

Young children sensitive to others' behaviors and intentions

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Young children's helpfulness is tempered when they see that the person they intend to help has harmed another person. But it also diminishes when they see that the object of their attention meant to harm another, even if no harm was done.

That's the conclusion of two new studies of 3-year-olds conducted by researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany.

The research appears in the November/December 2010 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

"In finding that children are quite sophisticated and discriminating helpers, our studies show that [youngsters](#) are sensitive not only to others' moral behaviors, but also to the intentions behind those behaviors," according to Amrisha Vaish, postdoctoral researcher at Germany's Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and the studies' lead author.

Researchers carried out two studies with almost 100 middle-class German 3-year-olds. The children participated in several scenarios in which adult actors carried out various actions involving helpfulness (taping together a drawing that someone else tore), harmfulness (tearing another person's drawing), intentions to harm (wanting to but not being able to tear another person's drawing), and accidental harmfulness (accidentally tearing another's drawing). The [adults](#) then began playing a

game; children's helpfulness was gauged by whether or not they gave the adults a game piece they were missing.

The studies found that the children helped an adult less not only when they saw that the person harmed another person, but also when they saw that the person intended to harm another person without causing actual harm. When the adult was helpful and when he or she accidentally caused harm, the children were helpful, too. This suggests that children are sensitive not only to others' moral behaviors, but also to the intentions behind them.

The research sheds light on our understanding of children's moral development. And it raises questions about our assumptions that young [children](#) are not discriminating helpers, but help everyone in the same way.

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