Brief report

From cleaning up to helping out: Parental socialization and children's early prosocial behavior

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Relations between parental socialization and infants’ prosocial behavior were investigated in sixty three 18- and 30-month old children. Parents’ socialization techniques (e.g., directives, negotiation, reasoning) differed for the two age groups, as did relations between socialization and different forms of emerging prosocial behavior (helping; sharing). © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Prosocial behavior, such as instrumental helping (e.g., picking up a dropped item for someone), empathic helping (e.g., comforting someone in distress), and sharing (e.g., of food or toys), appears in the second year of life (Brownell, Jesue, Nichols, & Svetlova, 2013; Dunfield, Kuhlmeier, O’Connell, & Kelley, 2011; Svetlova, Nichols, & Brownell, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), and its precocious appearance has led some researchers to conclude that early prosociality is unlearned or minimally socialized. Indeed in a recent study, overt encouragement by a parent did not influence how often young children helped an experimenter with an instrumental task (Warneken & Tomasello, 2012). However, this asocial framework leaves developmental and individual differences in prosocial behavior difficult to understand. Although nearly all children eventually engage in prosocial behavior, this behavior increases with age; and within ages, they do so inconsistently, with variations both between and within children in terms of when and how much they assist others.

An older research literature suggests that parents attempt to influence children’s prosocial behavior, and succeed in doing so (Rheingold, Cook, & Kolowitz, 1987; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979). They use praise (Grusec, 1991), negotiation (Crockenberg & Litman, 1990), reasoning and induction (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996), and directives to increase children’s cooperation and assistance, particularly with preschool-age and older children. Parents expect younger children to participate in family routines, including chores and household tasks (Graliński & Kopp, 1993; Rheingold, 1982), and they scaffold toddlers’ cooperative participation in such tasks (Hammond, 2011; Rheingold, 1982) fostering the growth of children’s autonomous prosocial involvement. In the current study we examined parents’ use of these socialization techniques with toddlers, and how their efforts, beyond reinforcement, relate to diverse forms of prosocial behavior (instrumental helping, empathic helping, and sharing). This is the first examination of how parents’ specific socialization practices to encourage helping in their toddlers are associated with emerging prosocial behavior.

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Sixty-three children participated with their parents, in two age groups: 18-month-olds (n = 30; 12 girls; M = 82.10 weeks, SD = 5.18) and 30-month-olds (n = 33; 12 girls; M = 124.63 weeks, SD = 8.75). Families were from a mid-Atlantic city and were working- to middle-class by parent report. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (70%), with the remainder identifying as biracial (9%), other (4%), African-American (2%), or no report (13%). An additional four children were excluded for experimenter or parental errors, refusal to participate, and one twin.

The study took place in a laboratory playroom after a brief warm-up play session and was video-recorded via one-way mirror. Children completed one instrumental helping task (picking up wooden sticks that were “accidentally” dropped by the experimenter; adapted from Over & Carpenter, 2009); one empathic helping task (fetching a blanket for a shivering experimenter; adapted from Svetlova et al., 2010); and two sharing tasks (giving one or more of several toy animals and cars to an experimenter who had nothing to play with; adapted from Brownell et al., 2013). All were counterbalanced for order. On each task, the experimenter provided up to four increasingly specific cues until the child assisted. These began with a non-verbal indication of the problem (e.g., shivering), followed by describing the problem (e.g., “I’m cold!”), the need (e.g., “I need to warm-up!”), and the solution (“A blanket!”), and finally, if necessary, requesting a specific prosocial act (“Can you bring me the blanket?”). During the prosocial tasks, mothers were busy filling out questionnaires and remained uninvolved with their children.

Children were scored as assisting the experimenter if they performed the task-appropriate act on each task (e.g., retrieving a blanket) at any cue in the sequence up to and including the direct request for assistance (scored dichotomously: 0 for no assistance; 1 for assisting). Spontaneity of prosocial behavior was also scored for each task according to the cue at which the child assisted (4 for initial cue; 0 for no assistance after final cue). Spontaneity scores on the two sharing trials did not differ significantly and were averaged to create a single spontaneity score. The number of items shared (0–10) was also recorded for each sharing task.

