

The Little Albert Experiment

THE EXPERIMENT (1920)

John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner conditioned 9-month-old Albert to fear a white rat by pairing it with a loud, frightening noise. This proved that fears could be learned through conditioning.

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING PROCESS

Before Conditioning

Neutral Stimulus: White rat
No fear response
UCS: Loud steel bar strike
Natural fear response

After Conditioning

Rat + Noise (multiple pairings)
Result:
Conditioned Stimulus: Rat alone
Now triggers fear and crying

STIMULUS GENERALIZATION (Most Important Finding)

Albert's fear spread to other white, furry objects he had never been conditioned to fear:

- White rabbit** - Cried and withdrew
- Dog** - Showed fear despite being larger
- Fur coat** - Even inanimate furry objects triggered fear
- Cotton wool** - Soft, white material elicited avoidance
- Santa Claus mask** - White beard similar to fur caused distress

This explains why real phobias are often broader than their original triggers and why one bad experience can create fear of many similar things.

THE MYSTERY OF ALBERT

Who was Little Albert?

Douglas Merritte (2009 theory)
Had hydrocephalus, died at age 6

William Barger (2014 - likely)
Lived to age 87, never knew

NEVER DECONDITIONED

Watson promised to remove the fear but never did.

Albert left with the induced fear
- a serious ethical violation

ETHICAL VIOLATIONS

No informed consent from mother or infant
Intentional psychological harm with no therapeutic benefit
Failed to decondition - left child with induced fear
No follow-up or treatment provided

Modern Standards:

IRB approval required, informed consent, right to withdraw, debriefing and treatment