

Children who experienced compassionate parenting were more generous than peers, study suggests

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Young children who have experienced compassionate love and empathy from their mothers may be more willing to turn thoughts into action by being generous to others, a University of California, Davis, study

suggests.

In [lab studies](#), children tested at ages 4 and 6 showed more willingness to give up the tokens they had earned to fictional children in need when two conditions were present—if they showed bodily changes when given the opportunity to share and had experienced positive parenting that modeled such kindness. The study initially included 74 preschool-age children and their [mothers](#). They were invited back two years later, resulting in 54 [mother-child pairs](#) whose behaviors and reactions were analyzed when the children were 6.

"At both ages, children with better physiological regulation and with mothers who expressed stronger compassionate love were likely to donate more of their earnings," said Paul Hastings, UC Davis professor of psychology and the mentor of the doctoral student who led the study. "Compassionate mothers likely develop emotionally [close relationships](#) with their children while also providing an early example of prosocial orientation toward the needs of others," researchers said in the study.

The study was published in November in *Frontiers in Psychology: Emotion Science*. Co-authors were Jonas G. Miller, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University (who was a UC Davis doctoral student when the study was written); Sarah Kahle of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, UC Davis; and Natalie R. Troxel, now at Facebook.

In each lab exercise, after attaching a monitor to record children's heart-rate activity, the examiner told the children they would be earning tokens for a variety of activities, and that the tokens could be turned in for a prize. The tokens were put into a box, and each child eventually earned 20 prize tokens. Then before the session ended, children were told they could donate all or part of their tokens to other children (in the first instance, they were told these were for [sick children](#) who couldn't come

and play the game, and in the second instance, they were told the children were experiencing a hardship.)

At the same time, mothers answered questions about their compassionate love for their children and for others in general. The mothers selected phrases in a survey such as:

"I would rather engage in actions that help my child than engage in actions that would help me."

"Those whom I encounter through my work and public life can assume that I will be there if they need me."

"I would rather suffer myself than see someone else (a stranger) suffer."

Taken together, the findings showed that children's generosity is supported by the combination of their socialization experiences—their mothers' compassionate love—and their physiological regulation, and that these work like "internal and external supports for the capacity to act prosocially that build on each other."

The results were similar at ages 4 and 6.

In addition to observing the children's propensity to donate their game earnings, the researchers observed that being more generous also seemed to benefit the children. At both ages 4 and 6, the physiological recording showed that children who donated more tokens were calmer after the activity, compared to the [children](#) who donated no or few tokens. They wrote that "prosocial behaviors may be intrinsically effective for soothing one's own arousal." Hastings suggested that "being in a calmer state after sharing could reinforce the generous behavior that produced that good feeling."

More information: Jonas G. Miller et al, The Development of Generosity From 4 to 6 Years: Examining Stability and the Biopsychosocial Contributions of Children's Vagal Flexibility and Mothers' Compassion, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.590384](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.590384)

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