

YOUNG CHILDREN'S CONCERN FOR OTHERS' WELL-BEING AS ONE ONTOGENETIC BUILDING BLOCK OF EARLY MORAL MOTIVATION

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ABSTRACT

The human capacity to be moral presents itself in behavior that directly benefits others, in particular, when prosocial behavior takes on the form of the benefactor choosing to put the beneficiary's well-being and interests before his or her own. Not having any morals is equivalent to acting with complete disregard for others. From a psychological perspective, the question of when and why humans help others is often explained by cognitive and affective factors contributing to our prosocial motivation. However, from personal experience most people can recall instances when individuals do not behave prosocially and appear to only pursue their own interests in disregard for others' well-being. How can one explain these contradictory tendencies? This is a fundamental question concerning psychology: What motivates us to be prosocial? One contribution to studying this question has come from studying human prosocial behavior in its earliest occurring forms, namely in young children.

Children are helpful to others from an early age (e.g., Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006, 2009; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). From as early as 14 months children readily become involved in another's situation and they will help others by instrumental and informational means (e.g., Liskowski, Carpenter, Striano, & Tomasello, 2006; Warneken & Tomasello, 2007). More recently, studies have investigated the actual motives that guide young children's spontaneous helping behavior. Do young children help others in order to get credit for their helpful acts or because they genuinely care about the welfare of the person in need? In one study, Hepach, Vaish, and Tomasello (2012) found that 2-year-old children's arousal decreased both when they could help themselves and when they could not help but saw another person provide the help. It did not matter whether children

could profit from the situations through providing the help themselves (which could be later reciprocated). What mattered was whether the person in need was helped.

In its earliest occurring forms, children's prosocial behavior appears to be motivated by a genuine concern for another's well-being. In adults, one considers this to be a moral motive. However, one would not necessarily consider these instances when children help others spontaneously and effortlessly as moral behavior. As children develop, they acquire the cultural norms and standards of their group. Furthermore, they will be exposed to peers and encounter situations when their own interests may be at odds with those of others. Likewise, children will come to realize that they cannot help everybody and that certain people are more reliant on their help than others. In some cases, another's request for help may simply be unjustified. These examples will play a crucial role in children's development from wanting to help others to wanting to be moral, i.e., wanting to do the right thing.