

Case Study

Little Albert



The "Little Albert" experiment was a famous psychology experiment conducted by behaviorist John B. Watson. Previously, Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov had conducted experiments demonstrating the conditioning process in dogs. Watson was interested in taking Pavlov's research further to show that emotional reactions could be classically conditioned in people.

A Closer Look

The participant in the experiment was a child that Watson called "Albert B." but is known popularly today as Little Albert. Around the age of 11 months, Watson exposed the child to a series of stimuli including a white rat, a rabbit, a monkey, masks, and burning newspapers and observed the boy's reactions. The boy initially showed no fear of any of the objects he was shown.

The next time Albert was exposed to the rabbit, Watson made a loud noise by hitting a metal pipe with a hammer. Naturally, the child began to cry after hearing the loud noise. After repeatedly pairing the white rabbit with the loud noise, Albert began to cry simply after seeing the rabbit.

Watson wrote: "The instant the rabbit was shown, the baby began to cry. Almost instantly he turned sharply to the left, fell over on [his] left side, raised himself on all fours and began to crawl away so rapidly that he was caught with difficulty before reaching the edge of the table."

Elements of Classical Conditioning in the Little Albert Experiment

The Little Albert experiment presents an example of how classical conditioning can be used to condition an emotional response.

- **Stimulus:** The white rabbit
- **Artificial Stimulus:** The loud noise
- **Natural Response:** Fear
- **Stimulus:** The white rabbit, Cotton balls or other soft material
- **Natural Response:** Fear

Stimulus Generalization in the Little Albert Experiment

In addition to demonstrating that emotional responses could be conditioned in humans, Watson also observed that stimulus generalization had occurred. After conditioning, Albert feared not just the white rabbit, but a wide variety of similar white objects as well. His fear included other objects including cotton balls or other soft material.