ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

The Moral Foundations of Prosocial Behaviour

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February 2026, Éd. rév.

Introduction

Moral development describes the changes in a person's understanding of, and feelings about, moral principles across the lifespan. Morality includes several dimensions, most prominently emotions, knowledge and reasoning, values, and prosocial and antisocial behaviours. While some of these components strongly develop across the first five years of life, significant biological and environmental factors also lay the foundation for individual differences in prosocial behaviour.[1,2] Developmental differences occur through maturation and are socialized by peers, parents, cultural values and practices.[3]

Subject

Early moral development is an important foundation for prosocial behaviour. Moral emotions may facilitate children's prosocial conduct through affective consequences of their actions for the self[4,5] (e.g., guilt) and concern for others[6] (e.g., sympathy). Alternately, they may become increasingly aware of why it is important to help others, which may motivate prosocial behaviour. Thus, for parents and teachers seeking to socialize prosocial behaviour, it is

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important to consider the affective and cognitive components of morality that facilitate such outcomes.

In recent decades, progress has been made in the study of early moral development.[7] Most early work focused on either emotions or cognitions (e.g., judgments, reasoning). Yet, both moral emotions and moral cognitions appear necessary for the emergence of prosocial behaviour.[8] What remains less well understood are the links between moral emotions and moral cognitions and how these relations change over time. There is also a need to study trajectories of moral emotions, moral cognition, and prosocial behaviour, as well as their socialization antecedents. In addition, research on how some aspects of peer influences in early moral development remains limited; for example, it is still unclear how experiences of peer exclusion shape early prosocial tendencies.

Research Context

The moral foundations of prosocial behaviour have been studied from various perspectives. Researchers have used interviews, observational measures, and parents or teacher reports of children's moral emotions, moral judgment, and prosocial behaviour. The interview measures typically include questions that assess children's understanding and reasoning about moral transgressions, such as if and why it is (not) right to transgress norms (e.g., pushing another child off the swing) and/or children's emotions anticipated in these events.[9] Observational studies have been utilized to study children's reactions to simulated distress (e.g., the experimenter expressed pain after hurting their knee[10]), spontaneous prosocial behaviour,[11] or negative reactions in response to a perceived transgression (e.g., children were led to believe that they damaged a valuable object[12]). While most research has been conducted in laboratory settings, some studies have examined natural settings (e.g., home environment, kindergarten)[13].

Key Research Questions

Developmental scientists have sought to understand at what ages children develop moral capabilities, such as empathy, guilt, or moral reasoning skills, and if development in these domains motivates children to act in prosocial ways. The central questions are how inter-individual differences in moral development relate to young children's prosocial behaviour, how these differences are associated with different socialization practices, and how normative change and atypical moral development affect changes in prosocial behaviour.

Recent Research Results

Investigators have extensively studied young children's moral emotions, such as empathy and guilt. A robust body of research indicates that affective concern (i.e., empathy) is associated with prosocial behaviour.[6] Early forms of empathy—feeling an emotion similar to what another is experiencing—emerge as early as three months of age.[14] Over time, most children develop sympathy—a feeling of concern for another—which becomes linked to their prosocial action by the 2nd year of life[11] and predicts future prosocial behaviour.[15] Early precursors of guilt, such as distress following a perceived transgression, emerge between the first and second years of life.[12] More explicit guilt responses to specific transgressions, such as imagining pushing another child off a swing, typically emerge around 3–4 years of age and are predictive of future prosociality.[16,17,18,19]

In addition, researchers have explored children's evaluations of, and reasoning about, moral issues. Even in infancy and toddlerhood, children show preferences for equal resource distributions.[20,21] By age 3, children understand that it is wrong to break moral rules and they respond more strongly to moral transgressions, involving issues of fairness or harm, than to social-conventional violations, involving traditions or customs.[22] As children's understanding of intentions develops in the second year of life, they demonstrate the first instances of spontaneous prosocial behaviours, such as helping others without being asked.[23,24,25] By the third and fourth years of life, children can more readily respond to another's negative emotional state with appropriate sharing or helping, even when personally costly.[26,27] The limited research on relations between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour in early childhood has yielded mixed findings, with some studies finding positive relations,[28] and others finding no relations.[29]

