

The Development of Rule Governed Pro-Social Behavior in Young Children

Raising children who exhibit prosocial behavior that aligns with verbal rules or principles is a central concern for parents and societies. However, the ability of rules to control behavior is uncertain and inconsistent. The current study examined the establishment of generalized helping behavior in young, typically developing children in a context in which helping competed with ongoing toy play. Additionally, we examined the emergence of verbalizations about helping behavior that suggest the adoption of a socially conventional rule that helping is a good thing to do. Generalized helping was initially established through multiple exemplar training. For all participants, learning to help in two exemplar conditions lead to helping in response to a larger array of untrained situations. Some participants also received rule instruction. Generalized helping emerged across all participants and the majority of participants made verbalizations aligned with the value of helping either in experimental sessions and/or while watching a video relevant to the opportunity to help. The importance of sustained research examining the emergence of rule governed behavior is discussed.

Keywords: generalization, helping, multiple exemplar training, rule governed behavior