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Learning to Be *Me* While Coming to Understand We

Encouraging Prosocial Babies in Group Settings

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At the same time young babies are developing an understanding of self as separate from others—what it means to be *me*—many also face having to negotiate living, learning, growing, and developing as part of a group—what it means to be *we*. This is true for more than half of all infants in the United States under the age of 9 months, who now spend many or most of their waking hours in some type of group care outside the home (Kreder, Ferguson, & Lawrence 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

During a recent sabbatical from my university position, I (Mary McMullen) spent time in a number of early care and education classrooms with infants and toddlers, ages 3 to 18 months, and their caregivers. I studied what life is like for babies in group settings. I tried to do this through the babies' eyes by looking at their day-to-day, lived experiences. In three classrooms I observed babies who showed higher levels of social competence than I had expected to see in children so young—much higher than what traditional child development

Consider how the caregiving and teaching practices you engage in or observe may encourage or discourage prosocial behavior in babies.



theories tell us. I was equally impressed by the teachers who encouraged and supported these behaviors. These three classrooms are featured in this article.

Clearly something special was going on in these three rooms, something that allowed strong positive social emotional development to occur in infants and toddlers and prosocial skills to flourish. I reflected on this, going back over the field notes from my study. I examined my photographs of babies and caregiving behaviors. I engaged in follow-up discussions with the lead teachers from each setting. I revisited some of the early literature written on this topic by well-known child development scholars (Vygotsky [1934]1986; Erikson 1950; Kohlberg 1971; Piaget 1972) and then looked at the latest thinking about the roots of caring and early social skill development in very young children (Eisenberg 1992; Katz & McClellen 1997; Noddings 2003; Hyson 2004). This article is the result of my examinations, reflections, and discussions with the teachers, who are also the six coauthors of this article.

As you read our examples, look at the photographs, and reflect on our definition of babies' prosocial behavior, think about how often you see these behaviors among babies in groups you encounter in your daily life and work. Consider how the caregiving and teaching practices you engage in or observe may encourage or discourage prosocial behavior in babies.

What prosocial babies look like

Many classic definitions of prosocial behavior are similar to Eisenberg's (1992), who describes it as "voluntary behavior intended to benefit another, such as helping, sharing, and comforting" (p. 3). Some scholars stumble over the word *intended* when it concerns infants and toddlers, saying babies are incapable of being prosocial because even if they do something socially positive, it is unlikely to be altruistic (that is, deliberately selfless). The behaviors of the babies in these high-quality classrooms—friendship, sharing, caring, rule following, helpfulness, cooperation, and many others—may or may not satisfy the test for being truly altruistic, but they were certainly *pro* rather than *antisocial*. Antisocial behavior involves show-

ing disregard for others or being uncooperative or disagreeable. People who are antisocial are potentially destructive to themselves or the community.

We offer a different definition of prosocial behaviors, one that avoids notions of intention or motivation. We define prosocial behaviors for babies in a group setting as the communications and behaviors on the part of a baby that help create a positive emotional climate in the group and that involve reaching out—positive, discernable, outward social expression on the part of one baby toward one or more other individuals, whether infant or adult.



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Reaching out to interact with those around them is a positive outward social expression seen in prosocial babies.

In group care, as in life in general, we teachers tend to place a premium on prosocial behaviors and make it a priority to help children acquire those skills and characteristics (see "Prosocial Skills and Related Attributes," p. 22). And now, with our youngest babies more frequently being placed in group care, the important life lessons about group and community living begin very early.

Prosocial Skills and Related Attributes

Sharing	Friendship	Security
Playing peacefully	Belonging	Fairness
High self-esteem	Relationship	Sense of justice
Active listening	Cooperation	Honesty
Empathy	Communication	Compassion
Turn taking	Trust	Comforting
Helping	Respect for others	Caring
Emotional well-being	Self-respect	and many more
Affection	Self-control	

Caregivers and teachers who care for the youngest children play a powerful role, alongside families, in contributing to the emotional well-being and social development of babies; their impact may lead to positive—or negative—long-term outcomes for children. “We tend to go through life feeling the way our attachment persons made us feel—be that happy or in turmoil,” says Honig (2002, 6). Research connects strong, secure, relationship-based early practices with young children to positive long-term cognitive, social, and mental health outcomes in older children and adults (Shore 1997; Ramey & Ramey 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; National Research Council 2001).