In addition, how parents and peers influence moral and prosocial tendencies has been studied extensively. Secure attachment relationships with both mothers and fathers are associated with greater prosociality,[30] supporting the use of warm and responsive caregiving, particularly in response to children's distress.[31] Disciplinary practices that minimize coercion or power assertion (e.g., spanking) and prioritize inductive discipline—explaining why a transgression is wrong based on how it affects a victim—also appear beneficial for early moral development.[12,32,33] Additionally, there is evidence that friends, peers, and siblings are important for moral and prosocial development.[34,35,36] For example, the quality of children's peer relationships is associated with later increases in their prosocial behaviour.[37]

Research Gaps

Although young children's emotions in moral contexts have been studied, more research is needed to distinguish between different motivations for prosocial behaviour, such as acting to satisfy social expectations versus acting out of selfless concern or kindness.[1] Longitudinal investigations are also warranted to better understand developmental trajectories and mechanisms that account for links between early moral development and prosocial behaviour.[39] Moreover, multi-informant and multi-method studies are needed to capture the variability in prosocial behaviour and moral development, especially among atypically developing groups of children whose expression of prosocial actions might be more context-specific.[38] In addition, current research is lacking in studies that investigate how young children's moral and prosocial development vary across diverse backgrounds—for example, in non-Western, non-industrialized countries—and as a function of adverse social contexts—including experiences of impoverishment, displacement, or out-group membership,[40] although studies have increasingly examined the impact of such factors among older children.[41]

Conclusions

Morality develops tremendously during the first five years of life. Although even infants demonstrate rudimentary capacities to distinguish right and wrong and express empathic concern, early childhood is marked by substantial growth in moral knowledge and the anticipation of more complex emotions, such as guilt. This developmental process is closely tied to children's emerging understanding of intentions, needs, and desires, in both themselves and others.[42] Individual differences in empathy and guilt have been associated with various prosocial behaviours.[6,17] In addition, empathy and guilt have been shown to predict later prosocial behaviour. There is also some, albeit limited, evidence for a positive relation between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, secure attachments with both mothers and fathers as well as inductive discipline are positively linked to young children's moral and prosocial development.[30,32] Finally, there is evidence that positive interactions with peers and close friends also support early moral development.[37]

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The early years are a time in which various components of morality emerge and rapidly develop. These components likely form the foundation for children's prosocial behaviour. Moral emotions, such as guilt and empathy, are critical because they can motivate children to behave in prosocial ways. Moral reasoning skills are important because they help children navigate complex social

and moral situations in everyday life. Parents, teachers, and peers play an important role in children's developing morality. Because the quality of parent–child relationships and peer relationships is associated with moral and prosocial development, it is important that parents and other caregivers be encouraged to interact with children in ways that foster the development of moral emotions, moral reasoning, and prosocial behaviour. In cases where parents are struggling to form secure attachments and employ appropriate discipline, it may be beneficial to engage relevant evidence-based parenting interventions for early childhood (e.g., the Video-feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline).[43] Similarly, because peers play a significant role in moral development, it is central to promote high-quality interactions with friends and peers, which may also benefit from developmentally tailored, evidence-based interventions.[44] Because moral development is central to the emergence of socially responsibly attitudes and values, social inclusion, and mental health, service providers and policy-makers should prioritize implementing strategies that promote moral development.

Tina Malti was financially supported by an Alexander von Humboldt Professorship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Antonio Zuffianò was financially supported by European Union – NextGeneration - EU PRIN 2022 MUR, Mission 4 Component 1, project PRIN "Promoting Social Inclusion and Psychological Well-being through Prosocial Functioning: From an Ecological-Causal Perspective to Intervention Design", Prot. 2022C7N58K, CUP B53D23019400006

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