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# Gender-differentiated effects of theory of mind, emotion understanding, and social preference on prosocial behavior development: A longitudinal study



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### ABSTRACT

Although key differences have been found in boys' and girls' prosocial behavior toward peers, few studies have systematically examined gender differences in how intrinsic perspective-taking abilities—theory of mind (ToM) and emotion understanding (EU)—and the extrinsic peer environment relate to prosocial behavior. In this prospective longitudinal study, we studied gender differences in the relations between children's observed prosocial behavior and their ToM, EU, and social preference ratings in 114 children (58 boys and 56 girls). We used conventional ToM and EU tasks at 5 and 7 years of age. Observed prosocial behavior in triadic peer interactions was assessed at both time points. Controlling for gender, age, verbal ability, and earlier prosocial behavior, ToM at 5 years was found to predict prosocial behavior at 7 years. Results also revealed gender-differentiated associations at 7 years, whereby only girls' prosocial behavior was positively associated with EU. Results are discussed in terms of gender-differentiated patterns of socialization.

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## Introduction

A consistent feature of children's successful peer interactions is prosocial behavior, conceptualized as a voluntary act done with the specific intention to benefit another (Eisenberg, 1986). Although prosocial behavior appears early in life, it nonetheless undergoes considerable change during childhood; it becomes more sophisticated and increasingly nuanced according to gender as boys' and girls' peer interactions take somewhat distinctive pathways (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Early manifestations of prosocial behavior have been consistently associated with children's perspective-taking skills in the context of both empathy development and, more recently, early appearing understanding of others' intentional attitudes, sometimes termed *implicit theory of mind* (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Low & Perner, 2012; Moore, 2007; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2009). In both cases, children typically show their sensitivity to others' emotional predicaments or states of mind through their prosocial acts, often tailoring their action to others' distress or intention, even prior to 2 years of age (Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). However, although it is well known that children's understanding of mind and emotion undergoes profound transformation during the transition to the school period (Harris, de Rosnay, & Pons, 2016; Wellman, 2002), very little is known about how these unfolding perspective-taking abilities continue to influence prosocial behavior development and whether gender socialization increasingly affects the way children use their understanding of mind and emotion in prosocial interactions.

Also of importance to children's early appearing prosocial behavior is the socializing environment; prosocial behavior is socially motivated, driven and reinforced by affiliative interactions with others (Grusec, 2006; Simpson & Willer, 2008), which again may be observed in children younger than 2 years of age. On entry to school, however, for many children there is a profound shift in their social context, being thrust into the busy to and fro of peer interactions and increasingly complex social networks. Although much is known about the importance of children's social relations for their school success and social adaptation, relatively few studies have examined how the peer environment influences prosocial behavior and whether this plays out differently for boys and girls.

In the current study, therefore, we examined whether known correlates of children's prosocial behavior—understanding of mind and emotion and social preference—exert gender-differentiated effects on prosocial behavior development over the first few years of school. We adopted a longitudinal design ideally suited to quantifying changing patterns of prosocial behavior, which was the focus of the investigation, rather than the origins of prosocial behavior per se. Despite the fact that children enter school with a good repertoire of prosocial behaviors, we nonetheless expected that observing children's spontaneous peer interactions during this period, which is a time of rapidly growing understanding of mind and emotion and expanding social relationships, would provide important insight into how prosocial behavior comes to be increasingly gender differentiated.

### *Gender differences in prosocial behavior*

As children mature, peer relations become increasingly gender segregated and the interactions that boys and girls have with their same-sex peers become more differentiated (Maccoby, 1998; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). By middle childhood, boys predominantly socialize in larger peer groups that are more agentic-focused and competitive, whereas girls typically interact in dyadic peer relationships that are more interpersonal by nature (Geary, Byrd-Craven, Hoard, Vigil, & Numtee, 2003; Maccoby, 2002). Indeed, gender differences in prosocial behavior may be present in children as young as 3 years (Sebanc, 2003), but these differences become increasingly pronounced as children enter middle childhood and remain intact through to adolescence (Maccoby, 1990). Increasing age-related gender segregation is thought to be influenced by multiple biological, environmental and cultural factors, including hormonal changes and maturation, emerging differences in the structure and style of play, the development of gender identity, and an increasing awareness of gender stereotypes and socially prescribed gender roles (Eagly, 1987; Maccoby, 1998). Cumulatively, these factors are thought to contribute to the increasingly ingrained gender differences in peer interactions as children spend more

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