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The Unintended Negative Consequences of Help in Childhood

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Abstract
Exchanges of help in childhood produce many positive consequences, such as increasing academic success, promoting happiness, and fostering positive peer relations. For this reason, caretakers encourage helping behavior early in life, and schools implement intervention programs to nurture children's prosociality. An often overlooked issue, however, is that providing and receiving help do not always produce positive outcomes. We review the latest research that converges to suggest that when children receive, witness, or provide help there can be unintended negative consequences—for example, receiving help can produce feelings of incompetence. We also grapple with how to balance the negative and positive outcomes of helping behavior, with an eye toward promoting children's well-being and social cohesion in society.

Keywords
helping, prosocial behavior, development, inequality, stereotypes

Children receive a lot of help because there are many things they cannot do on their own. Children also observe their peers getting help. And, on occasion, children even provide help themselves (Warneken, 2018). The ubiquity of help in childhood has encouraged scholars to study the origins and development of helping behavior. Perhaps because helping seems intuitively good, research has typically documented the positive consequences of help. For example, studies have revealed that children tend to like and want to befriend those who help others (Caputi et al., 2012) and feel happy when they can help others themselves (Aknin et al., 2012). Moreover, seeking help is crucial for self-regulated learning: When children know how and when to ask for help, they do better in school (A. M. Ryan et al., 2001).

Yet recent research has revealed a darker side of helping behavior. Below we detail emerging evidence for the (often unintended) negative consequences of exchanges of help in childhood. We define "helping" as providing support through acts that may or may not be motivated by the intention to benefit others (Van Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017). We focus first on the negative consequences of children receiving help and seeing others receive help. We then turn to research illuminating negative outcomes that can result when children provide help. Last, we suggest possibilities for reducing the negative consequences of help.

Receiving Help

Children often need help from others to accomplish daily tasks as well as to acquire and develop new skills. Studies showed, however, that adults' well-intentioned behavior toward children during task completion can backfire. First, receiving help can negatively impact how children feel about their abilities. For example, when 6- to 11-year-old girls received unsolicited help from an experimenter during a paper-folding task, they reported feeling less smart afterward (Shell & Eisenberg, 1996).

Second, receiving help can undermine children's motivation. For example, in one study (Leonard et al., 2021), 4- and 5-year-old children worked on puzzles, and, after some time, an experimenter either did the puzzles for them or taught them how to do the puzzles (e.g., by providing hints or asking questions). All children were then given the opportunity to open a

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wooden-box toy that was (unbeknownst to children) impossible to open. Children who did not get to solve the puzzle beforehand, because the experimenter took over, worked for a shorter period of time on opening the box compared with children in the teaching condition. The authors of the study concluded that children were less motivated to persist on a difficult task after receiving help. Similarly, other research showed that providing explicit instructions on a task can hamper both exploratory learning (Bonawitz et al., 2011) and persistence in daily tasks such as tooth brushing (Leonard et al., 2022). Correlational studies also showed that children who receive more intrusive help tend to be less motivated to complete difficult puzzles (Chen et al., 2024) and have lower achievement in school (Park et al., 2023).

Children receive a lot of help, and seeking help has clear benefits for self-regulated learning (A. M. Ryan et al., 2001). At the same time, research indicates that providing children with help can also be demotivating and threatening, especially when such help is intrusive or when children do not actively seek assistance (e.g., Leonard et al., 2021).

Witnessing Help

When children observe people exhibit prosocial behavior, they often think positively about them. For example, young children like people who are helpful, who share, and who are considerate of other people's needs (Gill et al., 2023; Sierksma et al., 2022). Children view those who need or receive help less positively, however.

Young children think that receiving help signals incompetence (Graham & Barker, 1990), and they are aware that other people think this as well (Good & Shaw, 2022)—which can be a reason why children avoid seeking help themselves (A. M. Ryan et al., 2001). For example, starting at the age of 5, children infer that peers who receive help are less intelligent (Graham & Barker, 1990). In another set of studies, Sierksma and Shutts (2020) focused on what young children (between the ages of 4 and 6 years old) infer from observing help exchanges in intergroup contexts. In their study, children watched animated videos in which two groups of children worked on a puzzle, word game, or art project. One group then received help from an adult, whereas another group did not. Children as young as 4 thought the group that received help was less smart than the group that did not. Importantly, when children saw new group members of each group, they thought members who belonged to the group they had seen receive help before were also less smart. Children thus generalized the inferences about the group to new individuals, similar to the application of stereotypes.

