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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 47(0)

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Publication Date

2025

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Children's expectations of paternalistic helping

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Abstract

Requests for help often guide our goal-directed helping behavior. However, sometimes the requested help does not actually accomplish the requester's ultimate goal. Here we ask whether 3- to 12-year-old children expect others to help in ways that prioritize others' ultimate goals instead of their requests, known as paternalistic helping. We also investigate whether children's expectations of paternalistic helping vary based on the relationship between the partners (classmates, enemies, and friends). In two studies (total $N = 502$), children were read a short vignette about a character who unknowingly requests a broken cup. Children were asked to predict whether a second character would give the requested but broken cup, or a different, unbroken cup. Children expected paternalistic helping when the requested item could not accomplish the target's goal. But, they were less likely to expect paternalistic helping when characters were described as enemies.

Keywords: prosocial behavior; social expectations; social cognition

Introduction

Helping is cognitively complex: it requires making—and linking—inferences about others (e.g., goals, capabilities, and beliefs), and the self (e.g., abilities and possible actions; Bridgers & Gweon, 2018). Thus, for a child to help, they must possess a causal understanding that their actions will accomplish another person's goal. One way to arrive at this understanding is through verbal prompts. For example, if an individual points at a pen across the table and asks someone to hand it to them, both the target's goal and the appropriate means of helping are clear. Correspondingly, toddlers are more likely to provide help when the asker provides a clear verbal prompt (Brownell et al., 2009). However, verbal prompts do not always make helping easier: sometimes the requested action may not actually accomplish the asker's goal. For instance, an individual asking for a particular pen may be unaware that the pen is out of ink. Thus, the target's goal is clear (writing), but following the specific verbal prompt would not allow the requester to achieve their goal. If a helper *knows* that the requested item cannot meet the goal, they might choose to help in a different way, such as by giving a different (functional) pen. This form of helping, which prioritizes the asker's ultimate goal over their verbal request, is known as paternalistic helping (Martin & Olson, 2013).

Paternalistic helping is interesting because it clearly requires a helper to link their actions to the asker's mental states and goals (whereas explicitly following a verbal request may not). Even 3-year-olds engage in paternalistic helping: when an experimenter (unknowingly) asked for a broken cup to drink water, they instead hand the experimenter a different unbroken cup (Martin & Olson, 2013). Interestingly, this action was not just about children's own knowledge that the cup was broken: they were willing to give the experimenter a broken cup when she would be able to accomplish her goal with either cup. Thus, preschoolers appear to be able to identify the correct action(s) that would meet the requester's goal and prioritize taking these actions over merely complying with direct verbal prompts.

Here, we ask whether children also *expect* others to help paternalistically. That is, when a requested action cannot accomplish the asker's goal, do children expect others to oblige the request? Or do they think helpers will act in other ways to accomplish the goal? Past research has shown that young children do have expectations that people will help (e.g., Dahl et al., 2020; Jackson & Tisak, 2001; Lee et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2022; Miller et al., 1990; Schuhmacher et al., 2023). But this work has not directly tested situations in which the potential helper would have to avoid following a specific verbal prompt in order to accomplish the requester's goal. Thus, it is critical to probe whether young children's expectations about helpful behavior also apply to situations that might be more complex or ambiguous in terms of what action would count as "helpful."

In addition to testing expectations about paternalistic helping generally, we probe the impact of social relationships on these expectations. Whereas 5-year-old children generally expect helping behavior regardless of relationship, by 8- to 9-years of age, children expect someone's parent or friend to be more obligated to provide help than a stranger (Marshall et al., 2022). We are interested in whether a similar pattern applies when the "helpful" action is paternalistic. That is, do children expect a helper to place more weight on the importance of accomplishing the asker's ultimate goal when the asker and helper are friends, compared to non-friends? Conversely, it is also possible that a helper may place more weight on fulfilling a friend's specific request.

