

Gender differences in prosocial behaviour in children aged 2-6 years essay



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Prosocial behaviour encompasses voluntary helping acts that the society values, with the intention of promoting harmonious relations and benefiting another as opposed to oneself (Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). The arousal: cost-reward model and its role in prosocial motivation proposes that a bystander's arousal is attributed to another person's distress, which they emotionally experience as unpleasant and are therefore motivated to relieve it (Dovidio, 1996). Eisenberg and Fabes (1991) contribute to the empirically supported hypothesis that affective reactions can appear in the early developmental stages and are universal that empathic arousal may be biologically inherited.

“ People will help others who have helped them and who are dependent on them”. Perceptions of reciprocity, equity and social justice shape the social responsibility norm, also involved in prosocial motivation (Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). Analysed using a cost-benefit model, altruism (a subtype of prosocial behaviour) is typically defined as the act of helping that benefits the recipient more than the performer (Dovidio, 1996). A number of studies concerning social relationships between toddlers have obtained evidence for the early emergence of prosocial behaviour.

The studies describe acts such as sharing, cooperation and reactions to the distress of parents, other adults, siblings and peers (Bridgeman, 1983; Hay, Castle & Jewett, as cited in Rutter & Hay, 1994; Hay & Rheingold, 1983, as cited in Bridgeman, 1983; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). Borke (1971) also suggests that children under the age of 7 can exhibit empathic behaviour. A common form of early prosocial behaviour is the tendency to offer objects to another individual. First apparent at

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approximately 8 months of age, it remains common throughout the following year (Hay & Rheingold, 1983).

According to Sigman, Mundy and Kasari (1993), early sharing is so common that its absence in behaviour could be an indicator of autism. The display of prosocial behaviour in young children is argued to be an effect of the development of theory of mind and their relationship has been investigated (Hughes, White, Sharpen & Dunn, 2000; Jenkins & Astington, 2000; Slomkowski & Dunn, 1996). Other factors also influence and promote prosocial behaviour in young children, some of which include attachment, parenting style and cognitive development. In children, attachment is evident when they strongly seek proximity or contact with a specific individual, often the parent, when feeling anxious or stressed (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1975). Theories have acknowledged the relevance of affective bonds between children and their caregivers to the development of prosocial behaviour (van IJzendoorn, 1997). Rawls (1971) suggests that a lack of empathic capacity signifies little attachment with parents or caregivers.

Alternatively, parents who respond appropriately to the distress of their children encourage a warm, secure attachment while modeling the importance of empathic behaviour in reciprocally satisfying social relationships in their children (van IJzendoorn, 1997). Consequently, secure children may be less inclined to engage in anti-social behaviour; they may be better equipped to regulate negative emotions about another person's pain. Attempts might then be made to relieve the individual's distress, rather than becoming overwhelmed by it (Hoffman, 1984, in Gewirtz & Kurtines, 1984).

Parenting style, as introduced, influences the display of prosocial behaviour <https://assignbuster.com/gender-differences-in-prosocial-behaviour-in-children-aged-2-6-years-essay/>

in young children and has been of paramount interest to developmental psychologists for years (Maccoby & Martin, 1983, as cited in Mussen & Hetherington, 1983). Cognitive development and information-processing skills have also been linked to prosocial capacity in young children (Quiggle, Garber, Panak & Dodge, 1992).

In a study conducted by Rosser (1982), preschool children are predicted to behave in an egocentric orientation. To sacrifice their candy and have none left for themselves, the child is put in a 'conflict situation'- their perspective and that of another is not yet aligned. Presently, there is a lack of evidence to suggest a substantial difference between young boys and girls aged 2-6 years in their exhibition of prosocial behaviour (Milan, Hou & Wong, 2006; Ostrov, Gentile & Crick, 2006; Persson, 2005; Rosser, 1982; Grunberg, Maycock & Anthony, 1985 etc etc etc). This essay aims to address the unclear distinction between genders in prosocial behaviour, considering aspects like experimental design and the cognitive development of children aged 2-6 years. In addition to the aforementioned parenting style and attachment, exposure to the media, the child's experiences as the target for altruistic behaviour and the availability of information are also factors that influence prosocial behaviour in the focus age group.

Theoretical evidence (or lack thereof) cannot suggest a clear distinction between genders during early childhood in prosocial behaviour. According to Gilligan and Wiggins (1987), psychologists used to link the emergence of morality to the point where a child understood the idea of justice. At the time, females were thought to have a lesser sense of justice than men.

However, psychologists have shifted their attention from moral reasoning <https://assignbuster.com/gender-differences-in-prosocial-behaviour-in-children-aged-2-6-years-essay/>

towards moral emotions. In doing so, gender differences in the topic no longer seem apparent. Research showing no gender difference in empathy or morality may be a sign of methodological and social justice progress.

The question does remain however, as to why there is a remarkable gender difference in antisocial behaviour among children (Hay, 2007), but not so much in prosocial behaviour. Gilligan suggests that there are flaws in how empathic behaviour is measured. Psychologists had avoided making observations of gender differences for numerous reasons including the problems of stereotyping and the intimations of biological determinism. Recent reports claiming there are no gender differences in prosocial behaviour suggest that the way morality has been studied is changing. On intuitive grounds, because both males and females have the capacity to feel compassion, it comes as no surprise that researchers measuring moral behaviour find no gender differences in their observations.

