

# Hoo, me?



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## Owl chicks are far more courteous than human kids

**T**HEY'RE the politest children you could imagine. Instead of pestering their parents and fighting over the next meal, they negotiate with each other so the hungriest can eat first.

But these aren't your average kids. They're barn owl chicks.

Zoologist Alexandre Roulin, of the University of Bern in Switzerland, and his colleagues chose two siblings at random from a brood of barn owls and gave one of them dead mice to eat during the day.

They found the hungry nestling cried far more often the following night than the chick that had eaten. But once the hungry chick had been fed, its sibling started to beg more. The conclusion was that a chick

was happy to let its sibling eat if it was hungrier than itself.

In another experiment Roulin found the more chicks there were in a nest, the less the chicks called out. It's not what you'd expect if the chicks were all trying to shout each other down.

The team thinks the chicks don't beg if there's only a small chance they'll be fed. "If one nestling is hungrier than the other, the value of the food for it is higher," says Roulin. "A hungry nestling will fight physically for the prey."

In this scenario, explains Roulin, it's not worthwhile for the less hungry nestling to compete for food it's not likely to get. So, instead, the chicks monitor each other's

**ABOVE:** Cute little barn owl chicks ensure the hungriest get to eat before the others.

hunger levels by the intensity of each other's cries.

The result is that less hungry birds back down, choosing to save energy and wait their turn.

Becky Kilner, a zoologist at Cambridge University says the work is an interesting new approach. "Nobody has really looked at the situation of nestlings communicating in the absence of the parents," she says.

She wonders whether the chicks of other species behave the same way. **Y**