One account that suggests children may prioritize a friend's ultimate goal (rather than verbal request) when helping is adopted utility calculus (Powell, 2022). Adopted utility calculus posits that placing value on another's person's goal is central to what it means to be friends (or "affiliated"). Indeed, children do use helping behaviors (and corresponding goal attainment) as an indication of which people are friends (see Afshordi & Liberman, 2021, for review). Therefore, children may expect people to prioritize goals when deciding how to help, and this expectation may be particularly strong

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when people are friends. On the other hand, if people are not friends, children may expect them not to prioritize each other's goals, in which case may be seen as more expected to oblige by following the action requested in the verbal prompt.

General Method and Analysis Plan

Five hundred and two 3- to 12-year-olds participated at a local zoo or science museum. By 3, children can engage in paternalistic helping (Martin & Olson, 2013), so we were interested in the age at which they also *expect* paternalistic helping. Because we were also testing the role of social relationships, and previous research found that older children were more attentive to relationships when inferring helping obligations (see Marshall et al., 2022), we tested a wide age range. Testing a wide age range also allowed us to interact with all interested families at our testing locations. All procedures and a waiver of consent were approved by the institutional review board.

In both studies, children were trained to use a two-part helpfulness scale prior to completing the measures of interest. First, children indicated whether an agent was "unhelpful" (red circle) or "helpful" (green circle). Then children saw a second scale and were asked *how* helpful or unhelpful: "a little un/helpful" (small circle), "un/helpful" (medium circle), and "very un/helpful" (large circle). Children did a scale-training in which they answered two warm-up questions: "Someone dropped their toy. Is it helpful or unhelpful to pick it up for them? How un/helpful is it?" and "Someone is coloring. Is it helpful or unhelpful to take the crayons away? How un/helpful is it?" Children were corrected if they did not answer "helpful" and "unhelpful" respectively. Participants were excluded if they failed either practice question when asked a second time after being corrected (Study 1, $n = 4$; Study 2, $n = 2$).

Next, the experimenter read each child a short vignette accompanied by pictures. All stories featured a character named Taylor who was playing with two cups: one red and one blue cup. Taylor saw that one of the cups was broken (had a hole in the bottom) and the other was not. To ensure that all children recognized that one cup is broken, children were shown a picture of the inside of both cups. The experimenter noted that the broken cup has a visibly small hole in the bottom. Which cup was broken (red or blue) was counterbalanced across participants. Children observed a second character, Alex, enter and ask Taylor to borrow a cup, either the red or blue one. Alex always (unknowingly) asked for the broken cup.

Our first and primary question of interest was children's predictions of Taylor's behavior: would Taylor give Alex the requested (broken) cup, or the unrequested (unbroken) cup? After their prediction of how Taylor would behave, participants were randomly assigned to different outcomes of the story: Taylor gave Alex either the broken cup or the unbroken cup. Children then used the helpfulness scale (from very unhelpful to very helpful) to evaluate Taylor's action. Finally, as a comprehension check, we asked children to identify which cup (red or blue) was broken. Children who did not correctly answer this question were excluded from analyses (see Participants sections).

The primary analysis for each study consisted of a logistic regression to probe children's expectations about Taylor's behavior (would Taylor give the broken cup or the unbroken cup), and a linear regression on children's evaluations of how helpful Taylor's behavior had been. Predictor variables included experimental conditions, age (continuous, in years), and their interactions. For each model, we started with a full model and engaged in model reduction to determine the final model. Specifically, non-significant higher order interaction terms were dropped from the full model one at time by removing the single highest non-significant interaction term and comparing the new model to the previous model. If the models fit the data equally well, the interaction was dropped. We continued this process until we got to the final model, which included all main effects of interest, any significant interactions, and any interactions that improved model fit (even if not significant). The final models are reported. To test whether patterns differ from chance in each condition, we also report two-tailed binomial probability tests (proportion = 0.5) on children's expectations of which cup Taylor will give to Alex.