Prosocial babies are cared for and respected as individuals

For babies to become prosocial, they must first and foremost be cared for by caring adults. In the relationship captured in the photo at right, the baby has the caregiver’s undivided attention and the caregiver responds in a loving manner. In moments of mindful, respectful, sensitively responsive caregiving like this, babies receive messages and lessons about what it means to be responded to with kindness and compassion, and this is at the heart of learning about empathy (Eisenberg 1992; Noddings 2003).

In a recent conference presentation, DaRos-Voseles (2009) said, “Children who come from caring homes come to school with that expectation; others come with that need.” Regardless of which babies come to us in our classrooms, we need to give them countless opportunities to experience the reciprocal, reflexive nature of being in a caring relationship, so they can learn the give-and-take, back-and-forth of being part of such relationships.

We also need to respect all babies as individuals. Very early on, babies begin to understand themselves as separate individuals in their own right, different and apart from others. They have their own personal characteristics and preferences, temperaments and needs (Field 2007), and they need to feel that their caregivers value and respect those traits (Abbott & Langston 2005).



Being prosocial starts with babies understanding who they are as individuals and feeling valued for the unique people they are.



Being in a caring relationship is rewarding for both participants.

We don't view babies as lesser beings, but as full, capable human beings, deserving of our respect.

(Teacher Comment)

Self-confidence—trusting in one's own abilities and what one can do—is also critical in being able to reach out to others in a caring manner. A baby becomes confident through close, supportive relationships and having plenty of opportunities to explore and try new things. Babies need opportunities to make things move and spin and rattle and make noise, and they are so pleased when they can do things by themselves or with minimal support or intervention. Most of all, however, they want the people they care about to notice what they do and to respond.



Two buddies spot each other, crawl toward one another, and greet each other warmly—“High five!”

© Samantha S. Sisk

very important in the overall healthy growth and development of very young children (Katz & McClellan 1997; Riley et al. 2008). Children with friends are found to be happier, better at working out social difficulties, and generally more competent (Brazelton & Greenspan 2000). Riley and colleagues (2008) argue that the experience of caring about other individuals that occurs through friendship is how children's early peer interactions become truly prosocial: “Within a friendship children can develop altruistic values, that is, prosocial behavior motivated by concern for others rather than the expectation of personal reward” (pp. 45–46).

The caregivers and teachers of the infants and toddlers in these rooms addressed the babies as *friends*. Babies notice each other and even show clear friendship preferences very early, as premobile infants. They frequently take special delight when their buddies arrive in the morning and miss them when they are absent. The prosocial babies in these groups seek out their special buddies for play.

In our room we have two boys, Hans and Hou Hou, who are clearly best friends. When one is already in the room and the other one arrives, the first one stops whatever he's doing to run to greet the other. They squeal in delight and run off, and typically start a game of chase or just laugh and laugh and imitate each other for the longest time.

(Teacher Comment)

Prosocial babies love to make things happen on their own, but they feel especially pleased when those they care about notice.

We try to make the children feel special and unique by providing interesting activities that are challenging but achievable for each and every one of them. We provide the support and encouragement needed for them to complete the tasks and gain a sense of pride. We put mirrors around the room so they can see themselves playing, and we communicate to them how special we think they are by giving them lots of hugs throughout the day.

(Teacher Comment)



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It is also common for the prosocial babies in these classrooms to show affection for one another and for their caregivers, occasionally offering pats, hugs, and kisses. Their caregivers freely snuggle, cuddle, and hug the babies. Such behavior, which fosters closeness and warmth in caregiving relationships, is a key element in encouraging prosocial development in very young children (Honig 2002).



