



Origins of Individual Differences in Prosocial Dispositions: Preschoolers



Abby C. Winer and Ross A. Thompson

University of California, Davis

Abstract

Prosocial behavior fosters positive social competence for individual children and strengthens society as a whole. This study is one of the first to employ a battery of prosocial tasks to study preschoolers' prosocial behavior. Findings suggest that specific tasks result in interindividual differences in rates of helping but also reveal intraindividual consistencies in children's prosocial behavior. Contrary to expectations, attachment security was a weak predictor of individual differences in children's prosocial behavior.

Introduction

- The development of other-oriented behaviors such as prosocial behavior (voluntary behavior intended to benefit another) facilitates the development of positive social conduct. Much research has been conducted on prosocial behavior in adolescents and adults but little is understood about the nature of prosocial development in early childhood (Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinrad, 2006). An important next step in the field is to explore individual differences in preschoolers' prosocial responding, particularly in the context of support in the parent-child relationship.
- There are some indications in the literature that attachment, which can be considered the most formative relational experience of young children, predicts prosocial behavior (e.g., van der Mark, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2002). However, in this and other studies, this association has been modest and not always reliable (e.g., observed for a girl-only sample). No research has assessed both concurrent attachment security and multifaceted observations of children's prosocial behavior in preschool age children.
- The present study investigated the origins of individual differences in preschoolers' observed prosocial behavior. We examined associations between children's prosocial behavior and measures related to children's relational experiences.

Research Questions

- Do young children show reliable prosocial dispositions across tasks which vary by cost and type of prosocial response required?
- To what extent does the quality of the parent child relationship (as indexed by attachment security) relate to young children's prosocial behavior?

Methods

- Participants.** 62 4-year-olds and their mothers (50% Caucasian, 35% Hispanic/Latino). Children's mean age was 4.57 years (55% female).
- Procedure.** Mothers and their 4-year-old children ($M= 4.07, SD= .31$) were invited to our lab for a single session during which we assessed children's prosocial responding and the quality of the parent-child relationship along with several other tasks not included in the current analyses.
- Measures.** Children's prosocial behavior was observed from three counterbalanced tasks designed to assess a range of contexts: (a) picking up spilled **markers** after the experimenter has accidentally tripped (helping); (b) sharing some of their own **snack** when the experimenter received far fewer and expresses hunger (sharing); and (c) giving or sharing their own **balloon** after the experimenter expresses sadness after her own accidentally popped (empathy). Prosocial behavior was coded based upon whether the children instrumentally helped or not (e.g., giving his/her balloon).
- The quality of the mother-child relationship was assessed using the Attachment Q-sort (AQS, Waters & Deane, 1985). Two indices of attachment security were created. A continuous attachment security score was created based upon criterion sorts. Children were also classified as either secure or insecure using a cutoff of .30. The distribution of security in our sample resembles other middle-class samples (71% secure, 29% insecure).

Results

- Bivariate Pearson correlations between tasks reveal intraindividual consistency between the helping tasks as each are significantly, but modestly associated with one another (see Table 1).
- One-way repeated measures ANOVA validated the different costs of helping for each $F(2, 122)= 32.47, p< .001$ (see Figure 1). Bronferroni post-hoc tests revealed that there were significant differences in helping between the tasks. Children were more likely to help in the markers than the snack task ($p< .001$), more likely to help in the markers than the balloon task ($p< .001$), and more likely to help in the snack than the balloon task ($p< .05$).

