

Developmental psychology: Little strategists

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Sharing with others and getting something back: Preschoolers expect someone who has benefitted from their generosity to reciprocate when an opportunity arises to do so.

"You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours". This old adage is one that already preschoolers seem to follow, as a new study by Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet (LMU) in Munich psychologist Markus Paulus, now demonstrates. In a series of experiments, Paulus, who is Professor of Developmental Psychology and the Psychology of Learning in Early Childhood at LMU, has looked at the question of whether 3- to 5-year-olds take a strategic approach when they ask one another for a favor. The results of his study have now been published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*, and the title of the paper - It's Payback Time - answers the question in no uncertain terms.

One of the issues in [child psychology](#) that has received a lot of attention in recent years is the question of the motives that shape the [social behavior](#) of preschool children. The cognitive mechanisms that underlie social behavior in preschoolers, and the extent to which they employ strategic thinking in their interactions with each other are subject to intense debate. Paulus shows in his latest study that 3- to 5-year-olds expect reciprocity from someone who has previously benefitted from an act of generosity of their own part. In the experimental set-up, the subject first allocated unequal shares of a resource to two recipients, and could subsequently ask either of the two for a share in the resources they controlled. In the latter situation, the subject always made the request to the recipient who had benefitted more from their previous generosity.

"So even preschoolers seem to be aware of the relative amounts of social capital they build up in their relations with other, and they make strategic use of this knowledge," Paulus says. "Reciprocity is a very important element of social life and is essential for the stability of a society. The study shows, for the first time, that young children already demonstrate the expectation that acts of [generosity](#) will be reciprocated by the recipient in their social behavior."

More information: Markus Paulus, It's payback time: Preschoolers selectively request resources from someone they had benefitted., *Developmental Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0000150](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000150)

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

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