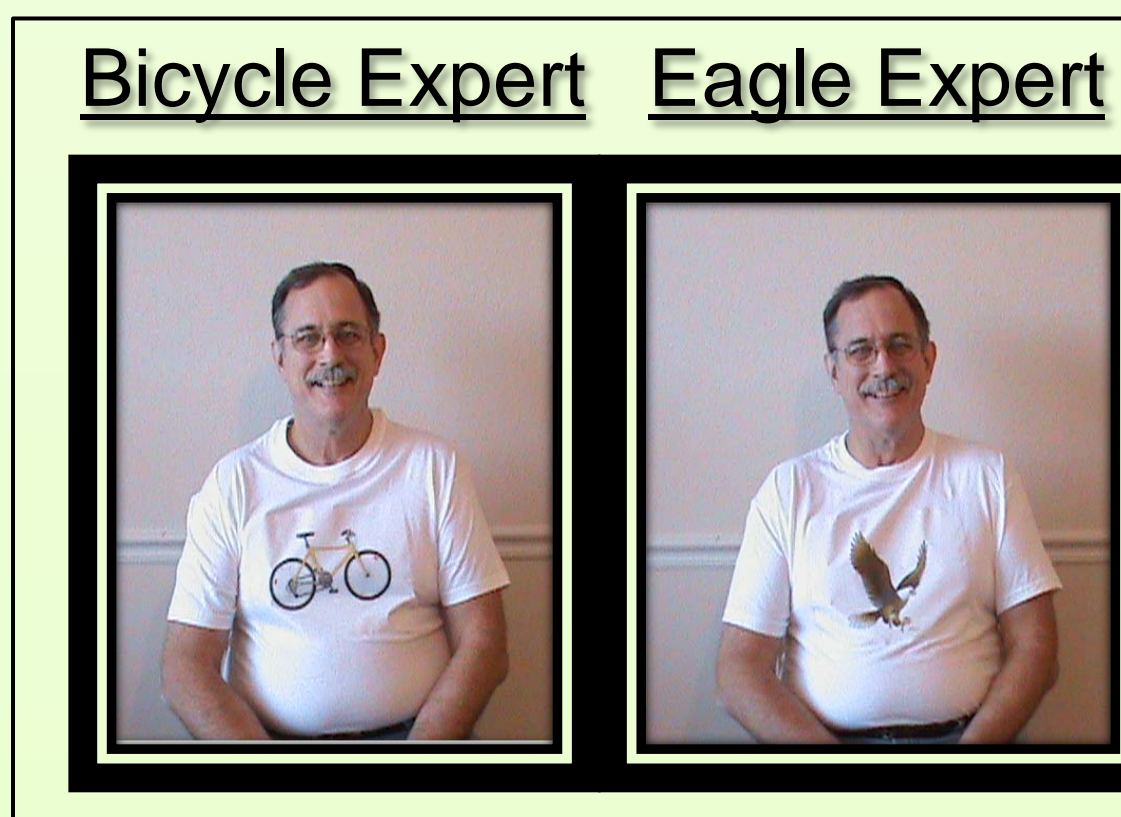
**Will children trust informants based on niceness, expertise, or both?**

### METHOD

#### Preschoolers participated in one of two studies:

**Expertise Only:** Children were introduced to twins with different areas of novel expertise (i.e., a bicycle expert and an eagle expert as used in Lutz & Keil, 2002).

**Niceness X Expertise:** This study was designed the same as Expertise Only, except that one expert was also nice and one was also mean.

