



PRESS RELEASE

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Evidence that Priming Affiliation Increases Helping Behavior in Infants as Young as 18 Months

In a new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Harriet Over and Malinda Carpenter of Germany's Max Planck Institute found that priming infants with subtle cues to affiliation increases their tendency to be helpful.

Most of us are willing to help a neighbor in need, but there is no question that we pay a price for our altruism. Not necessarily in money, but in valuable time and energy, and with no promise of payback. So, why do we engage in pro-social behavior in the first place?

Psychologists believe that these actions stem from the innate social nature of humans. One idea is that group living has been so crucial to human survival for so long that there are automatic connections between group affiliation and helping behavior. If that is so, then the mere hint of the group may be enough to induce pro-social behavior even in infants.



Figure: The small background image of two interacting dolls was intended to prime the infants' subconscious thinking. Children who saw this image were more likely to spontaneously offer help (Credit: Harriet Over, Malinda Carpenter).

In their study, the researchers showed a large group of 18-month-olds photographs of household objects, for example a teapot or a shoe. The household objects were always the central image and the only thing the researchers talked about with the infants, but in the background were much smaller secondary images intended to prime the infants' subconscious thinking. As these background images, some of the infants saw two small wooden dolls, facing and engaging with each other. Others saw the dolls facing away from one another, while others saw just one doll and still others saw some wooden blocks.

The idea was that the two dolls who were obviously engaged with each other — and only those dolls — would spark thoughts of group identity and belonging — and that those unconscious feelings of affiliation would increase helpful behavior in the children. To test this, after infants saw the images, one of the researchers “accidentally” dropped a bundle of small sticks. Then she waited, and took note of which infants spontaneously reached out to help. If the infants did not help immediately on their own, the researcher dropped some hints about the sticks and needing help.

The children, who had been primed for affiliation and group belonging, were three times as likely as any of the other infants to spontaneously offer help. Moreover, it was specifically the affiliative relationship of the dolls that caused the effect. Infants who saw two dolls, who were standing close to each other but who were disengaged, were about as helpful as those who saw just the lone doll — or the wooden blocks.

These findings point to some intriguing practical implications, the psychologists believe: If mere social hints can boost children’s helpfulness in the lab, just imagine what a few small changes in kids’ social environments might do to promote selflessness in the real world.

[CAW, SJ]

Original work:

Harriet Over & Malinda Carpenter

Eighteen-Month-Old Infants Show Increased Helping Following Priming With Affiliation

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