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Toddlers prefer to help familiar people

Meredith Allen, Conrad Perry, Jordy Kaufman*

Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Victoria 3128, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Young children's willingness to spontaneously help others is the subject of a large body of research investigating the ontogeny of moral behavior and thought. A developing debate centers around the extent to which social factors influence the desire to help. Familiarity with the person needing help is one such factor that varies across many studies but has not been systematically investigated. In Experiment 1, we show that toddlers were significantly more likely to assist a person on an out-of-reach clothespin task when they had previously become familiar with that person. Moreover, and in contrast to previous work, we found that becoming familiar with a person increases helpfulness only toward that person and does not transfer to an unknown person. We further demonstrate, in Experiment 2A, that children were equally likely to approach and take a sticker from an experimenter with whom they were familiar or unfamiliar—thereby ruling out wariness of strangers as the key driver for familiarity effects in Experiment 1. Moreover, in Experiment 2B, we show that children were more likely to help the previously unfamiliar partner (from Experiment 2A) after the partner gave the child the sticker. We conclude that familiarity is an ecologically important social influencer of toddler helping behavior.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jkaufman@swin.edu.au (J. Kaufman).

Introduction

The striking observation that toddlers spontaneously perform altruistic acts despite no obvious benefit to themselves has led to important insights into the development of prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Kuhlmeier, Dunfield, & O’Neill, 2014). For example, children as young as 14 months demonstrate instrumental helping that requires an understanding of the recipient’s goal and the obstacles to that goal (Carpenter, Uebel, & Tomasello, 2013; Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012; Warneken, Hare, Melis, Hanus, & Tomasello, 2007; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2013). These behaviors may indicate that early altruistic behavior is innate and that socialization later builds on this tendency (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009b).

Whereas the spontaneity with which children offer unprompted help is well documented, more ambiguous is the set of factors that influence helping behavior through development. Based on research into children’s helping, sharing, and comforting, Hay (1994) suggested that with development children become more selective in their prosocial behavior in a manner fitting with social norms. Similarly, Warneken and Tomasello (2009a) proposed that “children start out as rather indiscriminate altruists who become more selective as they grow older (p. 466)” due to their increasing social-cognitive capabilities. Yet, referencing children’s tendency to offer comfort to parents more than to strangers, Warneken (2009, 2018) also acknowledged that *familiarity* with a recipient is a simple and salient factor that may influence children’s instrumental helping early in life, noting that “an altruistic bias toward familiar individuals (as a cue for kinship) might be one of the earliest mechanisms for selectivity in the domain of altruistic behaviors already emerging in children at two years of age (p. 489)” (Warneken, 2009).

Wynn, Bloom, Jordan, Marshall, and Sheskin (2017) also argued that altruistic behavior may be influenced by familiarity with the recipient. Their arguments were based on a broad evaluation of research indicating that infants prefer some people over others based on both their level of familiarity with physical characteristics, such as voice, and some nonphysical characteristics, such as previous actions. The possible importance of familiarity in helping behavior is also consistent with Bornstein’s (1989) observation that familiarity, gained simply through unreinforced exposure, leads to an increase in positive affect for a stimulus—or, more simply put, “familiarity leads to liking” (p. 265). By this account, even mere exposure allows a child to become comfortable with another person.

Importantly, Hepach, Haberl, Lambert, and Tomasello’s (2016) study of anonymous helping demonstrated that under some conditions toddlers will help a person with whom they had little direct interaction. This could suggest that familiarity is not crucial to elicit helping behavior. However, the task used in that study elicited relatively low rates of helping overall (for familiar and unfamiliar partners) compared with other studies, leaving a gap in our understanding of how familiarity influences helping in more standard instrumental helping tasks.

Indeed, given its potential importance, the role of familiarity in studies of children’s instrumental helping behavior is rather understudied. Examining its role is important for a number of reasons. First, the extent to which familiarity affects instrumental helping informs us about the nature of children’s prosocial inclinations. Do toddlers really “quite readily help” other humans to achieve goals (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), or does this description apply to a restricted set of situations in which young children are familiar with the person in need? Relatedly, the role of stranger anxiety may be important in whether children help. In this case, although stranger anxiety often wanes by 2 years of age (Durkin, 1995). If familiarity increases toddler helpfulness, it may do so because it eliminates the element of stranger wariness. Alternatively, it may do so simply because children are more motivated to help familiar people.

Second, as pointed out by Gross, Stern, Brett, and Cassidy’s (2017) discussion of prosocial behavior through development, there are considerable individual differences in children’s willingness to trust and accept others; some do so immediately, and others do so with more hesitation. A direct study of how familiarity influences instrumental helping may clarify whether these individual differences are important to consider when interpreting studies on instrumental helping.

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