Study 1

Methods

Participants One hundred and forty-five 3- to 12-year-olds (68% female, M_{Age} = 6.74 years, SD_{Age} = 2.19 years) participated. Children were randomly assigned to one of four conditions which varied based on Alex's Goal (General v. Specific), and which item Taylor gave Alex (Requested v. Unrequested). Additional participants were tested but excluded due to experimenter error ($n = 5$), failing the training phase ($n = 4$), failing to complete the study ($n = 3$), failing the comprehension check ($n = 3$), or interference from a parent or sibling ($n = 1$).

Procedure After agreeing to participate, participants sat down next to an experimenter at a table. The experimenter asked the child for their age (to confirm eligibility) and their gender (to gender-match the characters in the story). The experimenter then began the procedure as described in the General Method. Here, we experimentally manipulated *why* Alex was requesting the cup. In the General Goal condition, Alex wanted to put a ball in the cup to prevent the ball from rolling away. Because the ball was larger than the hole in the broken cup, this goal could be accomplished with either cup. Alternatively, in the Specific Goal condition Alex's goal was drink water. Because water would leak out of the hole, this goal could only be accomplished with the unbroken cup.

We operationalized paternalistic helping as giving the unrequested (unbroken) cup when Alex had a Specific Goal. We hypothesized that children would account for Alex's goal in predicting which cup Taylor will give such that children would expect Taylor to help paternalistically in the Specific Goal condition. We were also interested in whether this

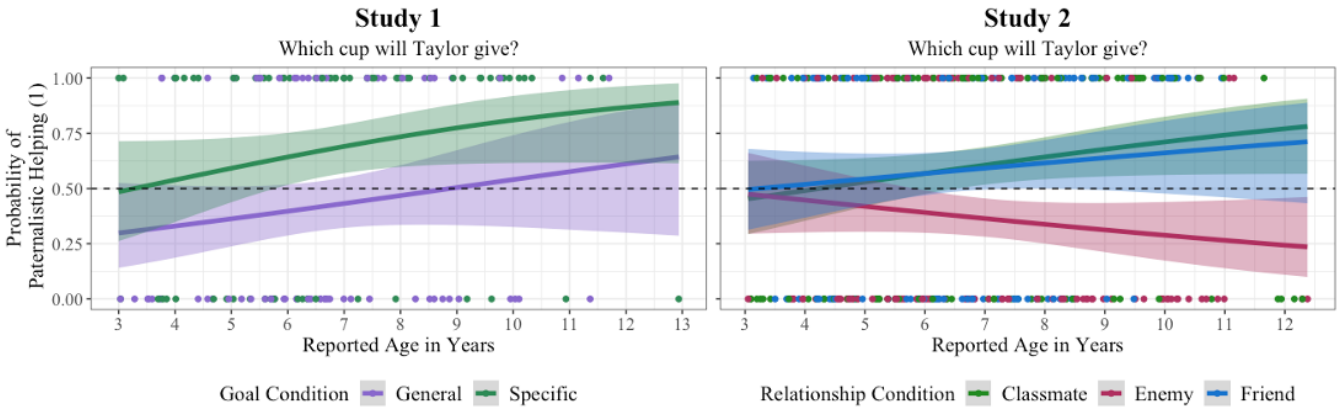


Figure 1: Children's expectations of paternalistic helping by age, depending on goal type (Study 1, left) and relationship (Study 2, right).

expectation was limited to cases in which the broken cup would be ineffective. If so, children may predict that Taylor would oblige Alex's request in the General Goal condition by giving Alex the requested (broken) cup.

After making a prediction, children observed Taylor give either the broken cup (Requested Item condition) or the intact cup (Unrequested Item condition). They then rated Taylor's action using the helpfulness scale. If children saw paternalistic helping as more helpful than obliging, we would see higher ratings for giving the Unrequested Item than the Requested Item, at least in the Specific Goal condition. Alternatively, children may only consider the target's request, and rate obliging as more helpful. After the study, children were compensated with an eraser and/or sticker.

