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## Preschoolers' social and moral judgments of third-party helpers and hinderers align with infants' social evaluations



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### ABSTRACT

Two experiments explored preschoolers' social preferences and moral judgments of prosocial and antisocial others. In Experiment 1, 3- to 5-year-olds ( $N = 74$ ) observed helping and hindering scenarios previously used to explore sociomoral evaluation in preverbal infants. Whereas 3-year-olds in Experiment 1 did not reliably distinguish between the helper and hinderer when reporting social preferences or moral judgments, both 4- and 5-year-olds preferred the helper, judged the helper to be "nicer" than the hinderer, selectively allocated punishment to the hinderer, and were able to justify their punishment allocations. A simplified procedure and the addition of comprehension questions in Experiment 2 ( $N = 24$ ) improved 3-year-olds' performance, suggestive that their performance in Experiment 1 was likely due to processing or memory difficulties rather than an inability to engage in explicit social and moral evaluation. These studies reveal that young children readily interpret helping and hindering scenarios as socially and morally relevant.

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### Introduction

Humans are remarkably judgmental. One example of this is our readiness to evaluate individuals based on their prosocial and antisocial actions; we condemn those who willfully harm and see them

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as deserving of punishment, and we celebrate those who selflessly help and see them as deserving of praise. Notably, humans make these judgments even in third-party situations when we are not personally invested in the welfare of those who are harmed and helped. These third-party moral judgments are commonplace in adult life across cultures (Brown, 1991), and a growing body of work suggests that such judgments are also evident during childhood.

Young children make moral judgments, suggestive that a moral sense exists (but is immature) during early childhood. Specifically, research has demonstrated that young children's explicit moral judgments are sensitive to some of the same factors that influence adults' moral judgments. For example, under certain testing conditions, 3-year-olds' explicit judgments are sensitive to the role of intentions in assigning moral praise and blame (e.g., Nelson, 1980; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Yuill & Perner, 1988). In addition, young children are sensitive to the difference between moral and nonmoral concerns; for example, 3-year-olds judge moral transgressions (e.g., hitting another child) to be more generalizably wrong than social conventional transgressions (e.g., not saying "please"). By 3 or 4 years of age, children also judge moral transgressions to be more serious than conventional transgressions, more independent of explicit rules, and wrong regardless of whether the transgression is sanctioned by an authority figure (e.g., Smetana & Braeges, 1990). These distinctions are reflected in children's verbal justifications of their judgments; whereas moral justifications tend to focus on issues of welfare and fairness, conventional justifications focus on concerns about authority, social order, and rules (Nucci & Weber, 1995; see Smetana, 2006, and Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014, for reviews). Finally, by 4 years of age, children treat moral versus immoral others differently (e.g., distributing more treats to prosocial vs. antisocial others) and explicitly justify nonegalitarian treatment in terms of individuals' morally relevant behaviors (Kenward & Dahl, 2011).

Other work using implicit measures has also demonstrated that young children appreciate the nature of moral concerns. For example, 3-year-olds spontaneously protest when others are the victims of moral transgressions (Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011; Vaish, Missana, & Tomasello, 2011) and protest third-party moral (but not conventional) transgressions regardless of perpetrators' group membership (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012). These results suggest that children are sensitive to the generalizability of moral principles. In addition, 3-year-olds selectively avoid directing prosocial behaviors toward those who have previously harmed (or merely tried to harm) others (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010; see also Dahl, Schuck, & Campos, 2013; Hamlin, Wynn, Bloom, & Mahajan, 2011). Altogether, these studies demonstrate that children both explicitly and implicitly evaluate morally relevant actions by 3 years of age.

Although the studies reviewed above suggest that the moral sense is operational fairly early in life, measures that assess children's verbal and complex behavioral responding necessarily restrict the exploration of early moral development to children who can reliably generate these responses. Therefore, during recent years researchers have developed alternative nonverbal methodologies to explore whether very young children are sensitive to third-party morally relevant action (see Hamlin, 2013b, for a review). In these studies, preverbal infants are shown puppet shows featuring a puppet protagonist who is unable to accomplish a goal—for example, trying but failing to climb a hill, open a box, or play with a ball. The protagonist's goal is facilitated by a "helper" puppet who pushes the protagonist up the hill, helps him open the box, or returns the dropped ball; the protagonist's goal is blocked by a "hinderer" puppet, who pushes the protagonist down the hill, slams the box closed, or takes the ball away. Infants are then presented with the helper and hinderer side by side, and their selective looking and reaching behaviors are taken as evidence of a preference for one puppet or the other.

Results from studies using these methods have demonstrated that infants prefer helpers over hinderers from soon after birth. By just 3 months of age, infants look longer at individuals who help a protagonist achieve a goal compared with individuals who thwart the protagonist's efforts (Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010). Once infants can make visually guided reaches, they selectively reach for helpers over hinderers (Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007; Scola, Holvoet, Arciszewski, & Picard, 2015; but see Salvadori et al., 2015). Critically, these preferences appear to reflect social concerns rather than merely perceptual concerns; infants show no preference for "helpers" who direct similar physical behaviors toward inanimate objects (Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Hamlin et al., 2007, 2010) or toward an animate character without a clear unfulfilled goal (Hamlin, 2015; see also Scarf, Imuta, Colombo, & Hayne, 2012).

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