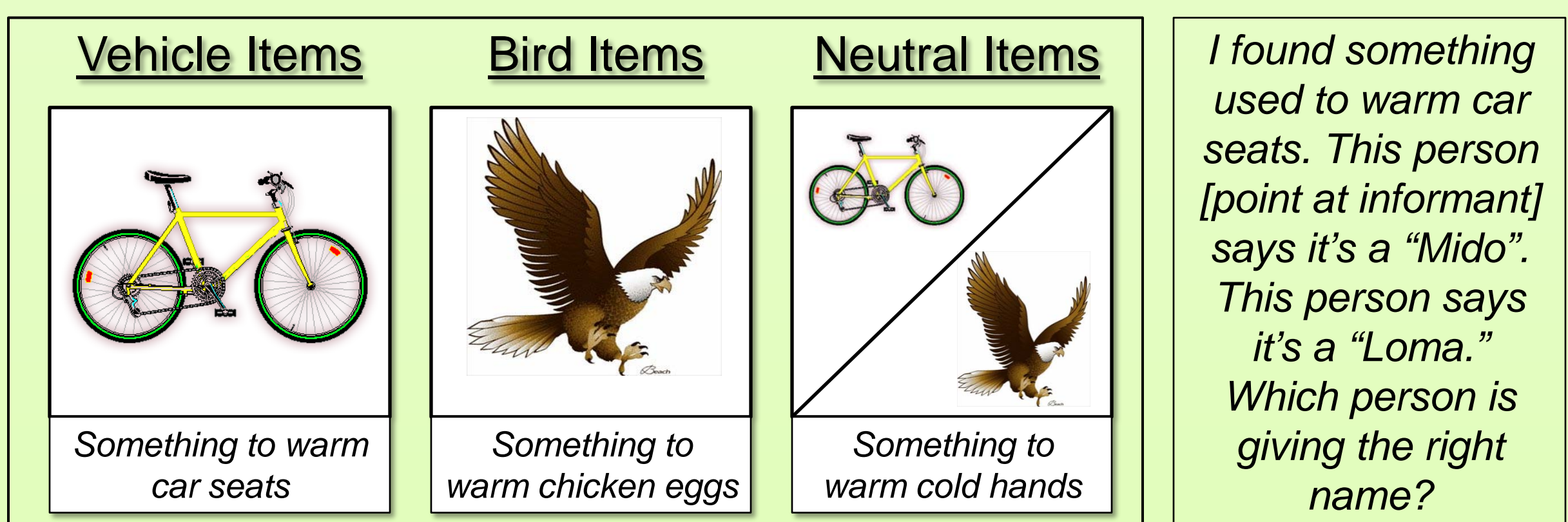


**Expertise:** This person knows all about eagles! He knows what kinds of food they eat; how many babies they can have, and how big they can grow! (Lutz & Keil, 2002)

**Meanness:** This person is always mean. She refuses to share things, she steals presents from her friends and family, and she doesn't care about other people's feelings!

#### Test Items:

**Preschoolers heard conflicting information** from the two experts about labels for 12 novel objects—4 items related to bicycle expertise (i.e., vehicle items), 4 items related to eagle expertise (i.e., bird items), and 4 items related to neither area of expertise (i.e., neutral items). For each item, children were asked to endorse one informant.



#### Post-Test Items:

**Preschoolers attributed knowledge & behavior** to the informants in 8 questions asking about expertise (who would know more), and 8 questions about niceness (asking who would have performed various nice and mean behaviors).