It is argued that the origin of morality needs to be located in the young child's awareness of self in relation to others. This may arise when the child acquires theory of mind which functions to organise complex social behaviour. The interplay between the development of empathic emotion and the realisation of others as mental beings becomes apparent in early childhood (Berk, 2006). Results from various studies demonstrate success in theory of mind tasks by children aged 4 years which evidences their understanding that mental states may differ between people at different times (Moore & Macgillivray, 2004).

The lack of a defined gender difference in prosocial behaviour at this early age may be attributed to theory of mind still developing at its earliest stages in both boys and girls. Conversely, egocentrism may be partly responsible for the absence of gender differences. Egocentrism -the inability to differentiate another's perspective from one's own (Berk, 20..

- may in fact influence the extent of social interaction children have with their peers, thus reducing the opportunity for prosocial behaviour to occur, which on intuitive grounds would account for the lack of gender differences in research data. Moreover, Hay (1994) hypothesised that, while prosocial tendencies are universal in the first 2 years of life, they become consolidated into the child's individual disposition afterwards. Another important factor that influences prosocial behaviour is family structure. Growing up in a single-parent household, in low-SES families or in families with high levels of dysfunction, can negatively impact on a child's emotional and behavioural outcomes. Parenting practices also play a hugely significant role. A 2005 study found that children whose parents utilised punitive, authoritarian measures displayed higher levels of aggressive behaviour and anxiety, and lower levels of prosocial behaviour than children whose parents adopted an effective and warm disciplinary style (Milan, Wou & Hong, 2005).

Early childhood is an important period for understanding how young children begin to mentally process information acquired from media as its content has been found to be very influential on their behaviour. Children who are exposed to educational media and prosocial models are more likely to behave accordingly during peer interaction (Bandura, 1977). A common form of prosocial behaviour in early childhood is relational inclusion (including <https://assignbuster.com/gender-differences-in-prosocial-behaviour-in-children-aged-2-6-years-essay/>

others in games and activities) and it is especially salient for girls.

Educational media may contribute to teaching young children how to approach others to ensure everyone is included in play, as well as improving co-operating and sharing skills (Ostrov, Gentile & Crick, 2006).

This suggests that gender socialisation processes are occurring in early childhood through media exposure. Ostrov et al. hypothesize that girls and boys attend to different behavioural tactics and schemas from media content. A key component of this process might be that children identify with same-sex T.

V. characters. However, the study conducted is limited by its sample size, thus making the analyses exploratory. The findings may not generalise to other populations as the current sample consists of high-SES children.

Persson (2005) investigates young children's experiences of being targets for prosocial concern from peers and how it affects their prosocial behaviour in natural contexts during preschool age. The specific feature in these peer interactions is reciprocity, an empirically supported notion that prosocial actions should be met with positive responses (Charlesworth & Hartup, 1967). In preschool children, positive correlations exist between benefiting from prosocial concern and performing prosocial acts (Cassidy, Werner, Rouke, Zubernis & Balaraman, 2003). Beneficially, a reinforcing mechanism may foster prosocial responding in targets of prosocial behaviour. Prosocial children are often well-liked by their peers and thus tend to be frequent recipients of prosocial acts (Cassidy, et al.

, 2003). It has also been shown that male, not female, victims of relational aggression were less prosocial than their non-victimised peers. Furthermore, prosocial acting can be a reaction to aggressive children who invoke fear in peers via a self-assertive attitude (Persson, 2005). Hay et al. (1999) find very few, if any, gender differences in young children's social interactions.

Analyses do suggest that the display of reciprocity is more often used by boys than by girls as the peer relationship developed; and the girls were more likely to share with other girls while the boys were equally likely to share with both boys and girls.

However, the youngest cohort in the sample in Hay's study did not differ in gender in sharing behaviour. This may be due to changes in the longitudinal study that were beyond factors of cognitive and emotional maturation- the death of participants' relatives and the father of one of the participants leaving the household. This poses problems of interpretation. Rosser (1982) speculates that prosocial children utilise available information to determine whether or not they should offer aid or behave self-sacrificially e. g.

, if the situation gives information about the consequences of acting prosocially to the target; and the consequences to the performer. A child who sees a model reinforced for an altruistic performance and is informed of how the recipient will benefit from it has the information available to them from which they can make a performance decision. Rosser showed that it is possible to decrease altruistic acts (donation rates) in children by giving them negative information about the consequences of donating candy. This may be because negative information was more salient to the children. The

reasons for this are not clear but could be due to the negative statements
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being more concrete (“donating candy to the poor kids will give them tummy aches”) than the positive statements which are valued socially (“you’ll be a good girl/boy if you donate your candy”). Grunberg, Maycock & Anthony (1985) reiterate the limitations in studies of prosocial children which may hinder the detection of gender differences.

One of the major problems is that an observer is present when the behaviour is measured, introducing confounding variables such as social facilitation and sensitivity to social pressures. Secondly, only a few age groups are studied (e. g. , 7- and 12-year olds) where the results are extrapolated beyond collected data points, implying that conclusions are assumed rather than observed. Lastly, different measures of prosocial behaviour are used within the same study for different age groups, meaning conclusions are based on non-comparable data.

Essentially, what most theories in this field have in common is the proposition that as the child grows older, the likelihood of expressing prosocial behaviour increases. This may be the result of either emotional or cognitive development. In lieu of the absence of definite gender differences, prosocial action is argued to become more apparent with age as influenced by successful socialisation, cognitive maturation and emotional regulation. This view implies that children who are not prosocial may have been improperly raised or are suffering from cognitive or emotional problems that interfered with normal prosocial development. References Bandura, A. (1979).

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