

Disasters can prompt older children to be more giving, younger children to be more selfish

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In early 2008, Profs. Jean Decety, Kang Lee and Hong Li were in Sichuan, China, working on a study on empathy and altruism among children and had completed the first portion of it. In May 2008, an earthquake struck the region and killed 87,000 people. The team immediately decided to change the course of their study and explore what the experience of a disaster might mean to the children's concern for others. Credit: Hong Li, Jean Decety, Kang Lee

(Medical Xpress)—A natural disaster can bring out the best in older children, prompting 9-year-olds to be more willing to share, while 6-year-olds become more selfish. Researchers at the University of Toronto, the University of Chicago, and Liaoning Normal University made this finding in a rare natural experiment in China around the time of a horrific earthquake.

A crucial difference between the two [age groups](#) emerged one month after the disaster. The 6-year-olds' willingness to share in a test measuring [altruism](#) dropped by a third, while among 9-year-olds, willingness to give to others nearly tripled. Three years later, children in the age groups returned to pre-[earthquake](#) levels of altruism.

"The study provides the first evidence to suggest that experiencing a natural disaster affects children's altruistic giving significantly," said Kang Lee, university distinguished professor at the University of Toronto.

"The immediate negative effect of the earthquake on 6-year-olds suggests that altruism at that age is still fragile," Lee said.

"We think that empathy is the intervening variable," said Jean Decety, the Irving B. Harris Professor of [Psychology](#) and [Psychiatry](#) at the University of Chicago, a member of the research team and a study co-author. The study demonstrates the developmental differences in the growth of empathy, Decety explained.

As children grow up, their prefrontal cortexes mature with improved connections among the circuits involved with emotion. "As they grow older, children become able to better regulate their own vicarious emotions and understand better what they feel, and they are more inclined to act pro-socially," said Decety.

"Even with the group of 9-year-olds, we show that not only are they more altruistic and give more than the 6-year-olds, but those 9-year olds with higher empathy scores donated significantly more than 9-year-olds with lower scores," Decety added.

The journal [Psychological Science](#) will publish the study in an upcoming issue in a paper titled "Experiencing a Natural Disaster Alters Children's Altruistic Giving." Lee, who is a professor at the Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, was a lead author. Two Chinese academics, Hong Li and Yiyuan Li from Liaoning Normal University also were part of the team.

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In the study, the team tested children's altruism by having them individually pick 10 favorite stickers from a set of 100. Afterward, they were told some of their classmates were not included in the test and asked if they would give up some of the stickers for them to enjoy. Without the researcher watching, children would put stickers into an envelope and seal it if they wanted to share. The amount of stickers they chose to give up was determined to be a measure of altruism.

The children also were given a standard test of empathy, which gauged their reactions to seeing animated vignettes of people who are injured. Nine-year-olds had significantly higher scores on empathy on the test than 6-year-olds.

Although there was a significant impact on altruism one month after the disaster, the study showed that groups of 6-year-olds and 9-year-olds had similar levels of altruism in follow-up tests three years after the disaster—equivalent to the levels observed among 6-year-olds and 9-year-olds immediately before the earthquake.

"Experience with adversity, though generally having negative impacts on children, may in fact be beneficial, at least for [older children](#), in evoking [empathy](#) toward others and in turn enhancing their altruistic giving, albeit temporarily," said Hong Li, also a lead author of the paper.

Provided by University of Chicago

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