The role of emotion in the development of prosocial motivation

Ross A. Thompson
University of California, Davis

Emily K. Newton
WestEd

Abby Winer Schachner
SRI International
Emotional competence can assume many roles in the development of constructive social behavior

- Emotion understanding can contribute to young children’s comprehension of another’s needs, desires, and goals
- Attention to and awareness of another’s feelings can contribute to empathy or sympathetic responding
- Maternal mental state language can enhance children’s emotion understanding by highlighting the importance of feelings, goals, desires, and their influence on another’s behavior
- A young child’s experience of emotionally warm, responsive relationships, especially with caregivers, can contribute to a reciprocal interest in attending to others’ intentions and goals
- Mother-child conversation can enlist a young child’s awareness of others’ intentions and feelings into a system of values that promotes constructive social behavior
Prosocial measures . . .

- Helping (neutral experimenter)
- Helping (sad experimenter)
- Sharing
- Empathy
Are there reliable individual differences in prosocial responding by toddlers?
How is prosocial behavior associated with children's sympathetic concern and personal distress?

For Personal Distress: $F(2,80) = 4.78, p < .05$

For Sympathetic Concern: $F(2,75) = 8.08, p < .001$
How are individual differences in prosocial behavior associated with mother-child interaction?

Logistic Class Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Class 1 vs. Class 2 OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>Class 2 vs. Class 3 OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>Class 1 vs. Class 3 OR (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Sex</td>
<td>0.58 (0.20-1.68)</td>
<td>1.77 (0.50-6.22)</td>
<td>1.03 (0.27-3.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>1.02 (0.99-1.05)</td>
<td>0.99 (0.95-1.02)</td>
<td>1.01 (0.97-1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.39 (0.85-2.27)</td>
<td>2.49 (1.17-5.31)*</td>
<td>3.45 (1.63-7.33)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Mental State Language</td>
<td>0.95 (0.86-1.03)</td>
<td>1.17 (1.02-1.33)*</td>
<td>1.10 (0.96-1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity x Language</td>
<td>0.99 (0.92-1.05)</td>
<td>0.91 (0.81-1.01)</td>
<td>0.89 (0.80-1.00)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, ***p < .001

Class 1 = Not Prosocial, Class 2 = Moderately Prosocial, Class 3 = Frequent Helpers; OR = odds ratio

Interaction between maternal sensitivity and maternal mental state language in predicting children's prosocial class membership (LCRA)

Probability of being a Frequent Helper (vs. Not Prosocial)

- High mental state language
- Low mental state language
Do preschoolers show reliable differences in prosocial responding at age 4½?
Prosocial groups at 6 years of age

Prosocial groups

- Low (N=4)
- Medium (N=12)
- High (N=27)
- Helpers of convenience (N=8)

Prosocial Aggregate Score

- Helping
- Sharing
- Empathy

Prosocial groups at 6 years of age
How consistent are prosocial groups at 4½ and 6?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T1 Groups</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Frequent Helpers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent helpers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mother-child conversation about helping and not helping

• References to emotions, needs, and desires – of the (potential) help recipient or the child -- were frequent for each conversation type, along with positive or negative moral evaluative statements.

• Conversations about not helping at age 4½ were shorter but were more strongly associated with prosocial behavior at age 6.

• In the conversations about not helping, mothers' use of positive moral evaluatives (“That was nice to do”) and their references to negative moral emotions (e.g., "sorry") were significant predictors of prosocial behavior at age 6.

• Shared positive affect between mothers and children at age 4½ was also a significant predictor of prosocial behavior at age 6.

• Maternal rule-based justifications were never associated with children's prosocial behavior at any age.
Interim conclusions . . .

- Individual differences in early prosocial behavior are consistent across helping, sharing, and empathy tasks, suggesting that a core disposition to assist others is developing during this period.

- Differences in prosocial behavior across tasks are associated with empathic concern but are negatively associated with personal distress, consistent with theoretical expectations about prosocial motivation.

- In very young children, differences in prosocial behavior are associated with maternal sensitivity and maternal mental state language, pointing to the importance of the child's experience of care and emotion understanding.

- Emotion-focused language assumes a broader role in mother-child conversations about helping with older children, along with morally evaluative statements. Rule-based justifications are never influential.
Thanks!

Ross A. Thompson
Department of Psychology
University of California, Davis
rathompson@ucdavis.edu

Emily K. Newton
Wested
SRI International
eknewton@gmail.com

Abby Christine Winer Schachner
Wested
SRI International
acwiner@me.com