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# How 18- and 24-month-old peers divide resources among themselves



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### ABSTRACT

Young children are often considered “selfish” with resources because they are reluctant to give up things already in their possession (e.g., as in dictator games). In the current two studies, we presented pairs of 18- and 24-month-old toddlers with various situations involving resources that no one possessed ahead of time. We observed very few instances of individuals attempting to monopolize the resources; rather, the pair peaceably divided them such that each child got something. Equal divisions—even involving one child sacrificing his or her own resources to establish equality—were especially pronounced when children were acting together jointly even in the absence of active collaboration. Children's divisions were also influenced by cues to ownership such as a spatial pre-division of resources and resources marked by color (and originally spatially associated with one individual). These results suggest that young children are not selfish, but instead rather generous, with resources when they are dividing them among themselves.

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### Introduction

When young children are in possession of resources, they are not very generous in giving them away to others. This is apparent both in natural observations in which preschool children are mostly

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reluctant to share their toys with others (e.g., Eisenberg-Berg & Hand, 1979; Levitt, Weber, Clark, & McDonnell, 1985; McGuire, Manke, Eftekhari, & Dunn, 2000) and in experimental situations resembling a dictator game in which preschool donors across many different cultures tend to keep the majority of resources for themselves (e.g., Benenson, Pascoe, & Radmore, 2007; Blake & Rand, 2010; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Rochat et al., 2009; Thompson, Barresi, & Moore, 1997). This is despite the fact that, when asked, 3-year-olds explicitly endorse the principle of egalitarianism (Smith, Blake, & Harris, 2013). In general, it is only by school age (5–9 years) that young children share resources that have been given to them equally or generously with others (e.g., Benenson et al., 2007; Fehr et al., 2008; Gummerum, Hanoch, Keller, Parsons, & Hummel, 2010; Kogut, 2012; Lane & Coon, 1972; Malti, Gummerum, Keller, Chaparro, & Buchmann, 2012; Rochat et al., 2009).

Obviously, in dictator game-type situations there is some kind of competition between children's selfish and generous or egalitarian motives. This is clear from two other situations of resource division. First, in some experiments children are asked to divide resources among third parties. In these scenarios, there is a strong tendency toward equal distributions (Frydman & Bryant, 1988; Peterson, Peterson, & McDonald, 1975; Rochat et al., 2009). In fact, in a number of studies preschool children must be given uneven numbers of resources to do anything other than allocate resources strictly equally among others (e.g., Olson & Spelke, 2008; Svetlova & Brownell, 2015). Even infants seem to expect equal distributions among third parties (Geraci & Surian, 2011; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011; Sloane, Baillargeon, & Premack, 2012; Sommerville, Schmidt, Yun, & Burns, 2013).

The second situation in which preschool children are generous and/or egalitarian involves collaboratively produced resources. Hamann, Warneken, Greenberg, and Tomasello (2011) had pairs of 3-year-olds encounter a situation in which one of them had three rewards (the lucky child) and the other had only one reward (the unlucky child). What differed across three experimental conditions was what led to this asymmetrical distribution. In one condition, the unequal distribution resulted from participants simply walking into the room and finding three rewards versus one reward at each end of a platform. In this situation, the children were selfish; the lucky child almost never shared with the partner. In a second condition, each child pulled his or her individual rope to obtain the rewards. Here the lucky child shared approximately one third of the time. But in a final condition, the asymmetrical rewards resulted from an equal collaborative effort on the part of the two children pulling one rope together. To begin, children saw a clump of resources (as well as their partner seeing the clump of resources), and there was no sense that the resources were “mine”; either they were no one's or else they were “ours” as they worked together to obtain them. Here the lucky child shared one reward with the unlucky child (to create an equal 2:2 split) nearly 80% of the time. This is by far the youngest age at which children have been shown to respond to an advantageous inequity by correcting an unequal outcome requiring a sacrifice on their part.

What is common to these two situations in which preschool children are generous and/or egalitarian is that they do not begin in possession of any objects. In third-party situations, the children have no stake in the distribution at all, and so their selfish motives are not relevant. In the sharing after collaboration situation, each peer sees the same clump of resources without thinking of them as “mine”; thus, there is no issue of them needing to relinquish resources that are already in their possession. A related reason why preschool children appear to be selfish in most resource distribution studies is that they typically make their distributional decision unilaterally. That is, a child decides how to allocate resources between himself or herself and a passive or absent agent. The few studies that have found infants keen to share goods with others generously have elicited this generosity via an adult's direct request (Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Schmidt & Sommerville, 2011). Arguably, however, the most “natural” situations for children in dividing resources—for most of human evolution and in most human societies—are situations in which children must decide among themselves how to divide up resources (Hamann et al., 2011; see Hay, Caplan, Castle, & Stimson, 1991, for natural observation; see Warneken, Lohse, Melis, & Tomasello, 2011, for experimental studies). These observations raise the possibility that even younger preschool children might act generously and/or fairly in situations in which they decide with a partner, bilaterally, how to divide up non-owned resources between themselves.

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