

Young children may go above and beyond when helping adults

February 12 2013

Even very young children understand that adults don't always know best. When it comes to helping, 3-year-olds may ignore an adult's specific request for an unhelpful item and go out of their way to bring something more useful, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

[Youngsters](#) may also attempt to warn adults who are doing something counterproductive, such as reaching for an empty box of crayons to draw a picture or putting on a wet sweatshirt when they say they are cold, according to the article published online in the APA journal [Developmental Psychology](#).

"In our experiments, most 3-year-olds were able to recognize that [adults](#) weren't making the best decisions and decided to be helpful in another way," said co-author Kristina R. Olson, PhD, of Yale University.

"Furthermore, we found that very young children are motivated to intervene when others are going about things in the wrong way, even when they are not prompted to do so."

In one of three experiments, an adult asked 3-year-olds to help with simple tasks, such as writing a note or making a [phone call](#), but mistakenly asked for a dried-up marker or toy phone. A majority of the children ignored such a request and, instead, brought the adult something functional, such as a working marker or a real phone. Almost all the children who were asked to bring over a helpful object obeyed. If they were told the item was going to be thrown in the trash, they brought the

requested object whether it was useless or functional, which indicates that children don't simply prefer functional objects, according to the article.

The children did not discriminate between functional and dysfunctional objects if either one would help the adult complete the task. For example, they would bring a toy phone if the adult said she wanted to use it to hold down some papers.

A series of three experiments involved 58 children, 30 of whom were girls, whose parents brought them to a laboratory at Yale University. For most of the experiments, children examined four pairs of matched functional and dysfunctional objects: a real phone and a toy phone; a functional glass and a cracked glass with a hole in the bottom; a real hammer and a rubber toy hammer; and a working marker and a dried-up marker. After examining all of the objects, the children helped the experimenter get ready for a "game." In one trial, the experimenter would ask, "Could you give me that cup so I can pour some water?" In half the cases, the experimenter would point to the cracked glass and in the other half she would ask for the functional glass. The adult did not remark on any issues with either of the objects, so it was up to the child to notice that the glass was cracked or that the phone was a toy and not a real phone.

"It appears very [young children](#) can recognize that helping someone can sometimes mean paying attention to their ultimate goal rather than their specific request," said Olson. "This work illustrates that even within the first few years of life, children have a remarkably sophisticated understanding of helping."

More information: www.apa.org/pubs/journals/reldevofp-martin.pdf

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: Young children may go above and beyond when helping adults (2013, February 12)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-02-young-children-adults.html>

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