



Early socialization of prosocial behavior: Patterns in parents' encouragement of toddlers' helping in an everyday household task



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ABSTRACT

Patterns in parents' socialization of prosocial behavior in 18- and 24-month-olds ($n = 46$) were investigated during an everyday household chore that parents were asked to complete with their toddlers. Two socialization approaches were distinguished, one focused on specific requests for concrete actions needed to complete an immediate, concrete goal ("action-oriented"), and a second focused on the more abstract needs and emotions of the parent and the child's role as a helper ("need-oriented"). Parents were equally active at both ages in trying to elicit children's help but used different strategies with younger and older toddlers. With 18-month-olds they used more action-oriented approaches, whereas with 24-month-olds they increased their use of need-oriented approaches. They also regulated the attention of younger toddlers more, and more often socially approved older toddlers' helping. Thus, how parents prompt, support, and encourage prosocial behavior changes over the second year from utilizing primarily concrete, goal-directed requests in the service of the immediate task, to increasingly emphasizing more abstract needs and emotions of the recipient and the child's role as a helper.

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1. Introduction

Prosocial behavior, voluntarily acting on behalf of others out of caring and concern, is a core component of childhood social competence and healthy adjustment (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Although prosocial behavior is known to emerge in the second year of life (Brownell & Carriger, 1990; Brownell, Svetlova, & Nichols, 2009; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O'Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992), its developmental origins are not yet well understood. In a recent review of theoretical approaches to the early development of prosociality, Paulus (2014) includes, among others, "social interaction" models in which children engage in prosocial behavior to experience the pleasure generated by interacting with others, and "social normative" models in which the social environment supports and fosters prosocial behavior. The conceptualization underlying the current study aligns with both of these, emphasizing the social origins of prosocial behavior rather than the social-cognitive underpinnings, which are important as well (Brownell, Nichols, & Svetlova, 2013; Paulus, 2014; Vaish & Warneken, 2012).

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Whereas much of the previous work on early socialization of prosocial behavior has focused on individual differences in global parenting style, such as sensitivity or responsiveness, we were interested in the process of socialization, i.e., the specific behaviors and strategies that parents use with young children to support and encourage prosociality and how these change over the second year as prosocial behavior emerges and becomes more autonomous. We thus examined how parents encouraged toddlers' helping during a common household chore that could be undertaken together.

1.1. Socialization of prosocial behavior in early development

The current study is grounded on the premise that very early socialization of prosocial behavior trades on young children's fundamental affiliative motives. [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#) proposed that humans have an essential need to form and maintain close social relationships; that such relationships involve affective concern and caring for one another's welfare; and that this core interpersonal motive influences much of human thought, emotion, and behavior. [Bowlby \(1969\)](#) similarly argued that young infants possess a basic motive for affiliation, which fosters their behavior and relationships. Despite differences in rearing, temperament, and attachment history, typically developing infants want to engage socially and emotionally with others. Investigators from a variety of perspectives have shown that such affiliative motives promote interdependence and shared goals, social emotions, and other-regarding orientation, all of which contribute to prosocial action ([Carpendale, Kettner, & Audet, 2014](#); [Dahl, Campos & Witherington, 2011](#); [de Waal, 2008](#); [Hobson, Harris, García-Pérez, & Hobson, 2009](#); [Hrdy, 2001](#); [Kochanska, 2002](#); [Laible & Thompson, 2000](#); [Rheingold, 1982](#); [Stern, 1977](#); [Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005](#); [Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001](#)).

If prosocial behavior is rooted in affiliative motives and young children are inclined to participate in joint, affiliative activity with their parents, then parents' socialization of prosociality may both reflect and build on these motives. That is, rather than attempting to teach prosociality outright to very young children, for example by telling children to help or by reinforcing particular instances of it ([Warneken & Tomasello, 2008, 2013](#)), parents may instead stimulate and encourage it by capitalizing on their children's affiliativeness to create situations where they can work together toward other-oriented goals. In an early classic study, [Rheingold \(1982\)](#) found that 18- to 30-month-old toddlers readily participated together with parents in household chores such as setting the table or sweeping up bits of paper, becoming involved in more than 60% of the parents' activities. Children thereby learn by doing, becoming prosocial by participating together in parent-led prosocial activity, motivated by affiliation, before they explicitly intend to help or are aware of their role as a helper.

A small body of empirical research is consistent with this conceptualization. For example, [Hammond \(2011\)](#) found that mothers who included their 18- to 24-month-old toddlers in a cooperative clean-up activity after joint play had children who were later more likely to help an experimenter. In several longitudinal studies, [Kochanska](#) and her colleagues have found that when mothers and toddlers routinely engage in positive, mutually responsive affiliative activity, their children exhibit greater prosocial behavior starting in their second year and develop a stronger moral conscience ([Kochanska, 2002](#)). Finally, when 18-month-old toddlers were primed experimentally with photos depicting affiliative interactions, such as dolls hugging or holding hands, they were subsequently more likely to help an adult ([Over & Carpenter, 2009](#)). Thus, affiliative activity appears to motivate prosocial action in very young children. However, questions remain as to how parents use their young children's desire to affiliate in the service of promoting prosocial behavior.

Notably, across the childhood years, helping parents at home is related to children's prosocial behavior ([Goodnow, 1988](#)). For example, [Hammond \(2011\)](#) found that the more household chores 18- to 24-month-old toddlers participated in at home, the more often they helped an unfamiliar adult in the lab. Similarly, parents who expect their 2- and 3-year olds to behave prosocially in the family context, such as helping parents and participating in household chores, have children who are more socially competent later in childhood, including being more prosocial ([Baumrind, 1971](#)). Among pre-adolescents, assignment of household chores that involve other-oriented family care, such as helping in the garden or feeding pets, relates to spontaneous prosocial behavior ([Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996](#)). We thus examine parents' socialization strategies in the context of a household chore, laundry-hanging.

Because effective socialization practices must accommodate to the child's developmental competence, we expect that parents' socialization of prosociality should change with the child's age and accompanying growth in emotion understanding, self-awareness, perspective taking, emotion regulation, and other capacities relevant to prosocial responding. A key developmental shift in early prosocial behavior is from children's ability to engage in "instrumental," action-based helping behavior early in the second year to "empathic," emotion-based helping later in the second and third years ([Svetlova et al., 2010](#)). Instrumental helping is primarily about assisting others with achieving their action-based goals, whereas empathic helping refers to efforts to alleviate another's negative affective state. For example, 14- to 18-month-old toddlers will help an adult by picking up something he has dropped or misplaced ([Warneken & Tomasello, 2007](#)), and by 24–30 months of age they can help someone who is sad or cold by giving them what they need to feel better ([Svetlova et al., 2010](#)). Corresponding to the developmental change in these forms of helping, parents would be expected to adopt a more concrete action-based, goal-oriented, and task-specific approach early in the second year that would support and encourage children's instrumental helping; later in the second year they would be expected to integrate a more indirect and abstract, need-oriented approach and a greater focus on the parent's emotions and how the child's behavior might be helpful in responding to them in support of the transition to empathic, emotion-based helping. We test this hypothesis in the current study with 18- and 24-month old toddlers.

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