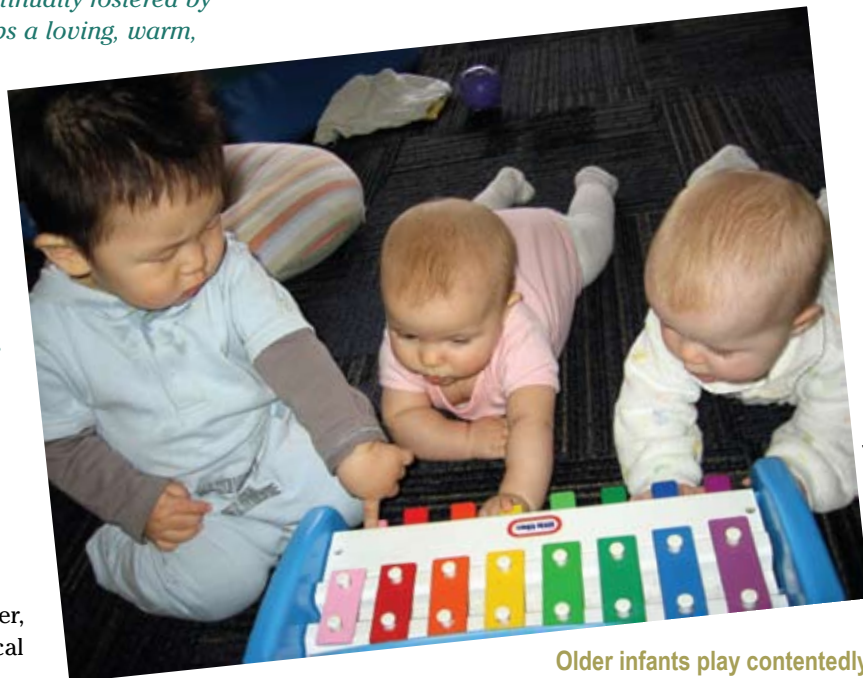
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Prosocial babies frequently show affection for one another with hugs, kisses, pats, and snuggles.

I believe strongly that an infant's ability to be prosocial begins at birth and is continually fostered by the way the caregiver develops a loving, warm, and supportive relationship with the infant. Babies are delighted just to be with their friends and with their caregiver. When I was reading Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See? little Norah crawled right up close to me, pulled herself up, gave me a hug, and made herself comfortable in the center of my lap.

(Teacher Comment)

Also notable in these groups is that babies of different ages play peacefully and contentedly side-by-side, older infants with younger, premobile infants. It is even typical to see babies sharing toys.



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Older infants play contentedly alongside younger infants, often reinforced by the caregiver's words reminding them, "Gentle, please; gentle touch."

Quann and Wien (2006) define empathy in young children as "the capacity to observe the feelings of another and to respond with care and concern for that other" (p. 22). Learning to value and appreciate others is the root of empathy. We saw many infant and toddler behaviors that fit this definition of empathy, or what we considered to be kindness. Babies in these rooms regularly comforted one another when they were sad, frightened, or injured. Older babies acted with care and caution around younger premobile infants, for instance, handing them toys that were out of reach or giving them pacifiers they had lost. Some behaviors were even more remarkable:

We were playing in the large-motor room, and Rosie needed her nose wiped. We noticed this because Matilda walked over to the box of tissues and took one out, walked over to Rosie, and rubbed her face with the tissue, making a smeary mess all over her face! She then walked over to the trash can and put [the tissue] in the trash and went back and continued to play. We teachers stood and watched in amazement.

(Teacher Comment)

Empathy in infants and toddlers may sometimes take the form of caregiving behavior, as with Matilda. Babies appear to be modeling something they have seen or been on the receiving end of many times. But sometimes the actions seem to go even further, indicating that they are internalizing a strong moral sense—with ideas about what they think is right or fair. Consider the actions of baby Faridah:

Little Faridah seems to have appointed herself the “mommy police.” We have a mom that comes at lunch to breastfeed her infant son, and sometimes he falls asleep just before she arrives. Faridah often sits and plays near his crib, waiting for him to wake up, keeping her eye on him. If, while waiting, the mom picks up another baby, Faridah gestures at the crib and the mom, and squeals with a tone that indicates she is correcting the parent.