Results

Expectation of which object Taylor will give To understand which item children expected Taylor to give, we conducted a binomial logistic regression with expectation (1 = unrequested cup and 0 = requested cup) as the outcome variable and Goal (General v. Specific), age (continuous in years, mean-centered), and their interaction as predictors. Following our analysis plan, we removed the non-significant interaction between age and Goal from the model (b = 0.07, SE = 0.17, p = .67). Therefore, the final model was: Expectation ~ age + Goal condition. The model revealed significant main effects of age (b = 0.18, SE = 0.24, p = .032), due to older children being more likely to expect Taylor to give the unrequested cup, and of Goal (b = 1.05, SE = 0.35, p = .003), due to children being more likely to expect Taylor to give the unrequested cup in the Specific Goal condition than the General Goal condition. Indeed, children in the Specific Goal condition expected Taylor to help paternalistically (n = 48 of 71 chose unrequested; binomial p = .004, two-tailed; 95% CI [0.55, 0.78]). But children in the General Goal condition were at chance in their expectation about which cup Taylor would give (n = 31 of 74 chose unrequested; binomial p = .20, two-tailed; 95% CI [0.31, 0.54]). Thus, children were more likely to expect Taylor to help paternalistically when Alex's goal could not be accomplished with the broken cup (See Figure 1, left).

Helpfulness ratings Next, we probed how helpful children rated each type of giving. We conducted a linear regression with children's helpfulness evaluations as the outcome variable (0 = Very Unhelpful, 5 = Very Helpful) and Goal (General v. Specific), Item Given (Requested v. Unrequested), age (continuous in years, mean-centered), and their interactions as predictors. The final model was: Helpfulness ~ Goal + Item Given + age + age * Item Given + Goal * Item Given. The final model revealed a significant main effect of Goal (b = -1.31, SE = 0.41, p = .002), which was qualified by an interaction between Goal and Item Given (b = 2.09, SE = 0.56, p = .003). There was also a significant interaction between Item Given and age (b = 0.39, SE = 0.13, p = .004). The main effects of age (b = -0.16, SE = 0.09, p = .077) and Item Given (b = -0.37, SE = 0.39, p = .35) were not significant. Both significant interactions included "Item Given," suggesting children evaluated helping differently based on the given cup's functionality. In particular, older children and children in the Specific Goal condition were more likely to positively evaluate giving the unrequested cup (see Figure 2 for children's helpfulness evaluations in the Specific Goal condition).

Discussion

Overall, children predicted that helpers would account for both the target's goal and the functionality of the item when helping. Children were more likely to expect Taylor to give the unrequested cup when Alex's goal could only be achieved by that cup, suggesting they do expect others to engage in paternalistic helping. Children also rated paternalistic helping as more helpful than obliging, especially when it was required to reach the goal (Specific Goal condition).

Study 2

Study 1 suggests that children expect agents to prioritize others' ultimate goals. Study 2 sought to investigate whether information about relationships changed these expectations.