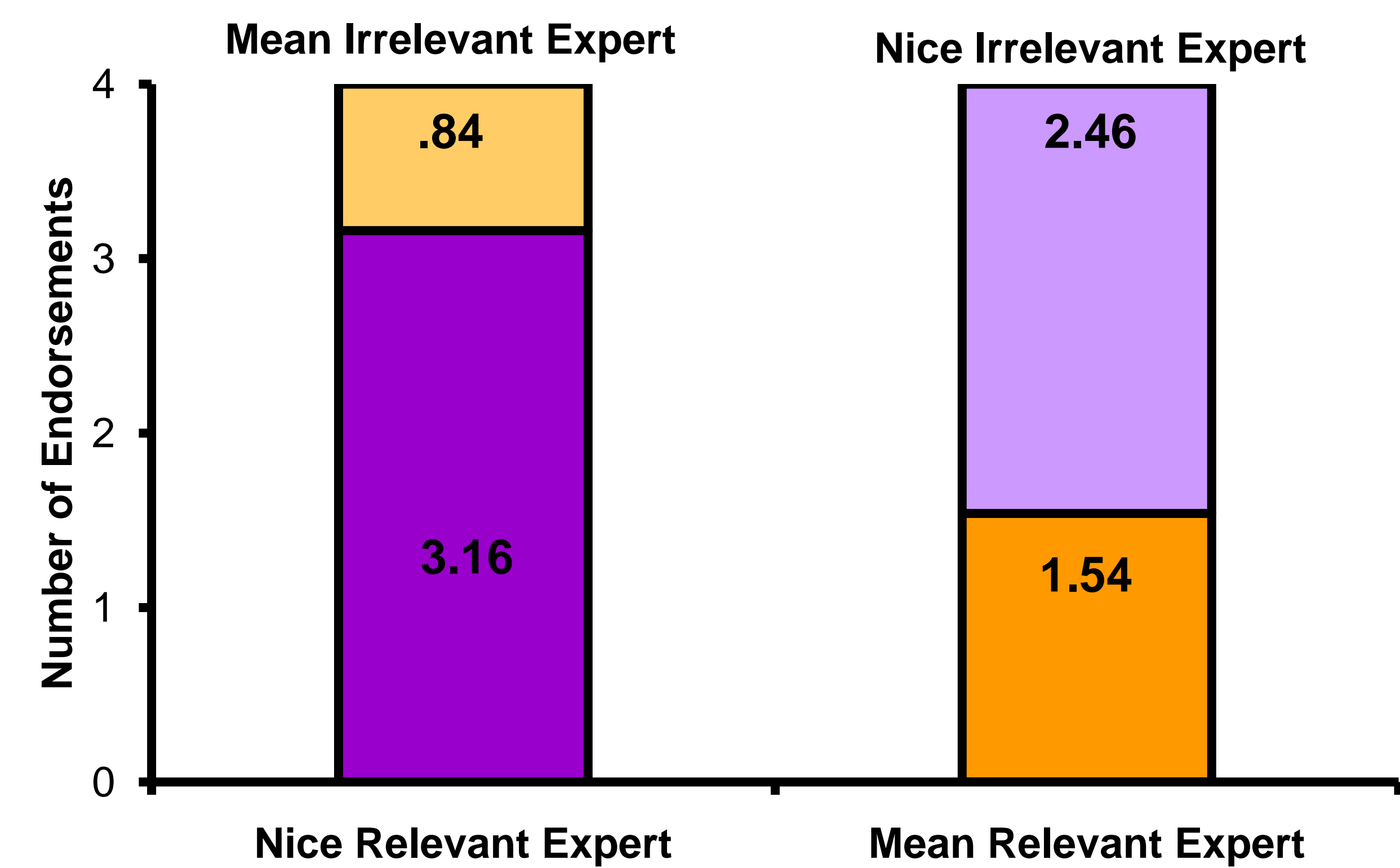
**Expertise Post-test:**  
Point to the person who knows how chickens lay eggs

