

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Do Sensitive Parents Foster Kind Children, or Vice Versa? Bidirectional Influences Between Children's Prosocial Behavior and Parental Sensitivity

Newton, E. K., Laible, D., Carlo, G., Steele, J. S., & McGinley, M. (2014). Do sensitive parents foster kind children, or vice versa? Bidirectional influences between children's prosocial behavior and parental sensitivity. *Developmental Psychology*, 50(6), 1808-1816. doi:10.1037/a0036495

SUMMARY: This longitudinal study evaluated the bidirectional relationships between children's prosocial behavior and parental sensitivity. The findings indicate that parental sensitivity predicted subsequent prosocial behavior in children, which in turn elicited greater parental sensitivity from mothers, but not from fathers.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The relationships between maternal sensitivity and children's prosocial behaviors were bidirectional. On the contrary, children's prosocial behavior did not elicit sensitive parenting from fathers.
- Higher levels of parental education were associated with greater parental sensitivity and children's prosocial behavior, particularly for mothers.
- Among the sample, girls were rated as more prosocial than boys, and parents of girls were rated as more sensitive than parents of boys (but only during third grade).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with organizations connected with military parents to emphasize the importance of building strong parent-child relationships
- Participate in regular trainings on positive youth development to better assist military parents foster prosocial youth behaviors

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer modules on positive parenting for military parents that teach skills about how to respond empathically to children
- Develop activities that provide opportunities for and model prosocial behavior for children (e.g., volunteer or youth program activities)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of structured leisure activities to encourage youth's prosocial behaviors for military families at installations
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote resilience in Service members, their partners, and children

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METHODS

- As part of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care, longitudinal data were gathered from 10 sites across the United States when children were 4.5 years old, and in third, fifth, and sixth grades.
- Mothers and teachers completed a questionnaire evaluating children's prosocial behavior with peers in third, fifth, and sixth grades.
- A trained rater coded mothers and fathers' sensitivity during structured observational tasks at 4.5 years old, third grade, and fifth grade.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 1,364 children as well as their parents (1,155 mothers, 459 fathers) and teachers.
- The sample of children was 52% male and 75% White. There were no data provided about the race/ethnicity or gender of the parents.
- Approximately one-third of mothers and 39% of fathers had at least one college degree; 10% of mothers and 8% of fathers had less than a high school education.

LIMITATIONS

- Relatively few fathers were included analyses which limits conclusions that can be drawn regarding relationships between paternal sensitivity and children's prosocial behaviors.
- Parental sensitivity was assessed during engagement in a limited number of structured tasks; additional tasks or unstructured tasks may have yielded different ratings of parental sensitivity.
- Observed gender differences in prosocial behavior may be partly attributable to the nature of the prosocial behaviors assessed (i.e., emotionally responsive behavior), which was not explored by the authors.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Incorporate interventions and experimental methods to evaluate causal associations between parental sensitivity and children's prosocial behavior
- Evaluate why bidirectional associations were found for children's prosocial behavior and maternal, but not paternal, sensitivity
- Identify other aspects of positive parenting that contribute to prosocial behavior

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