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Brief Report

Learning how to help others: Two-year-olds' social learning of a prosocial act



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ABSTRACT

Engaging in prosocial behaviors (acts that benefit others) is associated with many positive outcomes in children, including the development of positive peer relationships, academic achievement, and good psychological functioning. This study examined the social learning mechanisms toddlers use to acquire prosocial behaviors. This brief report presents a new experimental procedure in which 2-year-olds (28–32 months, $N = 30$) saw a video of an adult performing a novel prosocial behavior in response to another person's distress. Children then had the opportunity to imitate and implement the behavior in response to their own parent's physical distress. Children who saw the video were more likely to perform the novel action and to display non-demonstrated prosocial behaviors relative to (a) children who did not view the video but saw a parent in distress and (b) children who saw the video but witnessed their mother engage in a neutral activity. These results suggest that toddlers imitate and emulate prosocial behaviors for social interaction and that children can apply such behaviors in appropriate situations.

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Introduction

Prosocial behaviors encompass a range of helpful, affiliative, and supportive behaviors that are aimed at benefiting others (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Learning to interact in a prosocial manner is an important and potentially challenging developmental task for young children (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). Prosocial acts begin to emerge during infancy and increase in number and sophistication through toddlerhood as children learn to cooperate with parents and

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peers and to provide aid and comfort to people in physical or emotional distress (Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Hay & Cook, 2007; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). This study investigated social learning as a means through which 2-year-olds acquire these social behaviors.

Observational learning in toddlers

Guided by the comparative literature, developmental researchers have identified distinct social learning mechanisms (for a review, see Want & Harris, 2002). At a basic level, when children observe another person acting in a particular situation, it may increase their interest to that situation, prompting more trial-and-error learning. This *stimulus enhancement* may lead children to rediscover the model's acts. Children also may *emulate* another's example, by learning and reproducing the general outcome or goal that the other person obtained, or may *imitate*, by reproducing both the model's outcome and the exact acts the model used to attain that end. It is important to understand which of these learning mechanisms children use in order to pinpoint what they can be expected to learn from a prosocial example.

Beginning in infancy, imitation is an effective way for children to learn how to interact with objects. For example, 14-month-olds who see an adult perform an unusual act reproduce both the physical outcome with a novel object (turning on a light) and the specific manner used to bring about the outcome (bending and touching with the head) (Meltzoff, 1988b). There is also evidence that infants will emulate others' acts. When presented with a tool that was difficult for them to use, 12-month-olds used their hands instead of the tool even after seeing an adult employ the tool (Nielsen, 2006). Imitation and emulation are powerful learning mechanisms for children; even infants can learn others' body movements, acts on objects, and sequences of behaviors from live demonstrations (e.g., Barr, Dowden, & Hayne, 1996; Bauer & Mandler, 1992; Carpenter, Akhtar, & Tomasello, 1998; Meltzoff & Moore, 1977) or from video (e.g., Barr & Hayne, 1999; Meltzoff, 1988a).

Social learning of prosocial behaviors

Past studies indicate that others' examples influence children's prosocial and antisocial behaviors. A classic example of the uptake of antisocial behaviors comes from Bandura and colleagues' Bobo doll studies, in which 3- to 5-year-olds showed increased and novel forms of aggression after witnessing adults' aggressive behaviors (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963). Similar methods demonstrate children's use of prosocial examples; preschoolers who saw an adult demonstrate caretaking behaviors increased their general nurturing behaviors toward a sick child (Gray & Pirot, 1984). Furthermore, kindergarteners were more likely to help a distressed peer after hearing an adult's attempt to comfort the child, particularly when the adult first interacted with the participant in a nurturing way (Staub, 1971). In a longitudinal study, Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, and King (1979) found that 1.5- to 2.5-year-olds were more likely to respond to others altruistically if their mothers frequently explained or otherwise addressed others' distress, demonstrating the importance of everyday examples on children's prosocial behaviors.

Live prosocial examples are likely more effective (Rushton & Owen, 1975), but children also have been shown to learn from video examples (e.g., Bandura, 1965; for a review, see Calvert, 2006). Kindergarteners who saw a prosocial television show in which friends tried to help and understand a character's feelings were more likely to later help a puppet and another child than were children who saw only neutral content (Friedrich & Stein, 1975). Indeed, a meta-analysis of studies supports consistent benefits of prosocial television content on social behaviors, particularly altruism, relative to viewing antisocial or no video content (Mares & Woodard, 2005).

Although this past work indicates that others' prosocial examples influence children's behaviors, it is not clear through what social learning mechanisms modeling has its effect. Most studies have examined whether children increase anti- and prosocial responding of any type (e.g., general nurturing responses) after seeing a model's example. These studies support learning prosocial acts through processes akin to emulation. However, children might also learn specific prosocial strategies from imitating a model's example; a child may know to apply a bandage to a friend's cut after seeing her mom

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