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Helping hands: Exploring the earliest emergence of prosocial behavior

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Literature Review

Prosocial behavior

- Prosocial behavior (PSB) is defined as voluntary behaviors intended to benefit another.¹
- In children, prosocial behavior can include helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating.
- Prosocial behavior is an integral part of human development, contributing to social cohesion and harmony, and the survival of the species.²

Emergence of prosocial behavior

- PSB is thought to emerge in the first year of life.
- Toddlers begin to engage in forms of *instrumental helping*, “assisting another in achieving an action-based goal”³ such as picking up dropped items.
- Almost all research has studied children who can locomote (i.e., walk or crawl).



The earliest helping

- We know almost nothing about how prosocial behavior actually emerges – as if it appears out of ‘thin air’.
- Some research has begun to explore toddlers helping in other contexts, such as in self-care tasks (e.g., feeding; bathing) that they are too young to complete on their own.
- Prosocial behavior in self-care contexts could occur before locomotion.
- Recent study by Hammond et al. (in press) found, through a questionnaire study, that parents recalled earliest helping “in care and self-care contexts”⁴ – such as diaper changing, feeding, bathing, dressing, and tooth brushing.
- Parents recalled helping as early as 3-4 months of age, i.e., early in the *first year of life*.
- However, other parents recalled helping much later, e.g., 12-13 months of age.

Recollection and age of child

- One limitation of the Hammond et al. study is that parents of older children tended to recall helping emerging later in the life span.
- Those who recall later helping were also more likely to recall helping in chore contexts.
- Another limitation is that parents’ view of what constitutes help may have not included early cooperation in self-care tasks (e.g., they may have been more likely to picture the child independently completing a task) – with no opportunity for follow-up.

Current Study

- The current study seeks to address the limitations of Hammond et al. and will play a crucial role in the planning and development of a prospective longitudinal study on the emergence of helping.
- The present study seeks to determine parents’ of 12-13 month-old babies recollection of the emergence of helping.
- The present study’s telephone interview format will allow for a more in-depth investigation of the forms of early helping than a questionnaire.



Methodology

- Families were recruited from across Canada via Internet and community-based ads.
- After assenting to an informed consent procedure, parents responded to an online questionnaire, providing information about demographics, and current and past prosocial comportment of their children.
- Parents were asked:
 - if their child assisted with routine chore activities (e.g. laundry, vacuuming/sweeping, dishes, cooking/food preparation, feeding siblings or pets, groceries/shopping, gardening, putting away toys/cleaning own room, throwing away trash);
 - if their child assisted with self-care tasks (e.g. dressing, bathing, toileting, cleaning teeth, and feeding themselves);
 - to recollect the earliest instance of their child helping (“Thinking back, what was the first thing your child did that was helpful to you? How old were they when this happened?”);
 - whether they would assent to participate in a 20-minute telephone interview about the “Involvement in the Home” section of the questionnaire.

Data collection

- Data collection is ongoing.
- Goal is to interview 10-15 parents.

Preliminary results

- Initial results suggest an earlier onset hypothesis is correct.
- Early signs of helping (cooperation and coordination) noted from 3 months of age.
- E.g. Infant would lift legs up to facilitate the changing of his diaper.
- Infants often copy or imitate behaviors being modelled by their parents/primary caregivers.

Discussion

Rethinking prosociality

- The present study supports the view that helping emerges early in first year of life (first raised in Hammond et al.⁴).
- Must shift thinking about prosocial behavior to include more than just overt/explicit/conventional ideas of helping (or helping revolving around the ability to use locomotion). – need to explore realm of cooperation/coordination.
- Parents may overlook instances of prosocial behavior because they do not coincide with their understanding of the term “help”.
- Early “prosocial behavior blends helping and being helped in that the infant is the recipient of their parents’ help, even as parents benefit from their infants’ actions.”⁴
- Early PSB emerges as cooperation and coordination with parents, when infants participate in routine, self-care tasks willingly and/or without resisting or generating hindrance.

Conclusion and Future Directions

- The present study supports recent research conducted by Hammond et al. (in press) that suggests that “the recalled helping reported in the present study is participatory” and that “young infants are able to perceive and perform prosocial behaviors.”⁴
- To address the limitations involved in parents’ recollections after the fact, it would be useful for parents to keep a diary in which they record examples of prosocial behavior on the day these actions occur.
- Next step is to take a prospective rather than a retrospective approach to get more accurate and detailed data.



References

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Images

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Acknowledgements and thanks

Parents and babies taking part in our study
Professor Stuart I. Hammond
Guillaume La Perrière
University of Ottawa - Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP)

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