(Teacher Comment)

Prosocial babies feel a sense of belonging to their community

“Children need to be where they feel that they belong” (Jennings 2005, 92–93). Babies thrive when they are with familiar and trusted friends and adult caregivers, where they feel welcomed and accepted (Abbott & Langston 2005). In the group care of young babies, this is accomplished best in smaller groups with a consistent primary caregiver. In such groups, babies learn how to be increasingly social. Engaging in activities together, such as taking walks and stroller rides, reading, participating in short circle or group times, and having highly social mealtimes, all foster a sense of belonging and give babies opportunities to practice social skills.

We build community throughout the day, but mainly through activities such as music time, when we sing and get all excited about our friends who came to the room today. Also, I have started making classroom books filled with pictures of the children and staff, and a “stroller walk” book with pictures of people, places, and objects we see on our walks.

(Teacher Comment)

There is another part of group life that is important as well and is an aspect of belonging; it is achieved by helping babies understand the expectations, norms, rules, and values of their group. Babies easily learn and follow simple rules and expectations (such as washing hands after a diaper change, participating in circle time activities, or waiting patiently for food at mealtime), especially if they are part of well-understood daily routines. Some expectations, such as learning good manners, are most often taught in infant/toddler rooms by modeling, repeated practice, and positive reinforcement. Babies in these rooms learned simple rules of etiquette through caregivers’ sign language and verbal reinforcement for responses such as please and thank you.

Caregivers explicitly teach other rules, again through positive reinforcement and plenty of practice and patience. These are rules about doing what is expected at cleanup



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Short, engaging circle and small group times build a sense of belonging and promote active listening skills, key ingredients in encouraging babies to be prosocial.

time, going up the stairs of the climber and down the slide, and playing away from the area where babies are sleeping. Caregivers positively and respectfully transmitted the messages about behaviors expected in the group, in the classroom, and in society as a whole. They taught the babies respect for self, for property, and for others. Babies easily seemed to understand that “these are things I should do” and “these are things I should not do when I am in this group outside of my home and family.”

Talking constantly with the babies and telling them what’s going on and what we are doing is yet another way of respecting them and communicating expectations. It is truly surprising how much even the young babies understand. Another related strategy is singing. We try to instill a feeling of belonging to the group by singing songs and nursery rhymes together, especially songs with the babies’ names in them. Also we repeatedly talk and sign with actions the words for please and thank you, and we give a lot of love to each baby when teaching these ideas.

(Teacher Comment)

Prosocial babies love to be helpful in the caregiving environment. Give a toddler a small broom and dustpan or a sponge and just stand back and watch him work! Of course, helping sometimes does not extend to doing so at the scheduled, routine cleanup times, as we probably all have experienced. This, however, seems to show a child’s reluctance to quit doing something highly valued and move on to a teacher-selected activity, like putting things away. The teachers in these rooms moved the babies and toddlers into free play, cleanup, and other activities with transition songs and rhymes (see “Simple Transition Songs”) and by giving them verbal cues, such as, “Friends, in three minutes I’m going to set up for snack.”

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Mealtime is a time to foster community and belonging to the group.

Discussion

Clearly, adults should never underestimate the competence of young children. I am reminded of this whenever I spend a significant amount of time in early care and education settings. In the case of these three classrooms, it was evident that infants and toddlers were indeed up to the challenge of grappling with understanding the difficult lessons of becoming *we* and *me* at the same time. As seen in this article and others (Eisenberg 1992; Quann & Wien 2006), young babies have a remarkable capacity for prosocial behavior, an ability greatly underestimated by traditional child development theorists.

My experience in studying infants and toddlers in group settings also taught me that not all young babies in group care demonstrate this capacity for behaving prosocially. That is to say, not all babies have the opportunity to do so. I did not see it in most of the other rooms in which I observed. The three classrooms had several characteristics in common that the others did not. They were part of early childhood programs that met or exceeded the standards and criteria for earning NAEYC Accreditation of Programs for Young Children. The teachers were all professionally trained and highly experienced in teaching and caring for this young age group, and their practices reflected their belief in the importance of relationships and developmentally appropriate care and learn-

Some rules of group life have to be taught explicitly, such as those about health and safety, like hand washing, and rules about fairness, like taking turns going up the climber stairs, one at a time.



