

# The Sally-Anne Test: Decoding How We Understand Others

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## RECOMMENDED CITATION

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The Sally-Anne test is a psychological test, used in developmental psychology to measure a person's social cognitive ability to attribute false beliefs to others (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). In 1988, Leslie and Frith repeated the experiment with human actors (rather than dolls) and found similar results.

### **Test description**

The experimenter uses two dolls, "Sally" and "Anne". Sally has a basket; Anne has a box. Experimenters show their subjects (usually children) a simple skit, in which Sally puts a marble in her basket and then leaves the scene. While Sally is away and cannot watch, Anne takes the marble out of Sally's basket and puts it into her box. Sally then returns and the children are asked where they think she will look for her marble. Children are said to "pass" the test if they understand that Sally will most likely look inside her basket before realizing that her marble isn't there.

Children under the age of four, along with most autistic children (of older ages), will answer "Anne's box," seemingly unaware that Sally does not know her marble has been moved.

In the Baron-Cohen study of theory of mind in autism, 61 children--20 of whom were diagnosed autistic under established criteria, 14 with Down's Syndrome and 27 of whom were determined as clinically unimpaired--were tested with "Sally" and "Anne".

In the test process, after introducing the dolls, the child is asked the control question of recalling their names (the Naming Question). A short skit is then enacted; Sally takes a marble and hides it in her basket. She then 'leaves' the room and goes for a walk. Whilst she is away, and therefore unbeknownst to her, Anne takes the marble out of Sally's basket and puts it in her own box. Sally is then reintroduced and the child is asked the key question, the Belief Question: 'Where will Sally look for her marble?'

For the children to 'pass' this test they must answer the Belief Question correctly, by indicating that Sally believes that the marble is in her own basket, continuous with her perspective although not with the child's own. If the child cannot take an alternative perspective, they will indicate that Sally has cause to believe--as they do--that the marble has moved. To pass, the children have to show that Sally has her own beliefs that may not correlate with reality.

The result of the Baron-Cohen study was that 23 of the 27 clinically unimpaired children (85%) passed the Belief Question, 12 of the 14 Down's Syndrome children (86%) passed and, by contrast, only 4 of the 20 autistic children (20%) passed the test.