How Do Parents Socialize Prosocial Behavior in Toddlers?

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Introduction

Prosocial behavior emerges in the 2nd year, but developmental patterns & mechanisms are not yet fully understood (Hay & Cook, 2007)

Parental socialization may be an important contributor

- Sensitive responsiveness relates to toddlers’ empathic concern (VanderMark, 2000)
- Parents begin to socialize standards for behavior in the 2nd year, including moral & prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, et al, 1992; Gralinski & Kopp, 1993)

Other socialization influences may also contribute

- Parents’ talk about others’ emotions may make emotions more salient and enhance children’s awareness of others’ needs & desires (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006)

We examined how parent emotion talk & socialization of prosocial responding relates to sharing over the 2nd year.

Participants

18- & 24-month old (N = 66)

Procedures

SHARING

- Child had many toys; adult playmate had none (6 tasks)
- Adult delivered a series of cues to communicate her need/desire

Sharing score: Cue at which sharing occurred (0 = no sharing; 5 = share immediately)

Socialization of prosocial behavior

Parents rated how often they encouraged prosocial behavior by modeling, requesting, thanking, praising, or rewarding it (0 = never; 4 = daily; 12 items; 0 – 48 possible)

Parental emotion talk

Parents read 2 wordless picture books to children which portrayed people and animals in various contexts, some of which included emotions (e.g., boy drops ice cream cone & cries)

- Emotion talk production: # times parent labels or explains emotions
- Emotion talk elicitation: # times parent asks child to label or explain emotions (e.g., “Is he happy or sad?”)

Results

Sharing: Age Differences

Parental Socialization: Age Differences

Parental Emotion Talk: Age Differences

Sharing x Socialization

Sharing Score (age controlled)

Socialization of Prosocial Behavior

Elicit Emotion Talk

Produce Emotion Talk

Conclusions

2-year-olds share more often and more readily than 1-year-olds, and need less adult support to behave prosocially.

Parents socialize prosocial behavior as early as the 2nd year of life both directly, by encouraging and rewarding prosociality, and indirectly by asking children to reflect on and label others’ emotions.

Moreover, because they are related, these influences may work in tandem.

We find similar patterns for socialization of early prosocial helping (Svetlova, et al, Symposium 3-008, Sat, 8:20 am, Room 516A)