Photos © Mary Benson McMullen

ing (McMullen 1999; McMullen & Dixon 2006, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp 2009). My research did not look specifically at the relationship of the beliefs and practices of caregivers that encourage versus discourage early prosocial behaviors in infants and toddlers, and therefore I cannot draw conclusions with confidence. But I invite others to investigate this issue further.

Can we conclude that the behaviors I saw were truly prosocial, by the strict definition that includes being altruistic? Eisenberg (1992) and Quann and Wien (2006) indicate that chief among a baby's motivations for prosocial behavior may be to please their teachers, to get social approval from a peer or the group, or to accomplish something for an external reward (for example, to get something they want or to do something they want to do). But at this age, behavior motivation is probably not what really matters in a prosocial baby.

The prosocial babies I observed lived up to the definition of helping "to create a positive emotional climate in the group" and of "reaching out with positive social expressions . . . toward one or more others." We see these

Simple Transition Songs

Clean up, clean up,
Everybody, everywhere.
Clean up, clean up,
Everybody do their share.

Come follow, follow, follow,
Come follow, follow, me.
Come follow, follow, follow.
The Big Room's where I'll be.

behaviors as good for the overall group, whatever the reasons for them. Further, the behaviors may become a pattern for the way an individual baby lives, and in doing so, may become internalized and part of the baby's code of behavior, their moral code (Brazelton & Greenspan 2000). Thus, we believe that whether truly prosocial or not, these behaviors put the babies well on their way to having what they need to get along well as social beings.

The teachers in these rooms naturally behaved in the manner they expected of all members of their classroom communities. They showed respect to everyone in the room—to each other as colleagues, to parents and families, and most important of all, to the babies. In my research journal, an entry about one of the teachers speaks to the kind of respectful caregiving I saw in these rooms:

Her wonderful gentle manner, the way she speaks to the babies, how they are all her friends . . . how she sets up the room . . . Only someone who utterly respects and values babies could put that kind of effort into this the way she does, almost like she is setting a beautiful table for honored guests, each and every morning.

Final thoughts

Caring, friendship, kindness, affection, empathy, belonging, following rules, meeting norms and expectations, adopting the values of our culture and our society—all of these are lessons for life to be learned along the way. They usually are acquired later in childhood. As I observed the amazing babies in these rooms and the remarkable teachers in my study, I found myself recalling the words of essayist Robert Fulghum ([1986] 2004), in his well-known piece, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

Infant care is part of everyday life for most babies, and their early caregivers can have a tremendous and enduring effect on their well-being, development, and future functioning. It seems that the truly important and enduring life lessons about who we are, how we get along with others, and how to be the best people we can be begin in the infant/toddler care and education environment—or rather, in the *high-quality* infant/toddler care and education environment.

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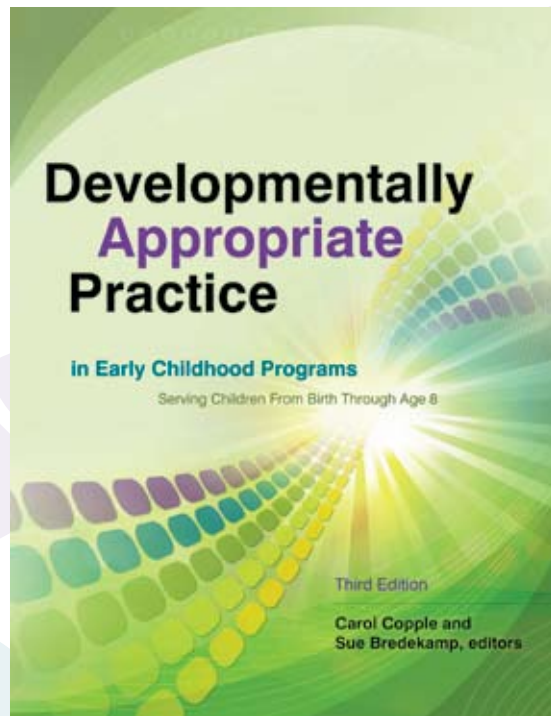
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