Toddlers’ selective social behavior towards high-status individuals
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Introduction
From a young age, infants are able to identify physical markers of social dominance, such as size and posture (Thomsen et al., 2011; Mascaro & Csibra, 2012). Infants use information about social dominance relationships to generate expectations and predict outcomes of future interactions. By age 5, representations of an individual’s social status influence how children learn from others (McGuigan, 2013).

However, little is known about how younger children’s representations of social dominance may influence their own social decisions. The current study explores how toddlers’ representations of social dominance relationships influence their choices in a selective helping and a selective play task.

Methods

Design
Participants:
24 26 to 30-month-olds (M = 28.5 months)
12 male; 12 female

Introductory phase:
Participants were introduced to an experimenter. Prior to entering the testing room, the participant met each actor separately for 90s each. Actors behaved identically in this warm-up phase and no status information was conveyed. Participants learned a new game in which a player can bounce two balls on a small trampoline.

Demonstration phase:
Participants watched the two actors perform a series of skits portraying social dominance (3 minutes total).

Selective Helping trial:
Participants saw the actors play with stacking rings, and were given the opportunity to give one actor the last ring. The experimenter encouraged the participants’ response.

Selective Play trial:
Participants were given a ball from the previous trampoline game. The experimenter encouraged them to join the actor with whom they wanted to play.

Results

Toddlers did not show a preference in selective helping behavior (13 of 24, p = 0.83).

However, a significant majority of toddlers chose to play with the dominant actor instead of the subordinate actor (17 of 22, p = 0.017).

Thus, representations of social dominance influence children’s selective social behavior prior to their third birthdays.

The difference between toddlers’ helping and play choices may derive from the different social demands incurred within each task.

The selective helping task requires children to meet the needs of one actor at the expense of the other’s needs. Selectively playing with one actor does not deny the needs of the other, potentially making the choice easier.

Current work examines how other tasks with reduced demands will continue to reveal a social preference for dominant individuals.

For instance, one ongoing version uses a selective donation measure that allows children to enrich the experience of one actor without diminishing the experience of the other actor.

References