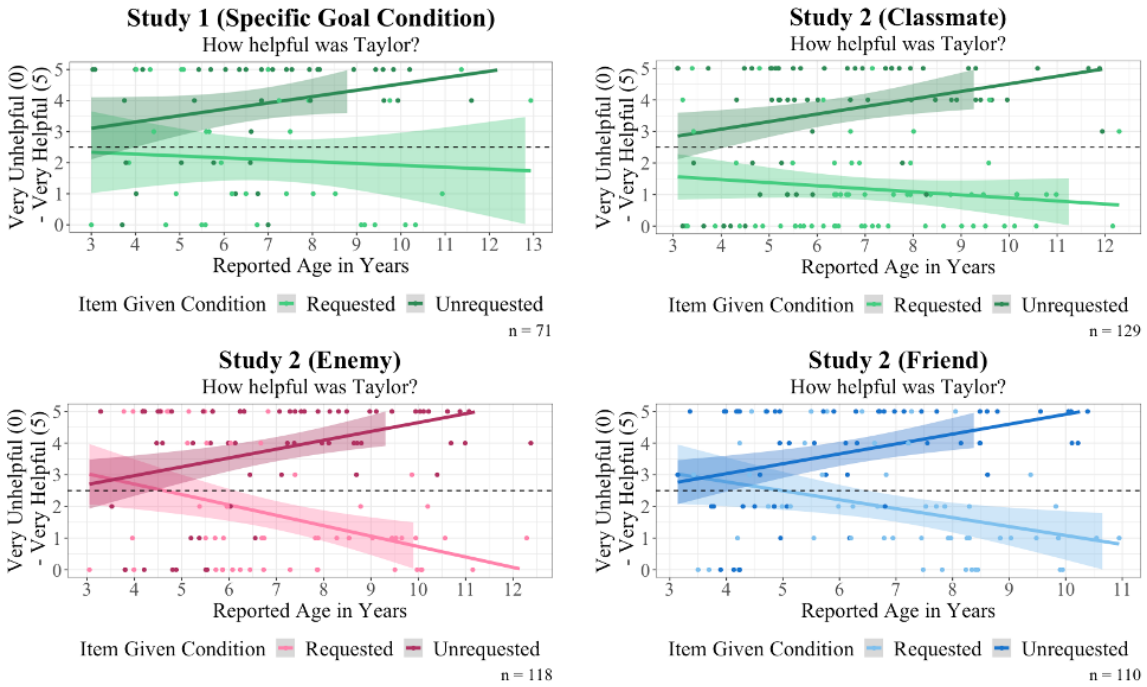


Figure 2: Helpfulness evaluations. With age, regardless of relationship, children generally rated paternalistic helping (darker lines) as more helpful than obliging a request (lighter lines).

That is, are children less likely to expect paternalistic helping among socially distant characters?

Methods

Participants An a priori power analysis using the "pwrss" package in R (Bulus, 2023) based on a proportion of expectations of paternalistic helping in Study 1 (0.714) revealed that a sample of 54 would provide 80% power at α = .05. We preregistered collecting at least 54 participants in each of our conditions (6 total; 3 Relationship x 2 Item Given) for a total sample size of at least 324 participants (see OSF: https://osf.io/h5fnx).

Our final sample included three hundred and fifty-seven 3- to 12-year-olds (57% female, M_{Age} = 6.85 years, SD_{Age} = 2.18 years). An additional 61 participants were tested but excluded due to experimenter error (n = 19), failing comprehension checks (n = 19), not completing the study (n = 8), interference from a parent or sibling (n = 7), not speaking English (n = 3), previously participating in this study or in Study 1 (n = 3), or failing the training phase (n = 2). Following our preregistered plan, data collection stopped at the end of the day on which we surpassed our desired sample.

Procedure Children heard a vignette which was almost identical to the Specific Goal condition of Study 1. However, children were given additional information about Alex and Taylor's relationship. Across conditions, children were told that Alex and Taylor were Classmates (who "go to school together"), Enemies (who "really do not like each other"), or Friends (who "really like each other"). Our primary question of interest was whether children expected paternalistic helping across relationships, or whether children were more likely to expect paternalistic helping when people were socially close (Friends) compared to when they did not like one another (Enemies). As in Study 1, we also asked children to evaluate the helpfulness of Taylor's action.

Results

Expectation of which object Taylor will give We ran a logistic regression with expectation (1 = unrequested cup and 0 = requested cup) as the outcome variable and Relationship (Classmates v. Enemies v. Friend), age (continuous in years, mean-centered), and their interaction as predictors. Classmates was chosen as the reference condition because it is the most neutral social relationship, serving as a baseline for comparisons with the other relationship conditions. Our full model was the same as the final model: Expectation ~ Relationship condition * age.

