

Evidence that priming affiliation increases helping behavior in infants as young as 18 months

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Most of us are willing to help a neighbor in need, but there's 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 prosocial behavior in the first place?

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. 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. For these background images, some of the infants saw two small wooden dolls, facing and almost touching 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 didn't 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.

Source: Association for [Psychological Science](#) ([news](#) : [web](#))

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