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Positive Pathways to Encourage Children's Prosocial Behaviors across Contexts

Introduction

Prosocial behavior develops early, is relatively stable, and is associated with concurrent and prospective positive outcomes (Eisenberg, Guthrie, Murphy, Shepard, Cumberland, & Carlo 1999). Unfortunately, the development of this behavior is difficult for some, with these children being at risk for negative social interactions and difficulties with peer relations (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Thus, promoting the development of this behavior in early childhood may allow lifelong benefits.

The parent-child relationship is foundational in the socialization of behavior (Parke & Buriel, 2006). However, the majority of the literature has focused on use of discipline strategies to correct antisocial behavior. This is an important distinction as discouraging negative behavior requires a different strategy than does promoting positive behavior.

The social learning perspective suggests that modeling and reinforcement are effective strategies to increase behaviors (Bandura & McDonald, 1963). The ability for tangible reinforcers to encourage self-sacrificing, low-rate prosocial behaviors has been repeatedly demonstrated in both basic and applied research. For example, Kazdin, Siegel, and Bass (1992) assessed the effectiveness of a behavior modification program for increasing prosocial competence in children with severe antisocial behaviors, and found that parental management training that included special reinforcement contingencies for low-rate prosocial behaviors effectively increased this behavior.

Although one of the benefits of modeling is its independence from the contingencies of emitted behavior (Bandura & McDonald, 1963), the drawback is that the success of modeling depends on orientation to the modeled behavior. For example, Gena, Couloura, and Kymissis (2005) used both video and in-vivo modeling, coupled with praise and external reward, to modify the affective reactions of autistic preschoolers. Interestingly, although these authors found both strategies to be successful in influencing affective responses, with the effects being maintained across scenarios and informants, imitation of modeled behavior did not occur until reinforcement was given for this behavior.

Current Study

Research suggests that the combined use of modeling and reinforcement together is more effective than either strategy alone (Gena et al., 2005). The current study was designed to measure parental modeling and reinforcement as these positive strategies relate to child prosocial behavior in the home and school contexts.

Current Study

Participants

- Parents: *N* = 74 (61 mothers, 8 fathers, 5 averaged)
- Children: *N* = 74 (37 boys, 37 girls), age 3 – 6 years
- Demographics: 92% White, 78% completed college
- Family Income: Mean = $87,114.75
  - SD = $44,533.92; Range: $20,000.00 - $265,000.00

Measures

Prosocialness Scale for Adults

- Parent report, α = .87
- Total: 16 items measuring adult engagement in four characteristic prosocial behaviors;
  - Sharing, helping, caring, and empathy
  - (E.g., "I try to console those who are sad)
- Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always)

Modified Child Rating Questionnaire

- Teacher (α range: .93 - .97) and Parent report (α range: .77 - .90)
- Total: 22 items composing 7 subscales
  - Comforting, helping, sharing, cooperating, volunteering, defending/including, and empathy
  - (E.g., "Shares play, food or other materials with others")
- Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always)

Parent Reinforcement Survey

- Parent report (α range: .61 - .86)
- Total: 16 items composing 3 subscales
  - Tangible Reinforcement, Social Reinforcement, and showing love
  - (E.g., I hug my child; I give my child a treat)
- Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always)

Results

Parent reinforcement was positively associated with parent reports but not teacher reports of child prosocial behavior. In contrast, the relation among parent and child prosocial behavior only approached significance, but evidenced a cross-contextual relationship with child prosocial behavior at school.