**Benevolence Post-Test:**  
Point to the person who hugged his neighbor

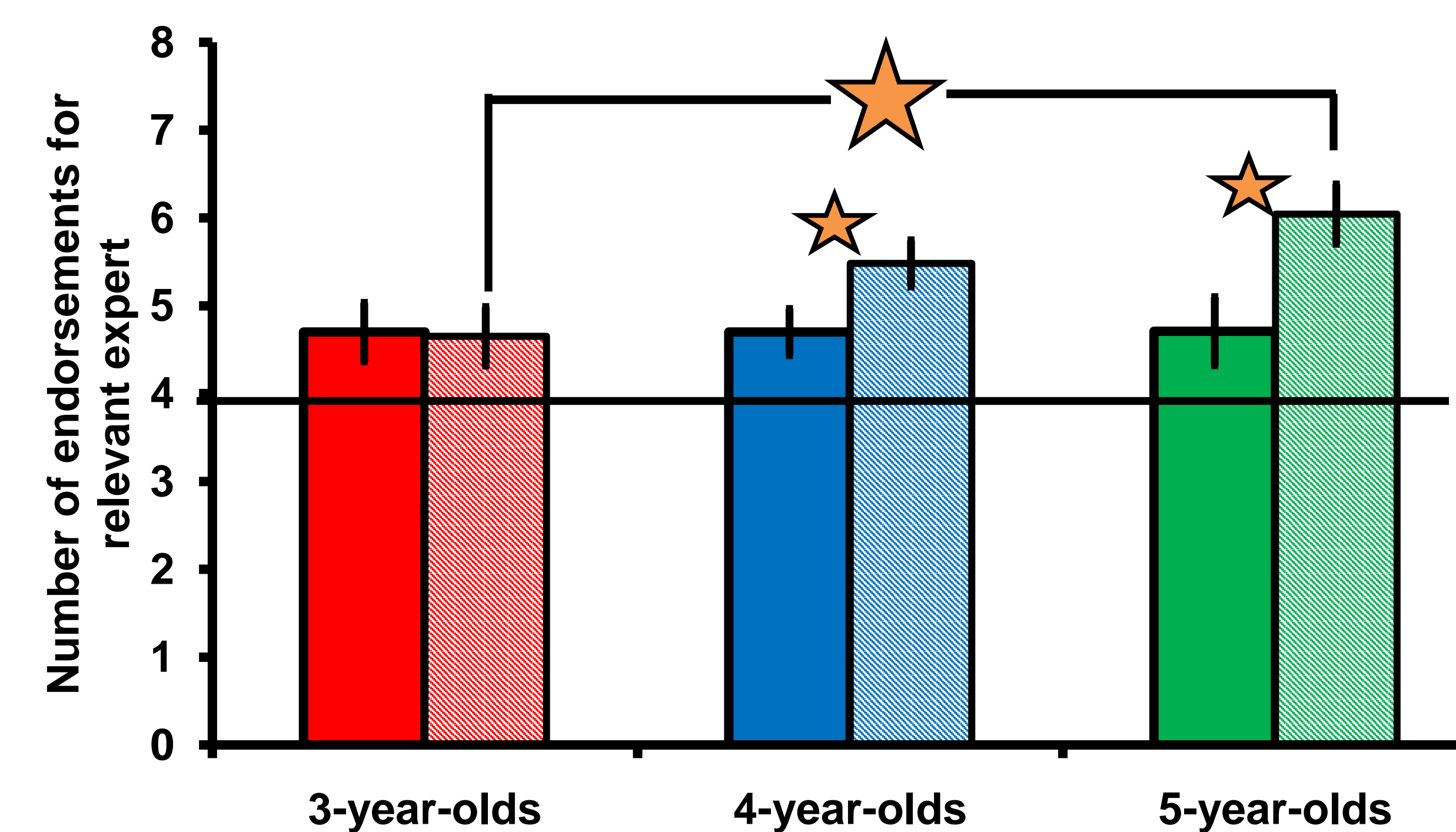
### NICENESS X EXPERTISE

**PARTICIPANTS**   3s – Mage = 3.7; 6 females  
**N = 67**   4s – Mage = 4.6; 12 females  
                   5s – Mage = 5.3; 10 females

*Children endorsed the nice relevant expert more than the mean relevant expert.*



*Older preschoolers correctly attributed knowledge to the relevant expert (post-test) more often than they endorsed the relevant expert's claim (test).*