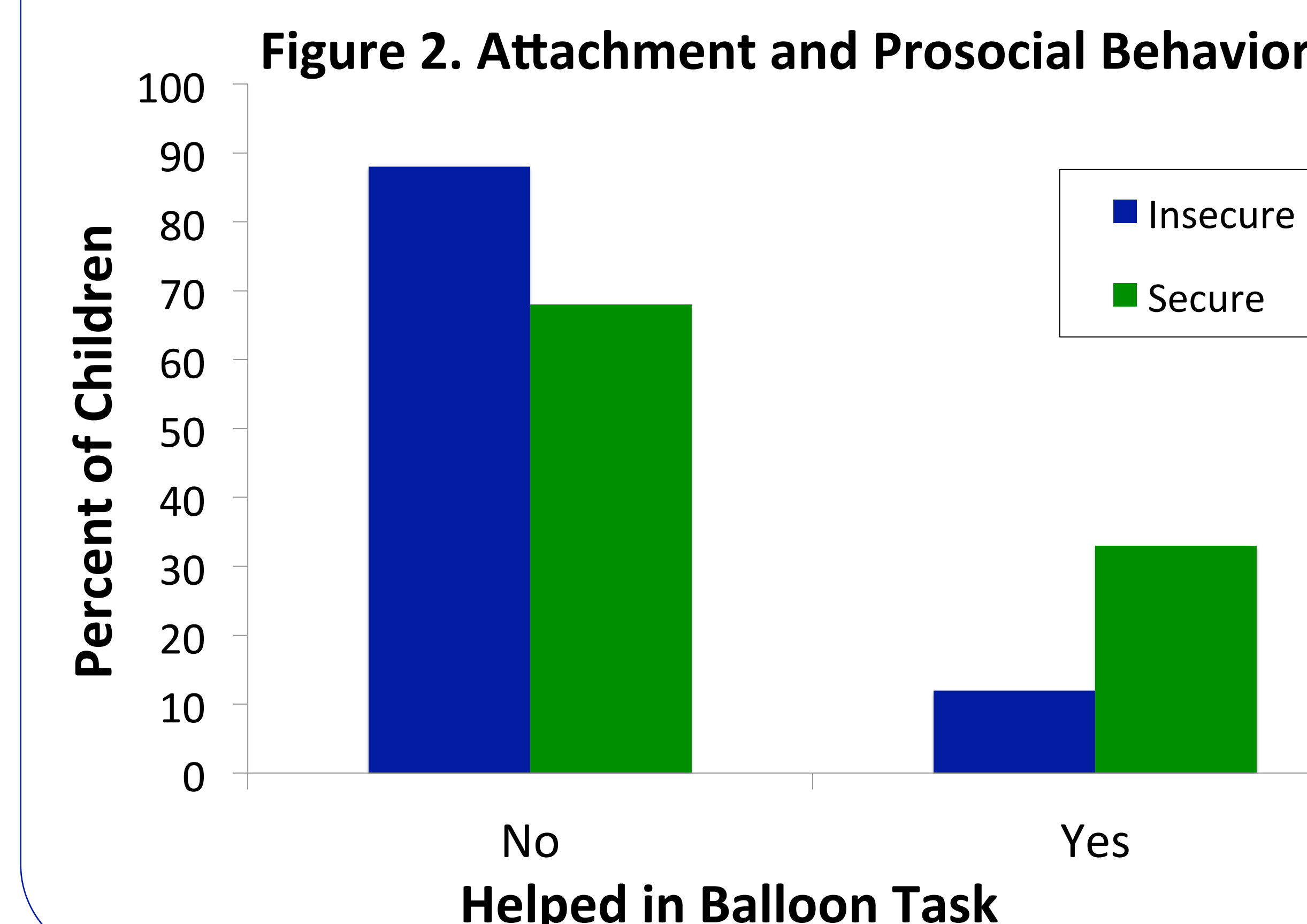
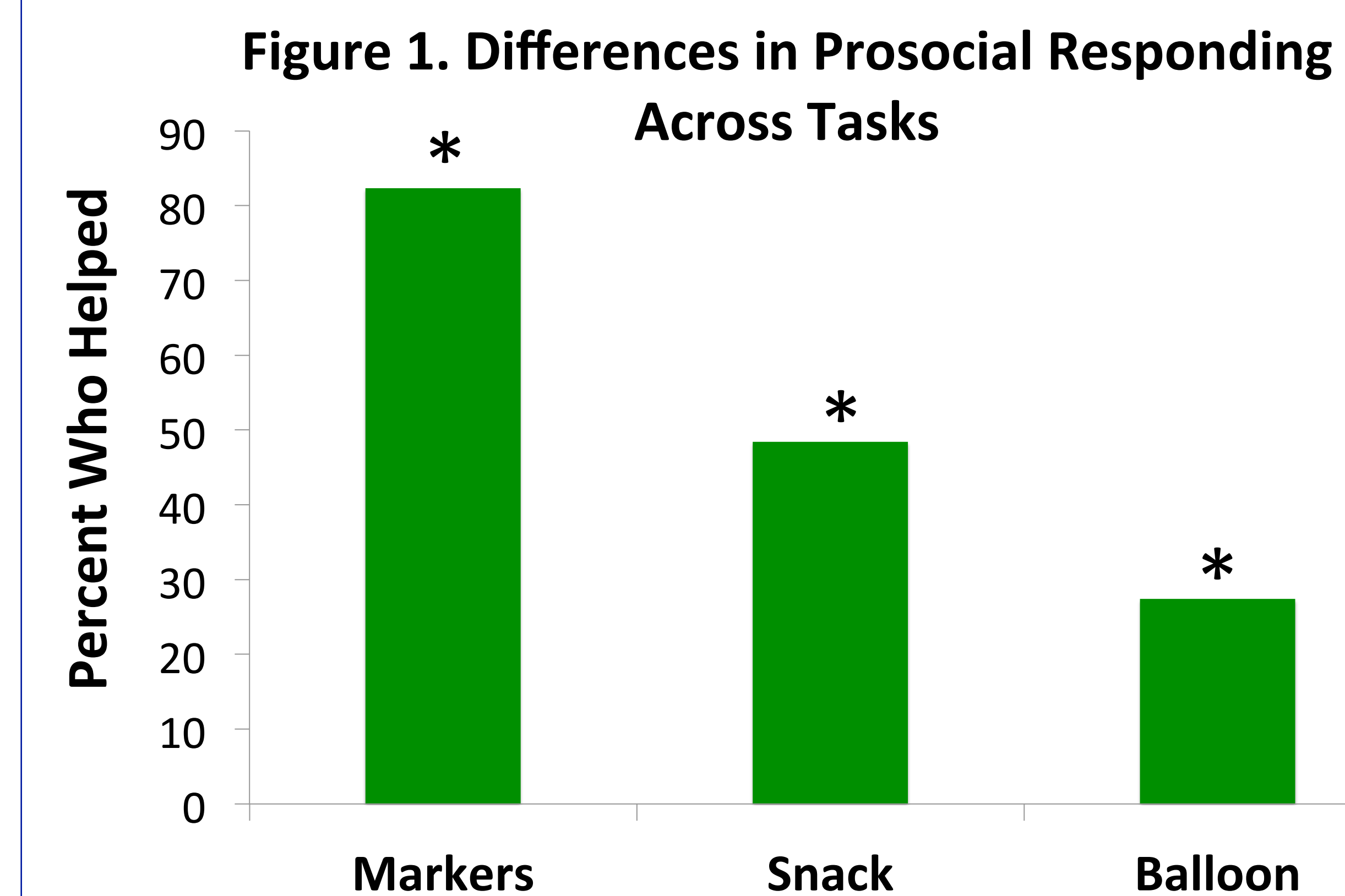
Results

