Exploring the influence of parental sensitivity on prosocial behaviour
Alexandra Vanderschot, supervised by: Dr. Stuart Hammond
Social and Moral Development Lab, University of Ottawa

Introduction
- Prosocial behaviour (PSB) → voluntary actions that aim to help another, emerging around 14 months of age.
- Individual Differences: increasing evidence that parent-child interactions (e.g., scaffolding, mental state talk) are related to individual differences in early PSB.
- Quality of parent-child emotional interactions: limited research of impact of parental sensitivity on PSB.
- Sensitivity: responsiveness to child, synchrony, warmth, positive affect, and supportive ness.
- Autonomy Support: parenting behaviors aimed at supporting children’s goals, choices and sense of volition.

Novel contributions:
- Investigating multiple forms of PSB (everyday helping, autonomous helping, prosocial tendencies).
- Mixed methods (questionnaire data and in-lab data).
- This two part study examines the relationship via:
  1. Questionnaire responses.
  2. In lab parent-child interactions (ongoing).

Methods Part 1 (Questionnaire)
Participants:
- N = 114, aged 12 to 48 months (M = 21.71, SD = 7.41).
- 62 females (108 mothers) residing in Canada.

Procedure:
- Parents responded to a questionnaire regarding their child’s helping behaviours in the home.

Measures:
- Parental Measures:
  - Responses on questions regarding managing children’s unhelpful helping were coded for overall sensitivity and autonomy support.
  - Participant received either a 1 (observed) or 0 (unobserved) score for each category in two contexts (chores and care/self-care tasks).**

- Prosocial Measures:
  - Everyday Helping: assistance with 9 chores (score out of 9).
  - Autonomous Helping: assistance with 5 self-care tasks (score out of 5).

Methods Part 2 (In-Lab)
Current Participants:
- N = 14, aged 12 to 48 months (M = 21.71, SD = 7.41).
- 8 females from Ottawa-Gatineau region.

Procedure:
- A parent and their child entered the lab to complete a variety of helping tasks (instrumental helping, collaboration).
- Parent-child structured play: Parent and child followed a recipe card to “make pancakes” and then cleaned up by washing the dishes.

Results

Part 1 (Questionnaire)
Descriptive Statistics
- Parental Measures:
  - Autonomy Support and Sensitivity (ASPS) (M=2.80, SD=1.31)
  - Autonomy Support (AS) (M=1.41, SD=.71)
  - Sensitivity (PS) (M=1.38, SD=.76)
- Prosocial Measures:
  - Prosocial Tendencies (PST) (M=11.87, SD=1.93) → empathy, etc.
  - Everyday Helping (EH) (M=5.97, SD=2.09) → chore collaboration.
  - Autonomous Helping (AH) (M=4.38, SD=.97) → self-care tasks.

Partial Correlation (Age in Months of Child partialled-out)

- Autonomy Support and Parental Sensitivity was correlated with both Prosocial Tendencies (r=.32, p<.10) and Everyday Helping (r=.22, p<.05).
- Autonomy Support alone was highly significant in its correlation with both Prosocial Tendencies (r=.33, p<.01) and Everyday Helping (r=.22, p<.01) and marginally significant in its correlation with Autonomous Helping (r=.17, p<.10).
- Parental Sensitivity alone was correlated with only Prosocial Tendencies (r=.23, p<.05).
- Prosocial Tendencies was correlated with both Everyday Helping (r=.46, p<.01) and Autonomous Helping (r=.24, p<.05).

Part 2 (In-Lab)
- ** Data collection for the In-Lab portion is ongoing.**

References

Discussion
Reviewing Results:
- Although parental sensitivity was not correlated with everyday helping or autonomous helping, it was however correlated with overall prosocial tendencies.
- Therefore, parental sensitivity may be a predictor for global prosocial behaviour.
- When sensitivity was combined with autonomy support the correlation was even stronger with prosocial tendencies, in addition correlated with both everyday and autonomous helping.
- Therefore, autonomy support and sensitivity together could predict PSB.

Limitations:
- When looking at the descriptive statistics, the mean for autonomous helping is high, thus it may have an effect on the correlations due to the possible ceiling effects.
- SES diversity – mostly upper-middle class participants.
- When coding questionnaire responses the experimenter must remain as objective as possible, the variety of responses make it difficult not to infer other caretaker qualities.
- E.g., one may assume that because a parent is sensitive to their child they must also be encouraging.
- When coding in-lab data it is difficult to anticipate children’s behaviours and when given free range of the toy kitchen there are a variety of behaviours that are difficult to fit into a coding scheme.
- A smaller scale limits the variation in scores and may have an impact on the significance of the results.

Further Research:
- Does parental sensitivity have an impact on PSB among peers (sharing tendencies)?
- Alternative measures of sensitivity and could potentially add a specific question to the questionnaire or revise the coding scheme.
- Train parents to do the in-lab tasks to compare children’s helping of familiar figures to strangers.
- In line with previous research on parental sensitivity, this study is highly skewed towards mothers, focus future research on fathers influence of paternal sensitivity on child PSB.

Conclusions
- The results of this study show a significant impact of parental sensitivity on PSB and the influence is compounded when autonomy support is included, therefore proving parenting socialization has an important role.
- It is important to investigate parental socialization tactics on child social and moral development for a variety of reasons:
  - Early in development sensitivity is central to the development of a healthy parent-child relationship.
  - What children learn in childhood carries on throughout their life so it is important for parents to aid in the development of their child’s prosocial behaviour.

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