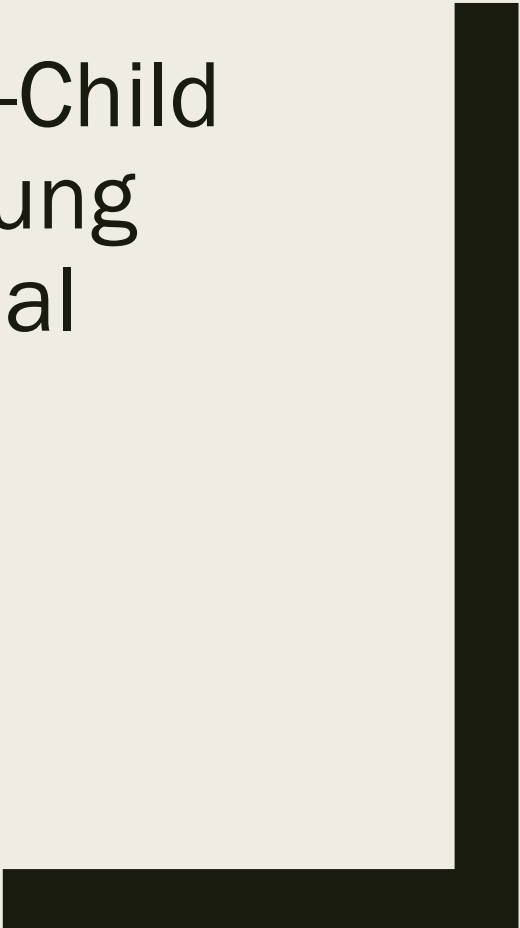




The Role of Caregiver-Child Relationships in Young Children's Prosocial Development

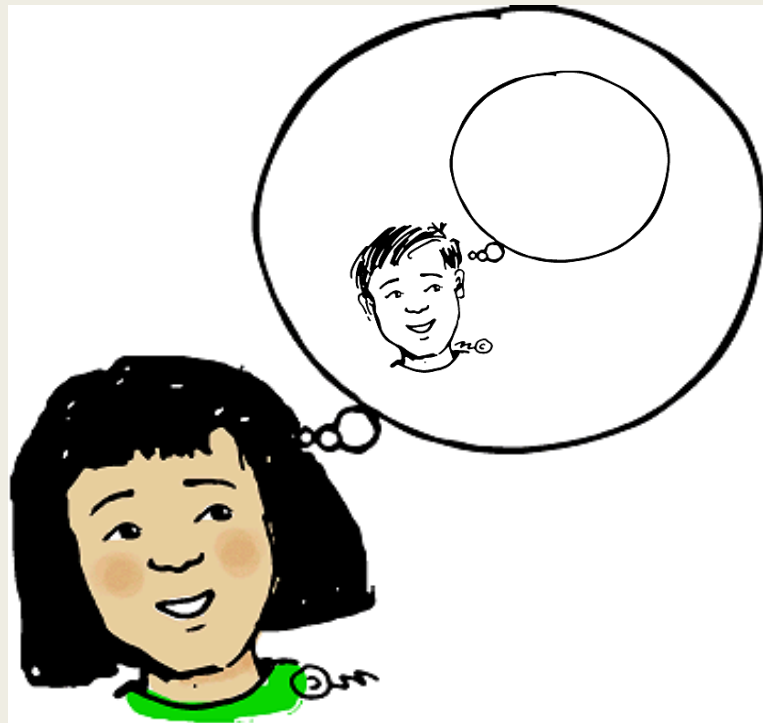
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WestEd



What do you want right now?



What is psychological understanding?

