

5 year olds are generous only when they're watched

31 October 2012

Children as young as five are generous when others are aware of their actions, but antisocial when sharing with a recipient who can't see them, according to research published Oct. 31 in the open access journal *PLOS ONE* by Kristin Lyn Leimgruber and colleagues from Yale University.

More information: Leimgruber KL, Shaw A, Santos LR, Olson KR (2012) Young Children Are More Generous when Others Are Aware of Their Actions. *PLOS ONE* 7(10):e48292. [doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0048292](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0048292)

Adults are more likely to behave in ways that enhance their [reputation](#) when they are being watched or their actions are likely to be made public than when they are anonymous, but this study examines the origins of such behavior in young children for the first time. For their study, the researchers presented five year olds with stickers and gave them the option of sharing one or four stickers with another five year old. The authors found that children were more generous when they could see the recipient than when the recipient was hidden from view, and were also more generous when they had to give stickers in a transparent container rather than an opaque one (meaning the recipient could see what they were receiving). They also found that these behaviors were independent of how many stickers the children were given to keep for themselves.

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According to the authors, these results show that children as young as five can make strategic choices about whether to be generous, depending on whether or not a recipient is aware of their actions. Leimgruber explains, "Although the frequency with which children acted antisocially is striking, the conditions under which they chose to act generously are even more interesting and suggest that children likely use much more sophisticated prosocial strategies than we previously assumed. Much like the patterns of [charity](#) we see in adults, donation tendencies in children appear to be driven by the amount of information available to others about their actions—for both adults and [children](#), the more others know about their actions, the more likely they are to act generously."

APA citation: 5 year olds are generous only when they're watched (2012, October 31) retrieved 15 September 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-10-year-olds-theyre.html>

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