Children also make different inferences about people depending on the type of help that they receive. In particular, researchers have distinguished between help that does not foster skill acquisition in the long run, such as providing correct answers or taking over ("direct help"; also called "dependency" or "expedient help"; Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014; A. M. Ryan et al., 2001) and help that provides a long-term solution to someone's needs, such as providing hints or asking questions ("indirect help"; also called "autonomy" or "adaptive help"; Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014; A. M. Ryan et al., 2001). In one study (Sierksma, 2023) children (7 to 12 years) saw videos of people receiving either direct or indirect help, and inferred that people who received direct help were less smart. Children also inferred that recipients of direct (vs. indirect) help would learn less, suggesting they are aware of an unintended negative consequence of direct help (Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014).

These results suggest that observing exchanges of help can support the formation of biased inferences about individuals and groups early in life. Outside the laboratory, seeing particular groups in their society receive more help (or more direct help) could lead children to infer certain groups are less capable than others and thereby support the formation of harmful social group stereotypes. Indirect evidence indeed suggests that children learn negative stereotypes about societal groups that often receive help. For example, children in lower ability groups are aware of negative stereotypes about their ability group (e.g., that they are "stupid"; Bardach et al., 2023), and children endorse stereotypes about poor people (e.g., that they are less competent than rich people; Sigelman, 2012). To obtain more direct evidence about the impact of help on children's perceptions of groups, the field needs studies that isolate the pure receipt of help from factors that often covary with receiving assistance frequently (e.g., socioeconomic status).

Providing Help

Children as young as 14 months provide help to other people, even when children have to overcome obstacles to assist others (Warneken, 2018). And, as noted earlier, helping has many positive consequences for helpers themselves (Aknin et al., 2012; Caputi et al., 2012). Children, however, do not always distribute their help equally; as a consequence, their help can perpetuate inequality.

Recent research revealed that children between the ages of 7 and 9 years old distribute different types of help to competent and incompetent peers (Sierksma, 2023). In these studies, children had the opportunity to help peers who were working on quizzes by providing

them with answers (direct help) or hints (indirect help). Before they started helping, however, participants overheard that one of those peers "did very well" on a previous quiz whereas the other peer "did not do so well." Children in these studies provided more indirect help to peers who were already competent and more direct help to peers who were not competent. Children thus gave peers who struggled less opportunity to practice and improve their skills (Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014).

Going beyond children's helping, research has revealed that children show similar tendencies in perpetuating inequality when sharing resources with others. Preschool-age children, for example, give more resources to people who are rich rather than poor, as well as to those who are dominant rather than subordinate (Paulus & Essler, 2020). Young children also tend to share more resources with members of their social in-groups—including those defined by gender, language, and race (Kinzler et al., 2007; Renno & Shutts, 2015).

Thus, children are motivated and able to help others from an early age. However, the ways in which children help others can negatively impact individuals (i.e., by denying particular individuals high-quality help and resources). Further, children's inequitable helping behavior can perpetuate group-based inequalities apparent in society, especially when members of high-status groups preferentially reward in-group members (Renno & Shutts, 2015).

How to Help Children Help Better

The research reviewed in this article converges on the idea that helping is not always good early in life: Exchanges of help that children witness and participate in can have negative consequences (e.g., the perpetuation of inequality). Yet it is important to provide children with the help that they need. To do so effectively, we call for more research on how helping promotes negative perceptions of the self or others and when and how it perpetuates inequality and hampers learning.

An important mechanism that seems to give rise to negative consequences is that children associate help with incompetence. Feeling competent is crucial for people's well-being (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000), and someone's competence has a pervasive influence on how much they are liked and trusted (Cuddy et al., 2007). This means we need to consider in what ways we can disrupt the association between help and incompetence early in life. One way to do so is by promoting intellectual humility. Intellectual humility indicates someone is aware that there are limits to their own knowledge and appreciates other people's expertise (Porter et al., 2022). Intellectually humble children, research suggests, are more likely to seek help during learning (see Porter et al., 2022). Promoting intellectual humility in, for example, classrooms could also change how children perceive recipients of help and react to receiving help. That is, when children endorse the idea that help is crucial for learning, they might think seeking and receiving help signals competence because it means others are motivated and eager to implement the best learning strategies. One way to promote intellectual humility is by mastery-oriented teaching practices (i.e., practices that emphasize learning and growth; Porter et al., 2022). Teaching children that one cannot know it all and promoting learning goals that emphasize mastery over performance thus seems a promising route to prevent negative outcomes associated with receiving and providing help (see also Dweck, 2006).

