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## The specificity of reciprocity: Young children reciprocate more generously to those who *intentionally* benefit them



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### ABSTRACT

Young children engage in direct reciprocity, but the mechanisms underlying such reciprocity remain unclear. In particular, prior work leaves unclear whether children's reciprocity is simply a response to receiving benefits (regardless of whether the benefits were intended) or driven by a mechanism of rewarding or preferring all benefactors (regardless of whom they benefited). Alternatively, perhaps children engage in genuine reciprocity such that they are particularly prosocial toward benefactors who *intentionally* provided them with benefits. Our findings support this third, richer possibility; the 3-year-olds who received benefits through the good intentions of a benefactor were subsequently more generous toward the benefactor than children who either (a) received the same benefits from the benefactor unintentionally or (b) observed the benefactor bestow the same benefits on another individual. Thus, young children are especially motivated to benefit those who have demonstrated goodwill toward them, suggesting, as one possible mechanism, an early sense of gratitude.

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## Introduction

Humans are extraordinarily prosocial; we help and share with others, comfort those in distress, and even pay costs to ensure the well-being of others (Tomaseello, 2009). Strikingly, these prosocial behaviors are often directed at genetically unrelated individuals. This poses a puzzle: Why do humans provide benefits to others when neither they nor their genetic relations gain from those benefits?

One principal explanation is direct reciprocity wherein favors are exchanged over repeated interactions between the same two individuals (Nowak, 2006; Trivers, 1971). By taking turns paying costs and receiving benefits, both individuals benefit in the long term. Indeed, extensive work demonstrates that adults readily engage in direct reciprocity and that direct reciprocity is an important way in which human cooperation is maintained (e.g., Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004).

Developmental research shows that even young children engage in direct reciprocity. For instance, 3-year-olds share more resources with a partner if that partner had previously shared resources with them than if the partner had not previously shared with them (Warneken & Tomaseello, 2013; see also Levitt, Weber, Clark, & McDonnell, 1985). By preschool age, children also expect reciprocity from those they had previously benefited (Paulus, 2016; Sebastián-Enesco & Warneken, 2015). Thus, direct reciprocity is a fundamental part of human cooperation from early in ontogeny.

What remains unclear, however, is why children show reciprocal behavior. One possibility is that children evaluate all generous individuals positively and, thus, act prosocially toward them even if the individuals were generous toward third parties. In line with this, prior work has shown that toddlers and preschoolers prefer and are more prosocial toward individuals who are prosocial rather than anti-social toward third parties (e.g., Dahl, Schuck, & Campos, 2013; Hamlin, Wynn, Bloom, & Mahajan, 2011; Kenward & Dahl, 2011; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomaseello, 2010). Thus, it may be that what is interpreted as direct reciprocity in young children is in fact driven by a more general mechanism of rewarding or preferring prosocial individuals.

A second possibility is that children feel happy whenever they receive benefits regardless of whether or not the giver intended to benefit them, and this motivates them to act prosocially. Indeed, a positive mood does promote adults' prosocial behavior (see Carlson, Charlin, & Miller, 1988), and this may reasonably be true in young children as well (see, e.g., Aknin, Hamlin, & Dunn, 2012). Note that in prior work, 21-month-olds did respond to their benefactors' intentions and were more likely to help an adult who previously intended but failed to benefit them than an adult who unwillingly benefited them (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2010). However, young children may judge all well-intentioned benefactors more positively than ill-intentioned ones even if the good intentions are directed toward third parties. In line with this, 3-year-olds evaluate positively and are more prosocial toward individuals who have helpful rather than harmful intentions toward third parties (Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Pawson, 2009; Vaish et al., 2010).

A third, richer possibility is that young children take both of the above factors into account (whether the children received benefits and whether the benefactor intended to benefit the children), such that they are particularly appreciative and prosocial toward benefactors who *intended* to benefit *them*. This specificity in children's reciprocity would indicate that children are particularly motivated to invest in the well-being of those individuals who mean them well, thereby engaging in and helping to sustain cooperation from early in ontogeny.

Strikingly, developmental research has not teased apart these possibilities, leaving unclear what mechanisms underlie young children's emerging reciprocity. Our aim was to fill this gap in our knowledge. Toward this end, we adapted the contingent reciprocity paradigm used by Warneken and Tomaseello (2013). In that study, when 2- and 3-year-olds ran out of items that they needed to play a game, a puppet either shared or did not share its game items with them. Subsequently, the puppet ran out of game items and children could share some of their game items with the puppet. We modified and extended this basic paradigm in order to disentangle the mechanisms described above. Specifically, in the current study, a puppet provided game items either to the child or to another recipient and did so either with the intention of sharing or not. The child then had the opportunity to share game items with the benefactor.

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