The model revealed no significant main effect of age (b = 0.16, SE = 0.08, p = .063). However, children's expectations varied based on social relationship (see Figure 1, right). In particular, there was a significant difference in children's expectations about classmates and enemies (b = -0.95, SE = 0.27, p < .001), which was due to children being less likely to expect paternalistic helping for enemies. Indeed, follow-up binomial tests revealed that children were above chance at expecting paternalistic helping in the Classmate condition (n = 77 of 129 chose unrequested; p = .034, two-tailed; 95% CI [0.51, 0.68]) but instead expected obliging in the Enemy condition (n = 75 of 120 chose requested broken cup; p = .002, two-tailed; 95% CI [0.55, 0.73]). There was also a significant interaction between age and relationship when

comparing enemies and classmates (b = -0.27, SE = 0.12, p = .026) due to the effect of relationship (classmate vs. enemy) being stronger for older children than younger children. On the other hand, children's expectations for classmates and friends were relatively similar: the main effect of relationship for friends compared to classmates (b = -0.05, SE = 0.27, p =.85) and the interaction between age and relationship when comparing friends to classmates (b = -0.06, SE = 0.13, p = .66) were not significant. However, a follow-up binomial test indicated that children did not differ from chance in their expectations in the friend condition (n = 64 of 110 chose unrequested; p = .10, two-tailed; 95% CI [0.48, 0.68]).

Helpfulness ratings We ran a linear regression on children's helpfulness evaluations (0 = Very Unhelpful, 5 = Very Helpful) with Relationship (Classmates v. Enemies v. Friends), Item Given (Requested v. Unrequested), age (continuous) and their interactions as predictors. Consistent with our preregistered plan, we removed non-significant interactions to reach the final model: Helpfulness ~ Relationship + Item Given + age + Item Given * age.

The final model revealed significant main effects of age (b = -0.22, SE = 0.06, p < .001) and Item Given (b = 2.18, SE = 0.17, p < .001), which were qualified by a significant interaction between those variables (b = 0.49, SE = 0.08, p < .001). The interaction was due to the difference in helpfulness ratings between giving each item increasing with age (as children's evaluations of giving the unrequested item became particularly positive). Children also evaluated friends as more helpful than classmates (b = 0.45, SE = 0.20, p = .028), but did not differ in their evaluations of enemies and classmates (b = 0.26, SE = 0.20, p = .19; see Figure 2).

Discussion

In Study 2, we investigated children's expectations of how different social partners will help. Children expected classmates and friends to help in similar ways: children generally expected these social partners to paternalistically help compared to obliging unhelpful requests. On the other hand, children were more likely to expect enemies to oblige the request. Children's evaluations of helpfulness primarily depended on item functionality, not relationships. Therefore, although children saw paternalistic actions as more helpful regardless of relationship, they were less likely to expect such paternalistic helping for enemies.

General Discussion

In two studies, we investigated children's expectations of paternalistic helping, and their evaluations of how helpful it was to help paternalistically. In Study 1, children expected paternalistic helping when it was necessary to do so in order for the requester to meet their goal. Thus, children can integrate information about a target's goal and the outcomes of an agent's available actions to predict how an agent will help. Children generally evaluated paternalistic helping as more helpful than obliging, suggesting goal attainment is central to children's understanding of which actions are truly helpful.

We also found developmental differences in children's expectations and evaluations. Children as young as 3 years of age are successfully able to navigate paternalistic helping paradigms when they themselves are asked to help (Martin & Olson, 2013). When asked to predict others' helping behaviors, however, younger children were less likely to predict paternalistic helping compared to older children. Younger children were also less likely than older children to rate paternalistic helping as more helpful than obliging. It is possible young children have trouble predicting paternalistic helping because it requires causally understanding how different actions would or would not meet the requester's goal (see Lagattuta, 2005; Martin et al., 2016).

