



## Full Length Article

# The Differential role of parenting, peers, and temperament for explaining interindividual differences in 18-months-olds' comforting and helping



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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes temperamental and social correlates of 18-month-olds' ( $N = 58$ ) instrumental helping (i.e., handing over out-of-reach objects) and comforting (i.e., alleviating experimenter's distress). While out-of-reach helping as a basic type of prosocial behavior was not associated with any of the social and temperamental variables, comforting was associated with maternal responsible parenting, day care attendance, and temperamental fear, accounting for 34% of the total variance in a corresponding regression model. The data of the present study suggest that, while simple instrumental helping seems to be a robust developmental phenomenon, comforting is associated with specific social experiences and child temperament that constitute interindividual differences and thereby help to explain the domain-specific development of prosociality.

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## 1. Introduction

Prosocial behavior is defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit another person (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Although most researchers agree that under the umbrella of prosociality each of the different domains of prosocial behavior (i.e., helping, comforting, sharing) have a similar underlying motivation and share some common characteristics (e.g., social understanding of other's mental states), findings also indicate that these types of prosocial behavior are domain-specific, that is, mostly uncorrelated and show distinct developmental trajectories (Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Kärtner, Schuhmacher, & Collard, 2014; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010).

To explain *domain-specificity*, previous studies mostly focused on socio-cognitive prerequisites – in particular toddlers' ability to infer mental states, such as goals, feelings, and desires (see, e.g., Kärtner et al., 2014). In particular, Kärtner and colleagues demonstrated that toddlers' self-other differentiation and joint attention skills were differently associated with helping, comforting, and collaboration in 15-month-olds. However, these factors only explained some of the total variance in 15-month-olds' prosociality and there were no relations between socio-cognitive capacities and prosocial behavior three

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months later (i.e., with 18-months). Thus, there might be additional processes that constitute the domain-specificity of 1-year-olds' prosocial behavior.

Beyond socio-cognitive influences, a number of authors have stressed the role of social and temperamental factors in explaining individual differences in toddlers' helping and comforting (e.g., [Thompson & Newton, 2013](#)). In addition, [Dunfield \(2014\)](#) argues that beneath socio-cognitive factors, social factors and individual characteristics (e.g., emotion processing) likely account for domain-specific differences in toddlers' prosociality. Thus, the present study postulates that specific temperamental and social factors account for individual differences in 1-year-olds' prosocial behaviors and that these factors are differentially related to toddlers' early out-of-reach helping and comforting. This integrative perspective, which includes experience-based as well as individual-dispositional factors (i.e., toddlers' temperament), adds to the literature by helping to explain the domain-specific development of toddlers' comforting and helping during the second year of life.

### *1.1 Social and temperamental factors associated with individual differences in prosocial behavior*

A closer inspection of the general literature yields three promising candidates that might help to explain domain-specific interindividual differences in toddlers' development of prosociality, namely parenting styles, peers, and temperamental factors. In what follows, we will delineate our assumptions regarding the role of these factors in toddlers' prosocial development from the existing literature.

#### *1.1.1. Parenting style*

Parenting style is defined as a global and consistent pattern of parents' typical child-rearing strategies, behaviors, attitudes, and values. Most importantly, there are stable individual differences in parenting that account for differences in various domains of children's social development, for example, moral development or aggression ([Maccoby & Martin, 1983](#); [Darling & Steinberg, 1993](#)). In particular, previous work on preschool- and school-aged children underlines the importance of specific parenting practices for the developing prosocial behavior during childhood, namely authoritative parenting that is characterized by high support and high control (e.g., [Davidov & Grusec, 2006](#); [Hastings, McShane, Parker, & Ladha, 2007a](#); [Newton, Laible, Carlo, Steele, McGinley, 2014](#); [Hastings, Utendale, & Sullivan, 2007b](#); [Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman, 1983](#)). Generally, supportive parenting, including parental warmth and maternal sensitivity, is positively associated with preschool- and school-aged children's prosocial behavior, whereas authoritarian parenting is negatively associated with prosocial activities, but positively with aggression (for a review see [Eisenberg et al., 2006](#)).

However, much less research has been conducted regarding the role of parenting style in 1-year-olds' prosocial behavior. The following studies are notable exceptions: [Robinson, Zahn-Waxler and Emde \(1994\)](#) could show that maternal warmth was related to patterns of change in comforting between 14 and 20 months. For example, higher scores on maternal warmth were related to increases in female toddlers' comforting at 20 months. Furthermore, high scores for maternal control led to decreases in comforting whereas low maternal control scores led to marked increases in comforting for some toddlers. Likewise, maternal sensitivity was found to be positively associated with toddlers' empathy-related responses to others' distress during the second year of life both cross-sectionally and longitudinally ([Kiang, Moreno, & Robinson, 2004](#); [Kochanska, Forman, & Coy, 1999](#); [Moreno, Klute, & Robinson, 2008](#); [Spinrad & Stifter, 2006](#); [Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & Kind, 1979](#)).

To our knowledge, there is, however, not a single study on the role of supportive and controlling parenting styles in 1-year-olds' instrumental helping. And although recent studies investigated the association of some very specific parental practices with toddlers' emerging prosociality (i.e., mothers' emotional state talk, parental scaffolding and encouragement during cleanup and other everyday chores; e.g., [Brownell, Svetlova, Anderson, Nichols, & Drummond, 2013](#); [Dahl, 2015](#); [Hammond & Carpendale, 2015](#)), the role of parenting style defined as more global patterns of parents' interactions with their toddlers, still remains unaddressed. To get a fuller picture of the importance of different social factors in explaining interindividual differences in toddlers' prosociality, we want to complement recent findings on the role of parental scaffolding and encouragement by providing a thorough analysis of different, more globally defined, parenting styles.

[Grusec and Davidov \(2010\)](#) categorize parental behavior on the basis of five different domains of socialization (i.e., reciprocity, protection, control, guided learning, and group participation). By assessing various forms of supportive parenting (i.e., positive parenting, responsible parenting) and controlling parenting (i.e., corporal punishment, power assertion, parental control; [Clerkin, Marks, Policaro, & Halperin, 2007](#); [Reichle & Franiek, 2009](#)) this study particularly covers the socialization domains "reciprocity" and "control" (i.e., socialization by complying with child's reasonable requests & using discipline methods for achieving parental goals), whereas previous studies on the role of parental scaffolding during chores rather reflect the domains "guided learning" and "group participation" (i.e., instructing children and providing them with opportunities to participate in group activities). Thus, our study looks at new/different aspects of socialization in comparison to previous findings on (singular) parenting practices. By doing so, we identify the relative contribution of each of these more general parenting patterns on two major domains of toddler's early prosocial behavior, namely simple (out-of-reach) helping and comforting.

In particular, positive parenting focuses on parental warmth, establishing a positive parent-child relationship and appraisal of good behavior. In addition, responsible parenting describes a considerate "education" of children by their parents based on a child-centered and positive relationship ([Reichle & Franiek, 2009](#)). The essence of responsible parenting is reflective and deliberate parenting that aims at supporting positive social and moral development, such as teaching children good behavior, how to interact appropriately with others and feeling responsible for one's own behavior. Thereby, positive

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