

Toddlers appreciate good intentions, study finds

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Researchers have found that when it comes to toddlers, it's really the thought that counts. Credit: Kristyn Wallace

Researchers at Queen's University have discovered that toddlers as young as 21 months appreciate good intentions, and will do their best to reward the efforts of people who try to help them.

Psychology professor Valerie Kuhlmeier and PhD student Kristen Dunfield found that toddlers are more likely to help someone who has made an effort to help them, even if that person was unable to accomplish the toddler's desired outcome.

"This is the first time anyone has demonstrated that children this young can be selective in their helping," says Ms Dunfield. "Before that, we just knew children helped, and that they helped a lot. In this case, the helpfulness didn't really change - what changed was who the child was distributing that helpfulness to."

The researchers performed three experiments, each involving 16 infants and two actresses. In the first experiment, one actress was unwilling to give a toy to the infant, while the other actress was willing but unable to do so - she offered the toy by placing it on the edge of a slanted table, and watched in surprise as it rolled away. When the infants were then given the chance to help the actresses, 75 per cent of them helped the one who had tried to help them, even though the toddlers did not receive a toy from either actress.

In the second experiment, both actresses tried to help the infants by giving them the toy. The [infants](#) were just as likely to help someone who had tried to give them a toy and failed as someone who was successful in giving them the toy.

In the third test, both actresses were successful in providing the toy to the infant, however one actress ignored the child while doing so. 75 per cent of the toddlers helped the woman who displayed [positive feelings](#) towards them as opposed to the one who acted indifferent towards them.

Thus, it was the thought that counted for the [toddlers](#), not the end result.

The researchers' findings were published in the April issue of [Psychological Science](#).

Provided by Queen's University

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