Preschoolers weigh the desires of all involved when engaging in social helping
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Background

During the second year of life, children begin to help others achieve a variety of instrumental, action-based goals (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006; Warneken, 2013). Although individuals regularly struggle with goals that involve physical objects, unmet goals often involve people. Consequently, helping someone may involve assisting them to achieve a social goal, rather than an instrumental one.

Beier, Over, & Carpenter (2014) recently demonstrated that when an experimenter repeatedly called unsuccessfully to another person, 3-year-olds were motivated to help by directing the target person’s attention toward the caller. This finding extends the description of children’s helping behaviors into the social domain. However, rates of social helping were considerably lower than within-subject rates of instrumental helping (50% versus 91%), emphasizing that social helping presents specific challenges to children that instrumental helping does not.

Aims & Hypotheses

Reduced rates of social helping may reflect:

1. Difficulty of considering how social helping affects those beyond the goal-bearing agent.

2. Individual differences in personality traits like shyness that result in a delayed inclination to intervene on other people.

Hypothesis 1: If children consider the impact of social helping on others, then they should take longer to engage in social helping when doing so would violate the Player’s expressed wishes.

Hypothesis 2: If individual differences in personality traits influence children’s interventions on others, then parent-reported shyness (EAS – Shyness; Buss & Plomin, 1975) should be more negatively associated with overall rates of social than instrumental helping.

Methods & Design

Participants

Thirty-two 3-year-olds (M = 38.14 (1.15) months; 11 female)

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help Type</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Help</th>
<th>On Request</th>
<th>No Help</th>
<th>Social Helping Scores</th>
<th>Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test</th>
<th>Latency of unrequested help (s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Out of Reach</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.50, 2.56, 2.23</td>
<td>2.63 0.008 0.33 28.58 24.69</td>
<td>5.36 5.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Unnoticed by Player</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.00, 1.75, 1.70</td>
<td>45.85 26.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Player Not Interested</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Children’s instrumental helping behaviors are commonplace, however social helping occurs less frequently. Reduced rates of social helping are influenced, in part, by consideration for the appropriateness of social helping, as well as individual differences in personality traits like shyness which attenuates helping generally (Stanhope et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2015). Moreover, three-year-olds adopted multiple behavioral strategies to resolve the Caller’s unmet social goal. For example, when social helping was appropriate, children were inclined to inform the Player about the Caller’s goal. When helping was inappropriate, children discouraged the Player’s original social goal. This prosocial alternative to helping is a ripe domain for future research.

References