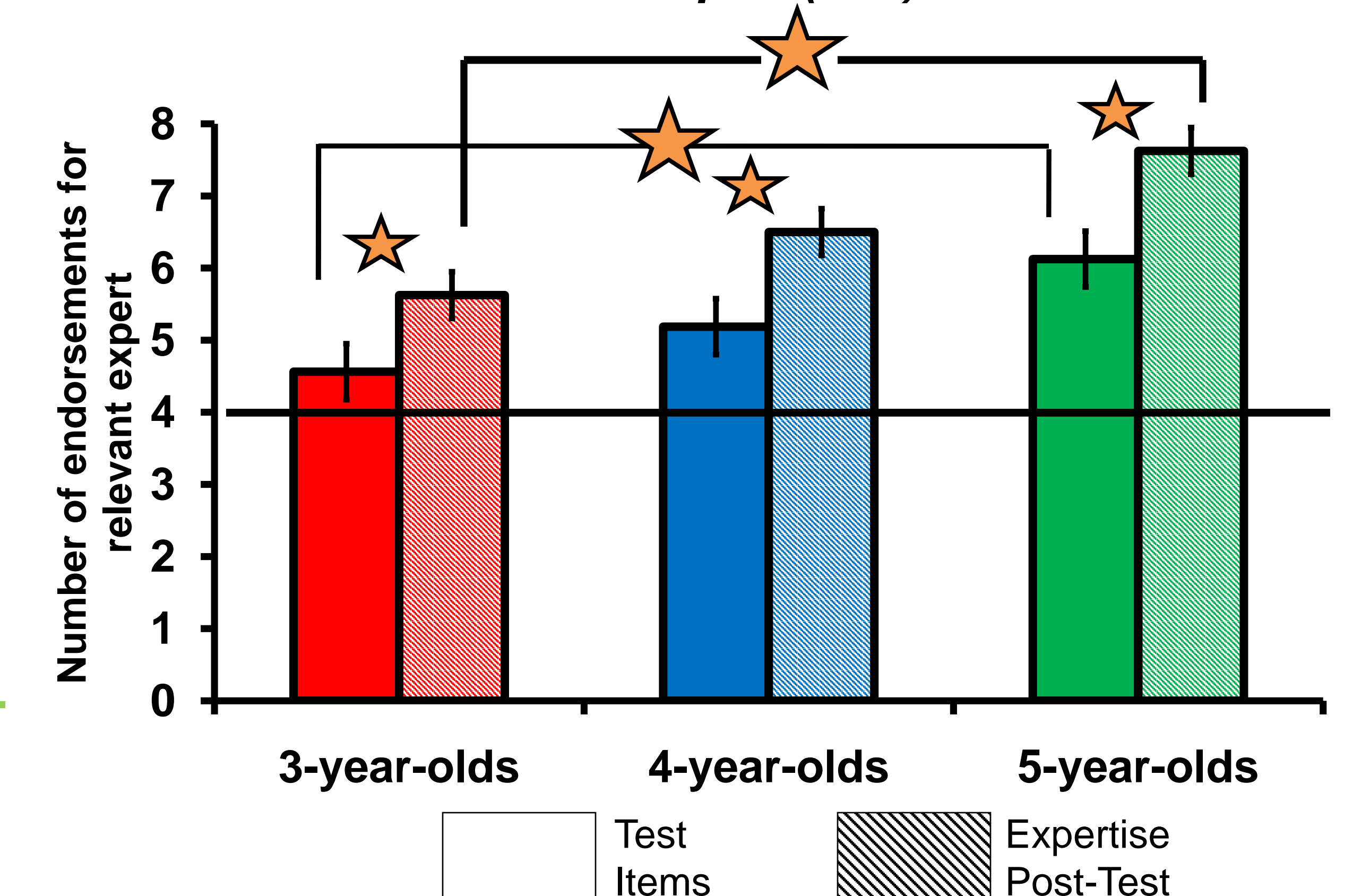
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### EXPERTISE ONLY

**PARTICIPANTS**   3s – Mage = 3.5; 9 females  
**N = 48**   4s – Mage = 4.5; 13 females  
                   5s – Mage = 5.3; 12 females

*Children of all ages were able to attribute knowledge to the experts (post-test), but only 4- and 5-year-old children were able to use this knowledge to endorse the claim of the relevant expert (test) above chance.*



### CONCLUSIONS

- Four and 5-year-old preschoolers not only understand that different experts *know* different things, but can also selectively endorse the claims of the relevant expert.
- However, meanness and niceness *do* distract from relevant expertise when children are presented with both characteristics: children endorse whomever seems nicer.

### REFERENCES

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