



Brief report

Infant helping in the first year of life: Parents' recollection of infants' earliest prosocial behaviors



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 September 2016

Received in revised form 27 January 2017

Accepted 25 February 2017

Available online 21 March 2017

Keywords:

Prosocial behavior

Infancy

Self-care

ABSTRACT

Prosocial behavior is widely thought to emerge early in the second year of life. This paper presents evidence that helping emerges early in the first year of life. Parents of 80 children asked to recollect the earliest instance of their child helping recalled help in two contexts: chores (e.g., cleaning up) and care and self-care (e.g., feeding and dressing). A subset of parents recalled helping even before eight months of age, most often in the context of self-care tasks. The presence of helping this early in the lifespan is situated in recent research, and its implications for current theories of early prosocial behavior are discussed.

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Infant helping in the first year of life

Parents' recollection of infants' earliest prosocial behaviors

Prosocial behavior is thought to emerge around the second year of life. This paper presents data suggesting that helping emerges early in the first year of life. Current views on the timing of the appearance of prosocial behavior may be the result of researchers focusing, to a great extent, on prosocial behavior in infants who are capable of independent locomotion (see [Hay & Cook, 2007](#)). For example, laboratory studies of early prosociality, which have largely focused on *instrumental helping*, examine how toddlers help others by moving towards and manipulating some target object to allow an experimenter to achieve a thwarted goal (e.g., opening a door for someone whose hands are full; [Warneken & Tomasello, 2006](#)). Although real-life instrumental helping situations, where an adult requires the assistance of a young infant, are rare, observational studies are replete with examples of children getting involved in routines and chores in the home that involve moving and manipulating objects, such as throwing out trash or watering plants (see e.g., [Carpendale, Kettner, & Audet, 2014](#); [Dahl, 2015](#); [Rheingold, 1982](#)).

Two lines of recent research suggest that there are good theoretical grounds for looking for the emergence of helping earlier in the lifespan. Hamlin and colleagues (e.g., [Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007](#); [Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010](#)) found that infants, perhaps as young as three months, have a preference for prosocial actions and actors. This perceptual preference could have a relation to behavior. In research on early social cognition, ([Reddy, Markova, & Wallot, 2013](#)) likewise remark

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that beginning at three months of age, infants are able to perceptually anticipate others' goal-directed actions, which they argue is a form of social cognitive understanding. However, they also note that infants at this age are more competent with actions directed at their own body than at target objects. Looking at this former class of actions, they found that young infants were able to motorically anticipate parental actions in the act of being picked up, such as by adjusting posture. Infants' movements could also make the act of picking up the child easier for a parent to accomplish. As is evident to anyone who has tried to dress, change, or brush the teeth of an infant, anticipatory and cooperative bodily actions facilitate parents' attempts to care for the infant, and could be construed as a form of early prosocial behavior, albeit where an infant is helping their parent help. Conversely, infants can fail to produce these behaviors, or produce behaviors that are obstructive. When absent, these helpful behaviors might even be requested by parents.

In other words, infants' earliest helping might involve not only locomotion towards and the manipulation of target objects, but actions on their own bodies. To explore the possibility that infants can help earlier in the lifespan, the current study asked parents' taking part in a larger study of contemporaneous prosocial behavior to recollect the earliest instance of their child helping ("Thinking back, what was the first thing your child did that was helpful to you? How old were they when this happened?"). This is the first examination of when parents recall their children's first instance of helping. We further explore the issue of conceptualizing parent-infant coordinated interaction as prosocial behavior, both from a psychological and parental perspective, in the discussion below.

After assenting to an informed consent procedure, 93 parents filled out an anonymous online questionnaire with questions about contemporaneous demographics, language, and temperament, and current prosocial comportment of their children (e.g., contemporaneous assistance with nine routine chore activities, such as cleaning up toys, laundry, throwing out trash, and vacuuming and sweeping, and five self-care tasks, such as dressing, bathing, and toileting, and current prosocial tendencies, drawn from Goodman, 1997). As we will explain below, because of the relatively small number of parents who recalled helping before eight months of age, and the relation between the child's current age and the recollected age of first helping, the relation between these contemporaneous measures and recalled helping were not explored further.

Families were recruited from across Canada via Internet and community-based ads. Of the 93 parents who filled out the questionnaire, 13 either did not offer a response to the target question, or did not fully reply to the question (e.g., left out the age of the child's earliest helping, or did not specify a task the child helped with) for a final N of 80. Children were between 12 and 48 months of age ($M = 123.66$ weeks, $SD = 43.66$; 47 girls; 76 mothers) at the time of data collection. The majority of the sample was European-Canadian or other North American (77%), with 8% reporting mixed European and other ethnicity (Métis or First Nations-European, 5%; African-European, 3%; Asian or Pacific Islander-European, 2%). The remainder identified as Latin American (4%), Asian or Pacific Islander (4%) or Métis or First Nations (7%).

Parental responses were coded for the age in months of the first occurrence of helping, and for whether the prosocial act occurred in the context of care and self-care, or routines and chores (see Table 1 for examples). Independent coders coded the tasks with full agreement save for three parental responses. Two of these responses were chore tasks that occurred in the context of parental care, in both cases occurring when a child threw out a soiled diaper out after having been changed. After discussion, both were classified as chore tasks in the final data set. One case was where a parent listed two tasks emerging simultaneously, one a care task (getting dressed), and one a chore task (cleaning up the child's room); this response was given an "other" classification. None of these three responses occurred in the period of particular interest to the present study (i.e., helping before age 12 months).

Fig. 1 shows earliest reported helping by month. The mean recollected age of earliest helping months was $M = 12.84$ months, $SD = 5.08$. There was a positive correlation between the current age of the child in weeks and the earliest reported helping in months ($r(78) = .40$, $p < .001$), such that parents of older children were more likely to recall a later age of earliest helping. This relation, in addition to the relatively small number of parents who recalled helping in the first year of life, informed our decision not to examine recalled and contemporaneous helping in greater detail, and instead focus solely on analyzing recalled helping. Parents were not more likely to recall girls helping earlier than boys (Mann-Whitney test, n.s.). Of the 80 parents, 49 parents recalled their children's earliest helping in the second year of life (i.e., 12 months of age and up) and 31 parents recalled their children's earliest helping during the first year of life (see Fig. 2). Of this latter group, 14 reported that the earliest helping was in the context of care tasks, and 17 in the context of chores. However, of the 13 parents who recalled instances that occurred between three and eight months of age, 11 of these instances were in

Table 1
Examples of earliest helping by categories of care and chore.

Helping category	Definition	Example	Age of child
Care	Help occurs in context child assisting parent complete care or self-care task on/with child (e.g., dressing; brushing teeth; bathing)	"At around 4 months she started to help me dress her, just by guiding her limbs into clothes"	4 months
		"Stick out his feet so I could put his shoes on"	14 months
Chores	Help occurs in context child completing some routine or chore in the home (e.g., throwing away trash; cleaning up)	"She would pick up clothes off of the floor and put them in the hamper"	10 months
		"She started to help with laundry when she was about 16 months old, she'd close the dryer door and turn the dryer on"	16 months

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