After the prosocial tasks, dyads played with a set of age-appropriate toys for a fixed period and mothers were asked to clean-up the toys with their child when they heard a knock on the window (average clean-up duration = 142 s; SD = 74.52 s). Parents’ efforts to encourage their children to assist them in cleaning up were coded for the frequency of praise, character attribution, reasoning, negotiation, and directives. Parents were also rated (0–4) for the amount and consistency of scaffolding of their child’s efforts (adapted from Hammond, Müller, Carpendale, Bibok, & Lieberman-Finestone, 2011; see Table 1 for coding definitions). Two independent coders were trained to a minimum of 80% reliability on each code.

Preliminary analyses showed that none of the measures differed by child gender, nor were there order effects, and analyses were collapsed over gender and task order. There were no age differences for clean-up duration; however duration was correlated with mothers’ use of directives (younger children) and reasoning (older children). Because the duration of clean-up was attributable to a variety of factors (e.g., children’s motor capacities), controlling for clean-up duration in the analyses did not substantively alter the results.

Descriptive statistics for children’s prosocial behavior with the experimenter are presented in Table 2. Some of the parental socialization utterances were mildly skewed; correspondingly all correlations reported are Spearman rank correlations and non-parametric analyses were used to compare groups. Older children helped with more tasks than younger children (Mann–Whitney test, p < .001), and were more likely to assist instrumentally by picking up the dropped sticks (Mann–Whitney test, p < .01) and empathically by providing a blanket (Mann–Whitney test, p < .001), but they were not more likely to share. Older children also helped more quickly both instrumentally and empathically (Mann–Whitney test, p < .001), and shared more quickly (Mann–Whitney test, p < .01). Older children did not share more items (M = 1.59, SD = 2.14) than younger children (M = 1.54, SD = 2.14). Prosocial behavior was only moderately related across tasks. Specifically, spontaneity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socialization category</th>
<th>Definitions/example</th>
<th>18 months mean (SD)</th>
<th>30 months mean (SD)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>Specific commands or requests for particular actions to be carried out; e.g., “Can you put the block in the basket?”</td>
<td>20.33 (SD = 11.01)</td>
<td>13.79 (SD = 9.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Explanations of the situation and the need for assistance; e.g., “We need to clean up these toys so we can play some new games”</td>
<td>1.13 (SD = 2.26)</td>
<td>1.55 (SD = 1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character attribution</td>
<td>Comments on child characteristics; e.g., “You really like to help!”</td>
<td>2.00 (SD = 2.02)</td>
<td>1.42 (SD = 1.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>Positive comments on the child’s actions; e.g., “Good job!”</td>
<td>1.87 (SD = 2.73)</td>
<td>1.36 (SD = 1.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Compromising with child to solicit assistance &amp; cooperation; e.g., “You can play with that now, while we clean up the rest of the toys”</td>
<td>No instances</td>
<td>1.23 (SD = 1.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>0=Parent provides almost no appropriate support (adult-centered; includes interference, intrusiveness, excluding the child); 4=Parent provides consistent and age-appropriate support almost all the time (child-centered; integrating child’s efforts &amp; activities, helping child regulate, providing autonomy support)</td>
<td>1.53 (SD = 1.01)</td>
<td>2.06 (SD = 1.39)</td>
</tr>
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of instrumental and empathic helping were correlated among 18-month-olds ($r(28) = .40$, $p < .05$), and at both ages spontaneousity of sharing was associated with sharing more items (18 months, $r(28) = .77$, $p < .01$; 30 months, $r(31) = .36$, $p < .05$). Sharing and helping were not related at either age.

Descriptive statistics for mothers’ socialization practices during clean-up are shown in Table 1. Mothers used directives significantly more often than any other technique (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .001$). Use of praise, character attribution, and reasoning did not differ significantly from one another, but all were used more often than negotiation (Mann–Whitney test, $p < .001$). Mothers were more likely to use directives with younger children (Mann–Whitney, $p < .01$), and reasoning with older children (Mann–Whitney, $p < .05$). Negotiation was not used at all with younger children. Scaffolding did not differ significantly between younger and older children. Socialization techniques were generally unrelated to one another, with the following exceptions. In younger children, directives were related to reasoning ($r(28) = .37$, $p < .05$), and marginally related to character attribution ($r(28) = .31$, $p < .10$). In older children, reasoning was related to negotiation ($r(31) = .35$, $p < .05$), and character attribution was negatively related to praise ($r(31) = −.38$, $p < .05$).