- Bivariate Pearson correlations between helping in each of the three tasks with continuous attachment security scores were not significant. The strongest association was found with helping in the balloon task, but it was not significant ($r= .205, p= .110$).
- Contingency table analyses of helping in the balloon task by attachment groups (secure/insecure) were marginally significant (Chi-square= 2.89, $p< .10$) indicating a trend for securely attached children to be more likely to assist in the balloon task (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Intercorrelations between Prosocial Tasks

	Markers	Snack	Balloon
Markers (Instrumental)	1		
Snack (Sharing)	.28*	1	
Balloon (Empathy)	.28*	.27*	1

* $p< .05$ (2-tailed)



Discussion

- The three prosocial tasks were deliberately selected for the different types of helping behavior they targeted and the different costs inherent in each. The different loadings of each task in terms of their costs was validated in the different rates of helping between tasks. However, the intercorrelations between the tasks also suggest that the tasks also tapped into a common prosocial factor, suggesting that young children are beginning to developing reliable prosocial dispositions.
- Does attachment relate to prosocial behavior in preschool-age children? The strength of the association between attachment and prosocial behavior was not a compelling one. Although this was contrary to expectations, when we more closely examine the extant literature, we also find weak and inconsistent associations between attachment and prosocial behavior (e.g., van der Mark et al., 2002).
- A reasonable working hypothesis is that attachment security might be associated with young children's prosocial behavior in *some* situations, but not all. The situations in which attachment might be most influential are those involving emotional or empathic incentives, in which helping is motivated by an affective connection with the recipient. It is also possible that security is most influential when the costs of helping are high, and other motivational influences are not as strong.
- This study is one of the first to observe young children's actual prosocial behavior in tasks which varied in empathic incentive and cost. The balloon task was highest in both characteristics. It was also the only task in which there was an association with the security of attachment, albeit weak and marginally significant.
- Future investigations should attempt to more closely examine the nature of the relationship between attachment security and prosocial behavior. Attachment security may relate to aspects of prosocial behavior in situations which are more likely to activate the attachment system, such as those that involve greater emotional distress in another.

*Contact Information: acwiner@ucdavis.edu