



## Prosocial pathways to positive adaptation: The mediating role of teacher-child closeness

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Achievement  
Depression  
Observational assessment  
Prosocial behavior  
Sharing  
Student-teacher relationship

### ABSTRACT

Despite robust evidence that prosocial behavior is associated with positive adaptation and likely engenders it, few studies have evaluated mechanisms that may account for these effects. The current study utilized a diverse sample of young children ( $N = 228$ , 49.6% female, 45.6% Latinx) to evaluate prospective relations between an observational assessment of children's prosocial sharing behavior at age 6 and children's depressive symptoms and academic achievement at age 8 via intervening teacher reports of a close relationship with the child. The findings supported a significant indirect pathway from prosocial sharing to fewer depressive symptoms and higher academic achievement via the closeness of children's relationship with their primary school teacher. Potential explanations for these findings and their implications for intervention are discussed.

### Introduction

Prosocial behaviors are broadly defined as actions intended to benefit another person (Batson & Powell, 2003). Although a growing body of research has sought to identify antecedents of prosociality in adults (McNeely & Meglino, 1994; Piff, Kraus, Cote, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010) and, more recently, in children (Anderson et al., 2010; Hay & Pawlby, 2003; Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011), fewer studies have examined the adaptive significance of such behaviors. Some cross-sectional evidence suggests that prosocial behaviors, such as helping or caring for peers, are associated with positive adjustment indicators, such as lower levels of aggression and higher levels of perspective taking ability (Carlo, 2006; Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003; Nantel-Vivier, Pihl, Cote, & Tremblay, 2014). Likewise, a few longitudinal studies indicate that prosocial behaviors may contribute to later social competence (e.g., socially appropriate behaviors, peer reputation; Chang, 2003; Crick, 1996; Eisenberg et al., 1996). However, less is known about the relation between prosocial behavior and non-social domains of adaptation in childhood, and still fewer studies have evaluated mechanisms that may underlie relations between prosociality and positive developmental outcomes.

The current study sought to fill several gaps in our understanding of whether and how young children's prosocial behavior may influence later adjustment by evaluating a mediation model whereby children's prosocial expressions were expected to predict fewer depressive symptoms and higher academic achievement via the closeness of

children's relationships with their primary school teachers. First, relative to the abundance of studies documenting positive associations between children's prosocial behavior and social competence (e.g., Chang, 2003; Laible, McGinley, Carlo, Augustine, & Murphy, 2014), fewer investigations have examined prospective associations between prosocial behavior and non-social domains of adjustment. Therefore, this study sought to expand our understanding of the adaptive significance of children's prosocial behavior beyond the social domain by evaluating prospective relations with children's depressive symptomatology and academic achievement. Second, very few studies to date have examined potential mechanisms by which prosociality may contribute to positive outcomes (e.g., Laible et al., 2014; Wentzel, 1993). Thus, this investigation contributed new information regarding the role of closeness within the teacher-student relationship as a putative mediator of predicted relations between children's prosocial behavior and later adjustment. By testing the role of teacher-child relationship closeness as a modifiable mediator of positive child development, this investigation sought to inform school-based prevention and intervention efforts. Third, prior studies have favored self- or informant-reports of prosocial behavior using cross-sectional designs in predominantly White European American middle-class samples. In contrast, the current investigation drew on multiple methods, including direct observations of children's prosocial behavior, and informants to evaluate the hypothesized model using longitudinal data drawn from a large and diverse community sample. Moreover, we explored the invariance of predicted pathways across child gender, child race/ethnicity, and

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family socioeconomic status (SES), to yield generalizable findings regarding predicted relations among prosocial behavior, teacher-child closeness, and child adaptation.

### Prosocial behavior and child adjustment

A number of studies demonstrate strong and consistent associations between children's prosocial behavior and a range of adaptive outcomes, particularly social competence (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). For example, Crick (1996) found that sixth graders who were nominated as prosocial by their peers (e.g., "kids who say or do nice things for others") reported higher levels of perceived social support six months later relative to sixth graders who received fewer prosocial behavior nominations. Moreover, children who received fewer prosocial behavior nominations endorsed higher levels of social rejection at follow-up than their more prosocial peers. At younger ages, preschoolers whom teachers rated as engaging in prosocial acts evidenced more stable and supportive friendships in later development than their less prosocial peers (Fabes, Hanish, Martin, Moss, & Reesing, 2012; Sebanc, 2003). Importantly, prosocial behavior also evidences negative relations with problematic social outcomes. For example, in a longitudinal study of elementary school children, Griese and Buhs (2014) found that peer-reported prosocial behavior was related to less self-reported loneliness concurrently, as well as to less peer victimization and more peer social support one year later.