Mothers’ socialization techniques were associated with their children’s prosocial behavior. Among younger children, maternal directives were correlated with more spontaneous instrumental helping ($r(28) = .37$, $p < .05$), and scaffolding was marginally related to more spontaneous instrumental helping ($r(28) = .32$, $p < .10$). Reasoning was negatively correlated with spontaneous sharing ($r(28) = −.47$, $p < .01$). Among older children, scaffolding was correlated with more spontaneous empathic helping ($r(31) = .36$, $p < .05$), and negotiation was marginally related negatively to spontaneous instrumental helping ($r(31) = −.30$, $p < .10$).

These results extend recent findings illustrating that prosocial behavior exhibits change during its emergence over the second year of life, changes that differ by age and the specific form of prosocial responding (Brownell et al., 2013; Svetlova et al., 2010). Whereas 30-month-old children helped more often than 18-month olds, younger children shared at the same rate as older children. Nevertheless, 18-month olds required substantially more support and encouragement from the recipient than did 30-month olds to both help and share. Thus, although prosocial responding emerges in the second year of life, it initially depends on adults’ active efforts to solicit and promote it, becoming more autonomous over the second year.

Further, we found that different forms of prosocial behavior are unrelated to one another in the later period of childhood, consistent with other recent findings (Dunfield et al., 2011). That toddlers who share more readily do not necessarily help more readily suggests that a general prosocial disposition may not yet exist, and although young children’s instrumental and empathic helping were related, this likely reflects that both types of helping were slow and less skilled. Rather, early prosocial action may be governed by the demands unique to a given task or situation, including the recipient’s needs and how they are communicated, situation-specific knowledge and skills, and the perceived costs of assisting. A general caring motive or disposition may await further development of social and emotional understanding, or further socialization of norms of caring.

Finally, several interesting patterns emerged for relations between parents’ socialization of children’s helping in the cooperative clean-up setting and children’s willingness to help or share with the experimenter on a different set of tasks. Similar to other recent findings, no relations were found between maternal praise and children’s prosocial behavior (Warneken & Tomasello, 2012). This suggests that socialization of prosociality in the toddler years may occur through other means. By examining a wider array of parental socialization approaches the current study sheds light on this possibility, however, subsequent studies should also explore measures of socialization in contexts other than a clean-up scenario. Parental socialization of children’s assistance and cooperation during clean-up may have its own unique demands and be less likely to tap some aspects of socialization such as empathy and concern for others.

In line with previous findings, parents used reasoning more with older toddlers, and more concrete directives with younger toddlers (Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke Yarrow, & Girniius-Brown, 1987). Presumably, parents adjust their socialization efforts to take into account toddlers’ growing ability to comprehend others’ needs and emotions, and this both strengthens children’s understanding and helps them map it onto specific situations. Accordingly, maternal directives to 18-month olds were positively associated with how quickly children helped, but were unrelated to helping in 30-month olds. In contrast, mothers who used more complex explanations with 18-month olds, requiring them to reason about the situation, had children who shared less readily, perhaps because this approach was too advanced for young children. Similarly, negotiation, a particularly advanced form of reasoning (Kuczynski et al., 1987), was negatively associated with helping in 30-month olds. On the other hand, mothers’ scaffolding of children’s efforts to assist them was associated with children’s helping at both ages; at 18 months it was related to instrumental helping whereas at 30 months it was related to empathic helping. Instrumental helping with others’ goals is easier than empathic helping that seeks to alter another’s internal states (Svetlova et al., 2010), thus it appears to be age-appropriate support of children’s efforts to assist others that is most effective.

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<th>Instrumental helping</th>
<th>Empathic helping</th>
<th>Sharing</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>30 months</td>
<td>18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion who assisted</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity score (M; SD)</td>
<td>(1.59)</td>
<td>(1.28)</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
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In sum, socialization approaches beyond reinforcement are associated with early forms of prosociality, and the features of socialization that matter for nascent prosocial behavior appear to differ for older and younger toddlers.

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