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Brief report

# From cleaning up to helping out: Parental socialization and children's early prosocial behavior

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ABSTRACT

Relations between parental socialization and infants' prosocial behavior were investigated in sixty three 18- and 30-month old children. Parents' socialization techniques (e.g., directives, negotiation, reasoning) differed for the two age groups, as did relations between socialization and different forms of emerging prosocial behavior (helping; sharing).



*Prosocial behavior*, such as *instrumental helping* (e.g., picking up a dropped item for someone), *empathic helping* (e.g., comforting someone in distress), and *sharing* (e.g., of food or toys), appears in the second year of life (Brownell, Iesue, Nichols, & Svetlova, 2013; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), and its precocious appearance has led some researchers to conclude that early prosociality is unlearned or minimally socialized. Indeed in a recent study, overt encouragement by a parent did not influence how often young children helped an experimenter with an instrumental task (Warneken & Tomasello, 2012). However, this asocial framework leaves developmental and individual differences in prosocial behavior difficult to understand. Although nearly all children eventually engage in prosocial behavior, this behavior increases with age; and within ages, they do so inconsistently, with variations both between and within children in terms of when and how much they assist others.

An older research literature suggests that parents attempt to influence children's prosocial behavior, and succeed in doing so (Rheingold, Cook, & Kolowitz, 1987; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979). They use *praise* (Grusec, 1991), *negotiation* (Crockenberg & Litman, 1990), *reasoning and induction* (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996), and *directives* to increase children's cooperation and assistance, particularly with preschool-age and older children. Parents expect younger children to participate in family routines, including chores and household tasks (Gralinski & Kopp, 1993; Rheingold, 1982), and they *scaffold* toddlers' cooperative participation in such tasks (Hammond, 2011; Rheingold, 1982) fostering the growth of children's autonomous prosocial involvement. In the current study we examined parents' use of these socialization techniques with toddlers, and how their efforts, beyond reinforcement, relate to diverse forms of prosocial behavior (instrumental helping, empathic helping, and sharing). This is the first examination of how parents' specific socialization practices to encourage helping in their toddlers are associated with emerging prosocial behavior.

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**Table 1**
Definitions of parental socialization techniques, and means and standard deviations for each category at 18 and 30 months of age.

| Socialization category | Definitions/example | 18 months mean (SD) | 30 months mean (SD) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Directive | Specific commands or requests for particular actions to be carried out; e.g., "Can you put the block in the basket?" | 20.33 (SD = 11.01) | 13.79 (SD = 9.55) |
| Reasoning | Explanations of the situation and the need for assistance; e.g., "We need to clean up these toys so we can play some new games" | 1.13 (SD = 2.26) | 1.55 (SD = 1.60) |
| Character attribution | Comments on child characteristics; e.g., "You really like to help!" | 2.00 (SD = 2.02) | 1.42 (SD = 1.68) |
| Praise | Positive comments on the child's actions; e.g., "Good job!" | 1.87 (SD = 2.73) | 1.36 (SD = 1.80) |
| Negotiation | Compromising with child to solicit assistance & cooperation; e.g., "You can play with that now, while we clean up the rest of the toys" | No instances | 1.23 (SD = 1.63) |
| Scaffolding | 0 = Parent provides almost no appropriate support (adult-centered; includes interference, intrusiveness, excluding the child); 4 = Parent provides consistent and age-appropriate support almost all the time (child-centered; integrating child's efforts & activities, helping child regulate, providing autonomy support) | 1.53 (SD = 1.01) | 2.06 (SD = 1.39) |

Sixty-three children participated with their parents, in two age groups: 18-month-olds ($n = 30$; 12 girls; $M = 82.10$ weeks, SD = 5.18) and 30-month-olds ($n = 33$; 12 girls; $M = 124.63$ weeks, SD = 8.75). Families were from a mid-Atlantic city and were working- to middle-class by parent report. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (70%), with the remainder identifying as biracial (9%), other (4%), African-American (2%), or no report (13%). An additional four children were excluded for experimenter or parental errors, refusal to participate, and one twin.

The study took place in a laboratory playroom after a brief warm-up play session and was video-recorded via one-way mirror. Children completed one instrumental helping task (picking up wooden sticks that were "accidentally" dropped by the experimenter; adapted from Over & Carpenter, 2009); one empathic helping task (fetching a blanket for a shivering experimenter; adapted from Svetlova et al., 2010); and two sharing tasks (giving one or more of several toy animals and cars to an experimenter who had nothing to play with; adapted from Brownell et al., 2013). All were counterbalanced for order. On each task, the experimenter provided up to four increasingly specific cues until the child assisted. These began with a non-verbal indication of the problem (e.g., shivering), followed by describing the problem (e.g., "I'm cold!"), the need (e.g., "I need to warm-up!"), and the solution ("A blanket!"), and finally, if necessary, requesting a specific prosocial act ("Can you bring me the blanket?"). During the prosocial tasks, mothers were busy filling out questionnaires and remained uninvolved with their children.

Children were scored as assisting the experimenter if they performed the task-appropriate act on each task (e.g., retrieving a blanket) at any cue in the sequence up to and including the direct request for assistance (scored dichotomously: 0 for no assistance; 1 for assisting). Spontaneity of prosocial behavior was also scored for each task according to the cue at which the child assisted (4 for initial cue; 0 for no assistance after final cue). Spontaneity scores on the two sharing trials did not differ significantly and were averaged to create a single spontaneity score. The number of items shared (0–10) was also recorded for each sharing task.

After the prosocial tasks, dyads played with a set of age-appropriate toys for a fixed period and mothers were asked to clean-up the toys with their child when they heard a knock on the window (average clean-up duration = 142 s; SD = 74.52 s). Parents' efforts to encourage their children to assist them in cleaning up were coded for the frequency of praise, character attribution, reasoning, negotiation, and directives. Parents were also were rated (0–4) for the amount and consistency of scaffolding of their child's efforts (adapted from Hammond, Müller, Carpendale, Bibok, & Liebermann-Finestone, 2011; see Table 1 for coding definitions). Two independent coders were trained to a minimum of 80% reliability on each code.

Preliminary analyses showed that none of the measures differed by child gender, nor were there order effects, and analyses were collapsed over gender and task order. There were no age differences for clean-up duration; however duration was correlated with mothers' use of directives (younger children) and reasoning (older children). Because the duration of clean-up was attributable to a variety of factors (e.g., children's motor capacities), controlling for clean-up duration in the analyses did not substantively alter the results.

Descriptive statistics for children's prosocial behavior with the experimenter are presented in Table 2. Some of the parental socialization utterances were mildly skewed; correspondingly all correlations reported are Spearman rank correlations and non-parametric analyses were used to compare groups. Older children helped with more tasks than younger children (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .001$), and were more likely to assist instrumentally by picking up the dropped sticks (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .01$) and empathically by providing a blanket (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .001$), but they were not more likely to share. Older children also helped more quickly both instrumentally and empathically (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .001$), and shared more quickly (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .01$). Older children did not share more items ($M = 1.59$, SD = 2.14) than younger children ($M = 1.54$, SD = 2.14). Prosocial behavior was only moderately related across tasks. Specifically, spontaneity