Another pertinent issue is that negative consequences emerge in particular when help is distributed unequally and is based on group membership. Adults as well as children tend to provide more help and resources to their in-group compared with the out-group (Lazić et al., 2021; Renno & Shutts, 2015). They also sometimes help lower status groups more because, on the basis of stereotypes, they think that these groups are less competent and thus need help (Cuddy et al., 2007; Sierksma et al., 2018). Thus, it is critical to scrutinize practices that promote unequal group-based help. For example, educational differentiation practices such as ability grouping are used worldwide (Francis et al., 2020) and imply that children are grouped and then taught differently depending on their ability. Lower ability groups often receive more help (e.g., additional instruction) than higher ability groups, who work on more challenging tasks—often independently. Adjusting education to each child's needs (i.e., individualized helping) is important, but when helping is provided along group lines, it could foster negative self-views and stereotypes (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020; Sierksma & Shutts, 2020), thereby increasing rather than reducing educational inequality.

Does that mean we should not help those that need it more? Probably not. It does, however, mean we need better ways to provide that help. In the case of educational differentiation, for example, adjusting learning materials to children's needs in an individualized rather than group- based manner could make differences in help much less salient (see also Francis et al., 2020). Advances in educational technology offer new possibilities for such individualized help: Personalized learning apps can provide help without it being publicly visible (Dumont & Ready, 2023). Moreover, promoting indirect and autonomy-supporting help independent of group membership and competence seems like an important pathway to prevent the negative consequences of help. Another promising way to promote more non-group-based help in children is to note and talk to children about social-group biases in society. Emerging evidence

suggests that when adults make children aware of the structural causes of inequality, this reduces bias in young children and leads them to think that hierarchies are less fair (Leshin & Rhodes, 2023). As a consequence, children could, at least with age, become more aware of the role they may play in perpetuating inequality—as well as the role they could play in acting against it.

Promoting positive consequences of help also entails needing a better understanding of the dynamics that lead to negative outcomes. It is not the case that certain forms of help are inherently positive or negative. First, negative outcomes might depend on the nature of the help (e.g., when it is provided, whether it is solicited or not) and who provides it. Children might, for example, perceive help as more threatening when it is provided by higher status individuals (e.g., experts, adults; Alvarez & van Leeuwen, 2011; Nadler & Chernyak-Hai, 2014) or when they receive help after having worked on a task for a while compared with when they receive help early (Koo et al., 2023). And perhaps children perceive individuals who actively seek help less negatively than those who receive unsolicited help. Second, motivations for helping are diverse and complex (Malti & Davidov, 2023), and more research is needed that examines why children and adults provide different types of help so that we can target these underlying mechanisms in interventions. Social-psychological research, for example, suggests that adults sometimes provide direct help not to help others advance but to protect their own status (Nadler, 2002). And parents might sometimes provide direct help to their children because of self-interest (e.g., because they are in hurry). Third, our review identified feelings of incompetence as an important mechanism driving negative outcomes of help. Future research should work toward identifying additional mechanisms. For example, help might threaten feelings of autonomy (Koo et al., 2023; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000) or could trigger feeling of indebtedness that are distressing (Tsang, 2006). In sum, we call for more systematic theorizing and research on how the context in which help is provided (why, who, when, and how) gives rise to positive and negative outcomes across development.

Conclusion

Emerging evidence suggests that helping and receiving help could have unintended negative consequences. On an individual level, caretakers and teachers often scaffold children to seek and provide help. Peer-to-peer helping, for example, is a common practice that many assume promotes educational success (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). Here we showed that such help can in some cases backfire and lead to detriments in children's self-views and motivation. On a societal level, discrimination and prejudice are persistent problems, and educational inequality is on the rise worldwide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). People often argue that promoting prosocial behavior might be a path to better intergroup relations (Killen & Verkuyten, 2017; Taylor, 2020). Such calls, however, should consider that help can also negatively affect those who already struggle the most (e.g., children from marginalized backgrounds, those who have difficulty in school). Specifically, children might think people from marginalized backgrounds are less smart and therefore need more help, which could lead to the development of stereotypes, which in turn elicit more unequal group-based help. Developmental research could play an important role in preventing this recursive circle by addressing not only when help is positive but also when negative consequences arise.

Recommended Reading

Leonard, J. A., Martinez, D. N., Dashineau, S. C., Park, A. T., & Mackey, A. P. (2021). (See References). Examines the impact of help on young children's persistence.

Paulus, M., & Essler, S. (2020). (See References). Outlines theoretical perspectives on why children sometimes perpetuate inequalities.

Sierksma, J. (2023). (See References). Demonstrates that children perpetuate competence-based inequality when they help incompetent and competent peers.

Sierksma, J., & Shutts, K. (2020). (See References). Examines the inferences children draw from observing intergroup helping.

Transparency

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