



Exploring the influence of parental sensitivity on prosocial behaviour

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Introduction

- **Prosocial behaviour (PSB)** → voluntary actions that aim to help another, emerging around 14 months of age⁵
- **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 supportiveness⁴
 - **Autonomy Support** → parenting behaviours aimed at supporting children's goals, choices and sense of volition³

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 ($M = 30.04$, $SD = 12.37$)
- 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)**

**Note: 0 means parent's answer did not contain elements of autonomy support/sensitivity – not a direct observation

Prosocial Measures

- Prosocial Tendencies → Goodman (1997) Prosocial measure (score out of 15)
- 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 ($M=4.38$, $SD=.97$) → self-care tasks

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

	ASPS	AS	PS	PST	EH
Autonomy Support and Parental Sensitivity					
Autonomy Support	.88**				
Parental Sensitivity	.89**	.56**			
Prosocial Tendencies	.32**	.33**	.23*		
Everyday Helping	.22*	.22**	.10	.46**	
Autonomous Helping	.14	.17†	.17	.24*	.45**

** Highly significant correlation, $p < .01$ * Significant correlation, $p < .05$

† Marginally significant correlation, $p < .10$

- 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 **



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 the 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 relationship¹
 - 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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