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Moral stories emphasizing actors' negative emotions toward their nonhelping behavior promote preschoolers' helping behavior



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ABSTRACT

Specific emotions, especially guilt, are considered to facilitate children's prosocial behavior. The current study differentiated moral stories with a helping theme in terms of the valence and source of emotions and aimed to clarify the effect of these stories on preschoolers' helping intentions and behavior. A total of 322 preschoolers between 4 and 6 years old were randomly assigned to four experimental groups and one control group. A specific type of moral story was presented to each of the experimental groups, whereas a nonmoral story was presented to the control group. The preschoolers were also asked to answer relevant questions to examine their story comprehension. The preschoolers' donating intentions and behavior were then measured. The results showed that all the experimental groups expressed more donating intentions than the control group. However, only the group that read the moral story emphasizing the actor's negative emotions toward his nonhelping behavior displayed more donating behavior than the control group. Therefore, the current study reveals that various moral stories dealing with a helping theme can facilitate helping intentions among preschoolers and that only certain stories can promote their helping behavior. Thus, it indicates the specificity of moral stories that facilitate prosocial behavior in terms of the valence and source of emotions in those stories.

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Introduction

Helping behavior is defined as an action that benefits others without return (Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Goldberg, 1982). There are many types of helping behavior such as picking up others' dropped objects (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), donating money or goods (Bar-Tal et al., 1982; Bryan, 1972; Dewall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008), and rescuing people from burning buildings or cold water (Bryan, 1972; Dewall et al., 2008). Helping behavior increases during the preschool years. For instance, the majority of 3- and 4-year-olds engage in helping behavior (Nielsen, Gigante, & Collierbaker, 2014), and 6-year-olds engage in more helping behavior than 4-year-olds (Bar-Tal et al., 1982). Thus, questions about how helping behavior is facilitated during the preschool years have received great attention.

Helping others involves two different aspects: helping intentions and helping behavior (Liao, Liao, Lee, & Ji, 1999). Behavioral intentions are decisions or plans to perform a behavior (Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988). As such, helping intentions only reflect decisions to perform helping behavior. The formation of prosocial intentions depends on moral judgments (Bartels, 2008; Bartels, Bauman, Cushman, Pizarro, & McGraw, 2014). Preschoolers may be willing to help others if they judge that doing so is morally right. Thus, the helping intentions of preschoolers depend on their moral judgments. Children use emotional cues to form moral judgments (Turiel & Killen, 2010). They experience negative emotions when they engage in morally wrong behavior, and they then know that a certain behavior is morally wrong (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Likewise, positive emotions experienced after engaging in morally good behavior help to judge that a certain behavior is morally right (Tangney et al., 2007). Thus, different types of emotions provide children with immediate and salient feedback on their morally relevant behavior and facilitate their moral judgments (Tangney et al., 2007). By contrast, helping behavior is the realization of helping intentions. Hoffman (2000) maintained that emotional factors such as empathy provide individuals with motivations for prosocial behavior. Studies also indicate that children's emotions (Drummond, Hammond, Satlof-Bedrick, Waugh, & Brownell, 2017; Gummerum, Hanoch, Keller, Parsons, & Hummel, 2010) and their expectations of others' emotions (Paulus & Moore, 2015) are linked to their prosocial behavior. Moreover, whether one behaves in a prosocial way depends on the types of emotions experienced (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). A number of studies have indicated that children's specific emotions, especially those such as guilt, are closely associated with their prosocial behavior (Drummond et al., 2017; Gummerum et al., 2010; Malti et al., 2016; Menesini & Camodeca, 2010; Roberts, Strayer, & Denham, 2014; Ross, 2017; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2016). According to Hoffman (1982), children's emotions such as guilt motivate them to engage in prosocial behavior in the future. Because guilt arises from the attribution that another's distress is caused by "me", this emotion reflects a sense of personal responsibility. Thus, guilt serves as a motivator for engagement in prosocial behavior (Hoffman, 1982). Therefore, preschoolers' helping behavior may be motivated by their specific emotions, especially the experience of guilt.

Moral stories play a central role in facilitating moral development (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932). Moral stories may describe a character's emotions toward morally relevant behavior. Children have access to different emotions that provide motivation for prosocial behavior through moral stories. Therefore, moral stories may facilitate children's prosocial development in terms of intentions and behavior. Moral stories with a helping theme may also include emotional elements of morality. As mentioned above, helping intentions mainly depend on moral judgments. Because various kinds of moral stories with a helping theme involve different types of emotions, these moral stories may be important for preschoolers in terms of making judgments ("helping others is morally right" and "refusing to do so is morally wrong") and further promote their helping intentions. By contrast, helping behavior may be facilitated by specific emotions, especially guilt. Therefore, there are only certain kinds of moral stories with a helping theme that may facilitate helping behavior of preschoolers. Based on these considerations, the current study aimed to clarify whether various moral stories that dealt with a helping theme could facilitate helping intentions among preschoolers and whether only certain stories could promote their helping behavior.

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