Although less often studied, some data suggest that prosocial behavior may be related to outcomes beyond the social domain in childhood and adolescence, including depressive symptomatology and academic achievement. However, specific relations between prosocial behavior and nonsocial adjustment outcomes remain unclear. For example, some studies have documented negative relations between prosocial behavior and depression (e.g., X. Chen, Li, Li, Li, & Liu, 2000; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999), but others have shown that depressive symptomatology and prosocial behavior are positively correlated (Wentzel, Filisetti, & Looney, 2007). Mirroring these mixed findings, Nantel-Vivier et al. (2014) found that children who evidenced low levels of prosocial behavior from ages 2 to 11 reported both the lowest and highest rates of depression across time. These findings suggest that relations between prosocial behavior and depressive symptomatology are complex. On the one hand prosocial behavior may eventuate in greater in depressive symptomatology, perhaps due to excessive concern for the well-being of others at the expense of one's own well-being (Keenan & Hipwell, 2005; O'Connor, Berry, Lewis, Mulherin, & Crisostomo, 2007). On the other hand, a prosocial orientation may eventuate in fewer depressive symptoms, perhaps due to the positive impact of prosociality on one's social standing and available support (e.g., Crick, 1996; Fabes et al., 2012). This study evaluated the latter hypothesis wherein we predicted that prosocial behavior would be negatively related to depressive symptoms as a result of the positive influence of prosocial behavior on the child's social surroundings.

Relative to research on prosocial behavior and psychopathology, relations between prosocial behavior and academic outcomes are consistently positive. Among adolescents, for example, volunteerism is positively correlated with youths' reports of school achievement (Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski, & Wang, 1995). Likewise, in a longitudinal study from sixth to twelfth grade, Chen et al. (2002) found that peer nominations of prosociality in sixth grade were positively associated with youths' educational attainment in twelfth grade. Studies with school-aged samples demonstrate similarly positive relations of prosocial behavior with both grade point average and standardized test scores (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Gerbino et al., 2017; Wentzel, 1993). The current study extended prior findings earlier in development by evaluating the hypothesis that a laboratory-administered observational measure of prosocial sharing behavior at age 6 would be positively associated with gains in children's academic achievement at age 8.

### Mediators of prosocial effects

Despite evidence that prosocial behaviors, at least as assessed via peer nominations, are related to positive adjustment outcomes in a variety of domains within and beyond the interpersonal sphere, few studies have examined the mechanisms underlying these relations. Although an early investigation of middle schoolers by Wentzel (1993) evaluated relations among prosocial behavior, positive attitudes toward school, and academic achievement, the cross-sectional design of this study limited its capacity to evaluate mediation. To our knowledge, only one study has explicitly evaluated an explanatory model of prosocial behavior effects over time. In a large sample of seventh graders, Laible et al. (2014) found that a) children's benign attributions (i.e., giving others the benefit of the doubt in an ambiguous situation) engendered prosocial behavior as assessed via teacher and parent reports of children's social behaviors, and b) children's prosocial behavior predicted their application of benign attributions in future social exchanges.

Data suggesting that prosocial effects may follow from mutually reinforcing associations between prosocial behavior and adaptive social information processing (e.g., Laible et al., 2014), are consistent with prior assertions that relational mechanisms may account for the adaptive implications of prosocial behavior. For example, Caprara et al. (2000) suggested that positive associations between children's prosocial behavior and academic success reflect the creation of a positive and supportive school environment by prosocial children. In addition to robust relations between prosocial behavior and peer competence (e.g., Crick, 1996; Fabes et al., 2012; Sebanc, 2003), some evidence suggests that teachers are more likely to endorse a close relationship with prosocial children, and view them more favorably (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Caprara et al., 2000). Moreover, the quality of children's relationships with their teachers is a well-established (and potentially modifiable) influence on children's socioemotional and academic adjustment (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhman, 2004). Thus, we sought to extend these findings to evaluate a mediation model wherein we hypothesized that teacher-reports of closeness within the teacher-student relationship would account for significant variance in the predicted relations of prosocial behavior with decreases in children's depressive symptomatology and increases in their academic achievement.

### Moderators of prosocial effects

Efforts to elucidate specific contexts across which the expression, impact, or explanation of prosocial behavior may vary are important to refine applied theory and practice. However, it is equally essential to explain the rationale for considering specific moderators to mitigate the risk of inadvertently reifying deficit models of diversity (Coll et al., 1996). This study capitalized on a large and diverse sample of young children to explore empirically- and theoretically-supported moderators of children's prosocial behaviors and their effects. Specifically, we evaluated child gender, child race/ethnicity, and family SES as potential qualifiers of the predicted relations among children's prosocial behavior, teacher-child closeness, and later adjustment.

Investigations documenting higher rates of prosocial behavior among females (Hastings, Utendale, & Sullivan, 2007; Veenstra et al., 2008) have not always replicated (McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006), with comparable rates across genders found most often in studies using observational measures of prosocial behavior (e.g., Brownell, Iesue, Nichols, & Svetlova, 2013; Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). However, other data suggest that the developmental correlates of prosocial behavior may vary by gender. For example, prosocial behavior seems to be more strongly associated with peer status among girls than among boys (Crick, 1996; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). Likewise, some data suggest that teachers feel closer to their female than male students (Saft & Pianta, 2001), and other evidence

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