Developments in theory of mind and counterfactual reasoning may also play a role. In terms of theory of mind, although the participants in our studies know which cup is broken, younger children may be less likely to understand that the *requester's knowledge* differs from their own. That is, the requester likely does not know that the cup is broken (or they would not be requesting it). If younger children do not track this knowledge difference, they might think the helper should oblige because the requester wants that cup (even if it is broken). To test the role of theory of mind, we could ask children directly about each character's knowledge and inferences about whether the helper thinks either action will accomplish the target's goal. As for counterfactuals, older children may be more likely to compare paternalistic helping to how the agent *could* have helped (by obliging). In this comparison, only paternalistic helping would accomplish the target's goal, allowing older children to thus see it as more helpful. New evidence suggests that preschoolers *can* in some cases use counterfactual reasoning to assess helpfulness (Bridgers et al., 2020), so future work could include paradigms that better prompt counterfactual reasoning (as in Nyhout & Ganea, 2019, who show both possible outcomes), to see whether younger children then show more expectations of paternalistic helping.

Study 2 asked how relationships impacted expectations. Children expected classmates and friends to paternalistically help but expected enemies to oblige. Future work is needed to understand whether children think people want to actively prevent enemies from reaching their goals or just expect that enemies do not need go above and beyond to help. In line with the later possibility, children generally expect friends to feel empathy for one another after a negative outcome, but don't expect non-friends to feel counter-empathy (Smith-Flores et al., 2023). Therefore, children may not think that enemies are actively motivated to hinder one another's goals, but they are just not particularly motivated to help.

We did not investigate the underlying mechanisms for differences based on relationship. We thought children might think others would be particularly motivated to help a friend reach their goal (leading to the largest expectations of paternalistic helping for friends). Interestingly, children's expectations about friends did not differ significantly from

their expectations about classmates. Therefore, children may hold a general expectation that people will help paternalistically but override that expectation when there is evidence of a negative relationship. Alternatively, children may indeed expect people to prioritize a friend's goals, but they might have different ideas about possible goals a friend could have. For example, children may be especially motivated to prioritize a friend's hedonistic goals. In past research on paternalistic helping, children were less likely to help paternalistically when the alternative option was less pleasurable. That is, children were introduced to an agent who asked for chocolate, even though chocolate will make them sick. When the alternative was pretty good (fruit snacks) children helped paternalistically: they avoided giving the chocolate. But, when the alternative was very different, and maybe disliked (carrots), children followed the verbal prompt and gave chocolate (Martin et al., 2016). Therefore, if children think that the requester would receive more pleasure from the requested item, they may not know which goal (instrumental = drink water, vs. hedonistic = get preferred cup) to prioritize when helping a friend. Follow-up studies can investigate which motivation and goal children expect to be guiding character's actions when they help in different ways.

Our work may inform research on evaluations of people who refuse to help. Children generally see helping as obligatory (e.g., Dahl et al., 2020; Jackson & Tisak, 2001; Schuhmacher et al., 2023), and judge people who refuse to help (Sierksma, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2014; Sierksma et al., 2014), though these expectations may vary by culture (Marshall et al., 2022; Miller et al., 1990). But, children think it is more acceptable to refuse to help when i) the social partner is more distant (Mammen et al., 2021), ii) personal costs are high (Sierksma et al., 2014), or iii) social norms suggest helping may pose risk (Marshall et al., 2023). Paternalistic helping paradigms introduce an alternative to refusing to help: obliging a verbal prompt. If an agent does not want an asker to meet their goal (e.g., because they dislike the asker), the agent may oblige a request. This action can appear "helpful" to an outsider, leading to less derogation than outwardly refusing to help. Researchers can ask whether (or when) children evaluate obliging (even when it is ultimately unhelpful) as nicer than refusing to help.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that children expect others' to prioritize ultimate goals when helping. That is, they predict that people will help paternalistically, and rate paternalistic helping as more helping than obliging a verbal request. Children also understand that relationships can guide behavior: they are more likely to predict that enemies will oblige requests, though they continue to rate this behavior as relatively unhelpful. Our work opens up several new doors for research in how nuanced prosocial expectations can inform children's own behavior and subsequent behavioral predictions.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the families for their participation in this study, and the members of the UCSB Social Cognitive Development Lab for their help in data collection. In particular, we would like to thank Isabel Serrao for her assistance on this project.

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