Correlations among Parental Reinforcement and Parent Report of Prosocial Behavior

Scale	Total Reinforcement	Tangible Reinforcement	Social Reinforcement	Showing Love
Parent				
Overall	32*	.27*	.26*	.23
Feminine	.31**	.26*	.23*	.26*
Masculine	.31**	.26*	.28*	.17
Teacher				
Overall	-.03	.01	.02	.07
Feminine	-.04	.02	.02	.07
Masculine	-.15	.01	.02	.06

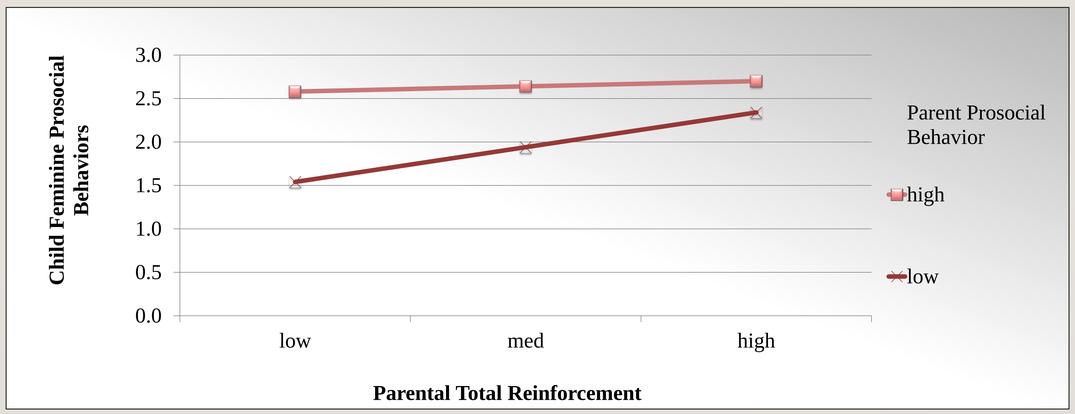
Note. *N* ranged from 71 to 74; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Correlations among Parental Prosocial Behavior Child Prosocial Behavior

Child Prosocial Behaviors	Parent Prosocial Behaviors
Parent Reports	
Overall	.22^{+}
Feminine	.27*
Masculine	.15
Teacher Reports	
Overall	.23*
Feminine	.24*
Masculine	.22^{+}

Note. *N* ranged from 71 to 74; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Regression analysis investigating interaction among parent prosocial behavior and reinforcement showed a trend for moderation, such that children whose parents engaged in both high levels of prosocial behavior and high levels of reinforcement had the highest levels of feminine prosocial behavior.



Discussion

These findings offer preliminary support for the application of simple, cost-effective, and positive strategies to encourage the development of positive social behaviors across contexts in early childhood.

1. What is the primary information that resulted from this investigation? What are the key take-away points?

Taken together, these findings suggest that reinforcement may be effective for encouraging prosocial behavior in the parent's presence, whereas modeling may be effective for encouraging this behavior in the parent's absence (e.g., in the school context). Furthermore, although both modeling and use of positive reinforcement were related to prosocial behavior, use of both strategies was related to the highest levels of prosocial behavior.

2. How can this information be applied to informing or advancing early childhood practices and/or policies?

The results of this research can be readily applied in the creation or modification of interventions to encourage social skills development. These findings are perhaps most salient for children whose low prosociality constrains the ability to reinforce these behaviors. For these children, modeling may encourage prosocial behaviors initially, with subsequent reinforcement helping to sustain behaviors. Additionally, for children who may not orient to modeled social behavior (e.g., autistic children), reinforcement may encourage orientation to modeled behavior, allowing benefits of this technique to be realized (Matson, Matson, & Rivet, 2007; Gena, Couloura, & Kymissis, 2005).

3. What additional research is needed? What is a next step?

Interventions incorporating both modeling and reinforcement would be enhanced by reliance on only the most effective methods of reinforcement; methods deemed most effective given the age and temperamental characteristics of the child. Thus, exploring the relations among temperament, reinforcement, and prosocial behaviors would prove beneficial to this type of work.

Furthermore, work to establish the most simple and cost-effective way to implement these techniques would go a long way in assuring their effectiveness. As noted by Matson et al. (2007), the most common strategies are implemented by teachers in the school setting, and incorporate both modeling of social skills as well as provision of reinforcement. However, given that parents have a unique impact on child behavior, and that children spend a good amount of time in both the home and school setting, it is likely that the most effective interventions would include parent-training to recognize and reinforce prosocial behaviors in the home context as well (Kazdin et al., 1992), establishing continuity in these methods across settings.

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