

# Developmental psychology: Friendship wins out over fairness

February 29 2016

---



Credit: chasingmoments / fotolia.com

When children decide to share, the giver's relationships with the pool of recipients determine who gets how much. They will give more to a wealthy friend than to a needy stranger - at least in cases where wealth is measured in stickers.

Even young [children](#) share things with others. In numerous studies, child psychologists have sought to identify the factors that motivate children's sharing decisions, and determine how their sharing behavior changes as they get older. However, there appears to be little agreement as to what precisely the results of these investigations tell us. Some researchers equate a willingness to share with the onset of the ability to consider situations in moral terms. Others believe that sharing behavior in young

children is primarily motivated by the desire to improve their social status. Markus Paulus, Professor of Developmental Psychology and the Psychology of Learning in Early Childhood at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet (LMU) in Munich, has now carried out a set of experiments which was designed to distinguish between the two hypotheses. The outcome of the study, which appears in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, is likely to disappoint those who regard children as innately virtuous. For it shows that children prefer to share with a friend who already has an abundance of the resource concerned than with a stranger who possesses much less.

## **The significance of friendship**

Many of the factors that have an impact on children's sharing behavior have already been defined. Young children tend to give more to the have-nots than to the affluent, they share with friends more readily than with strangers and they are influenced by whether a potential recipient has previously displayed generosity. "But we did not know which of these factors takes precedence in children's thinking", Paulus points out. In order to identify the primary influence on sharing decisions, Paulus performed a number of experiments with pre-school children who were given a supply of brightly colored stickers, which they were asked to share in various contexts and with various restrictions. The participants were divided into two [age groups](#) - 3- to 4-year-olds and 5- to 6-year-olds - because the years in kindergarten are known to be a crucial phase in the child's socialization.

The children were asked to name a good friend and a child with whom they did not enjoy playing, and then to draw a picture of each. They were then told that they could divide their stickers between (the representations of) the two, each of whom already had some. The friend had an album containing 100 stickers, while the non-friend had only three. "The aim of this experiment was to test whether the children's

decisions were motivated more by friendship or by the number of stickers the recipients already had," Paulus explains. "The results revealed a strong preference for sharing with the friend. This clearly shows that, in both age groups, willingness to share is primarily dependent on the giver's social relationship with the potential recipient."

In another experiment, the children were asked to divide their stickers between a friend who already had plenty and a stranger who had very few. And in this scenario also, the friend always received most of the stickers. Interestingly, in this case, the stranger was treated rather more generously than the non-friend in the previous experiment. "So pre-school children show greater willingness to share with a strange child than with one they know but don't like. In fact, the tendency to favor the friend turned out to be more pronounced in the older than in the younger children in these experiments. "This indicates that the significance of social relationships actually increases as the children get older."

## **Open questions**

These results clearly show that fairness is not the primary motivation for sharing behavior in pre-school children. "In order to understand how and why they share in the ways they do, one has to take their social relationships into account," says Paulus. With regard to 5- to -6-year-olds, this is a surprising result, as it had previously been shown that children in this age-group are more influenced by the factor fairness than younger kids are.

If, however, the disadvantaged child in the study had been able to articulate what it feels like to be in this situation, the results might well have been very different. "That might motivate the givers to be more generous, as other work strongly suggests that sharing by pre-school children is also influenced by sympathy for needy others," Paulus explains. His own study also throws no light on how the children would

act if the resource in question had been a basic necessity, such as food and drink. He hopes to determine how these factors influence sharing behavior in an upcoming project. And in these experiments also, he will appeal to the children's own imaginations, so that no child will go hungry or suffer from thirst.

**More information:** Markus Paulus. Friendship trumps neediness: The impact of social relations and others' wealth on preschool children's sharing, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2016.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2016.02.001)

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Citation: Developmental psychology: Friendship wins out over fairness (2016, February 29) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-02-developmental-psychology-friendship-fairness.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.