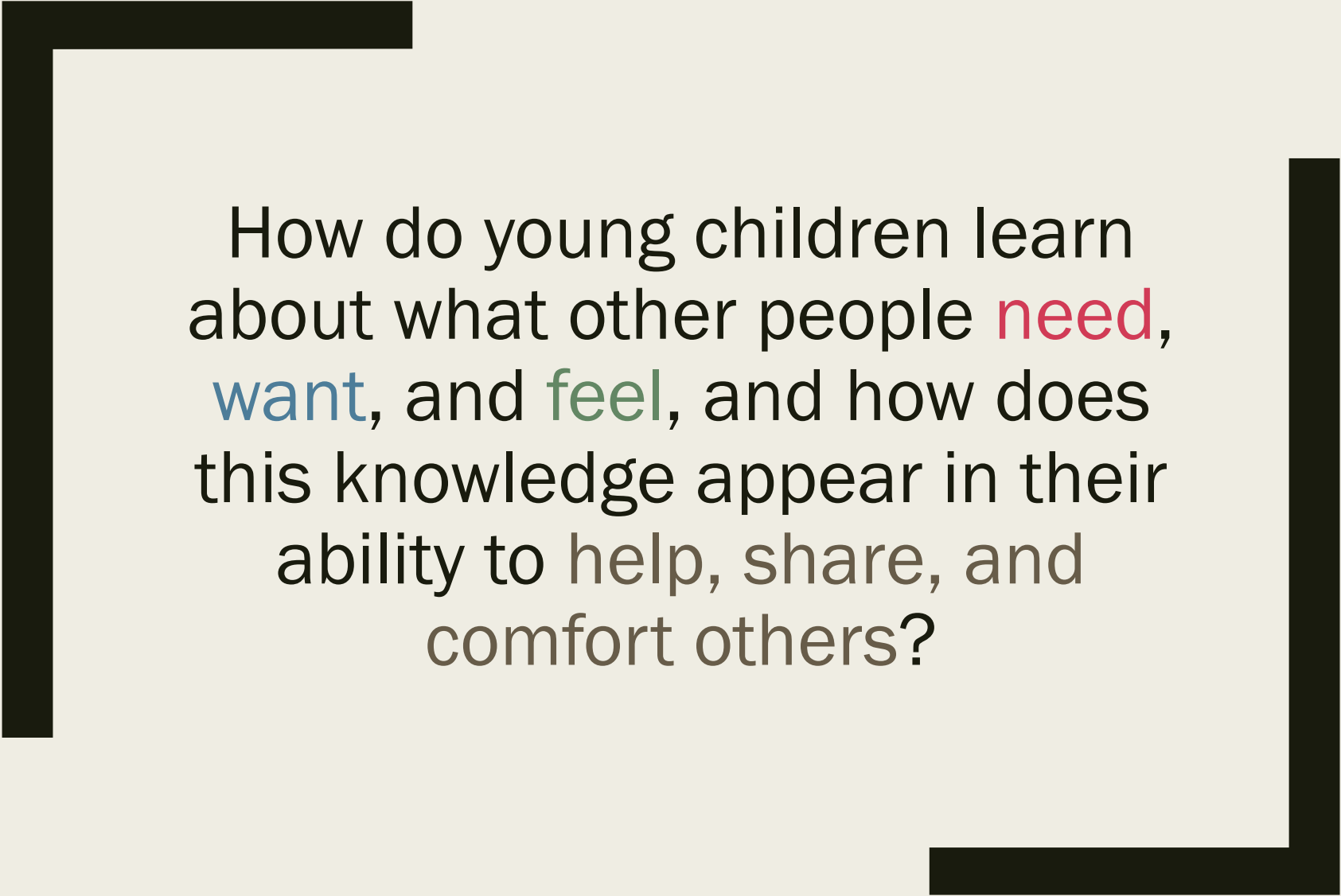


The ability to know what other people think and feel.

Psychological Understanding → Prosocial Behavior

- Psychological understanding manifests in prosocial behavior
- Any action intended to help another person
 - ▣ Sharing
 - ▣ Helping
 - ▣ Comforting
 - ▣ Cooperating
 - ▣ Volunteering
 - ▣ Donating





How do young children learn about what other people **need**, **want**, and **feel**, and how does this knowledge appear in their ability to help, share, and comfort others?



Gabbie & Milan
14 Months Old

How early do children understand other's thoughts and feelings?

- According to classic developmental and moral theorists, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, young children are “premoral.”
 - *These theories make it seem as though very young children are incapable of considering how other people think and feel, and responding in kind and helpful ways.*
- According to evolutionary theory, young children may be fairly adept at understanding how other people think and feel.
 - *Humans have evolved to be cooperative and altruistic*
 - *Humans have evolved to learn quickly from other people*

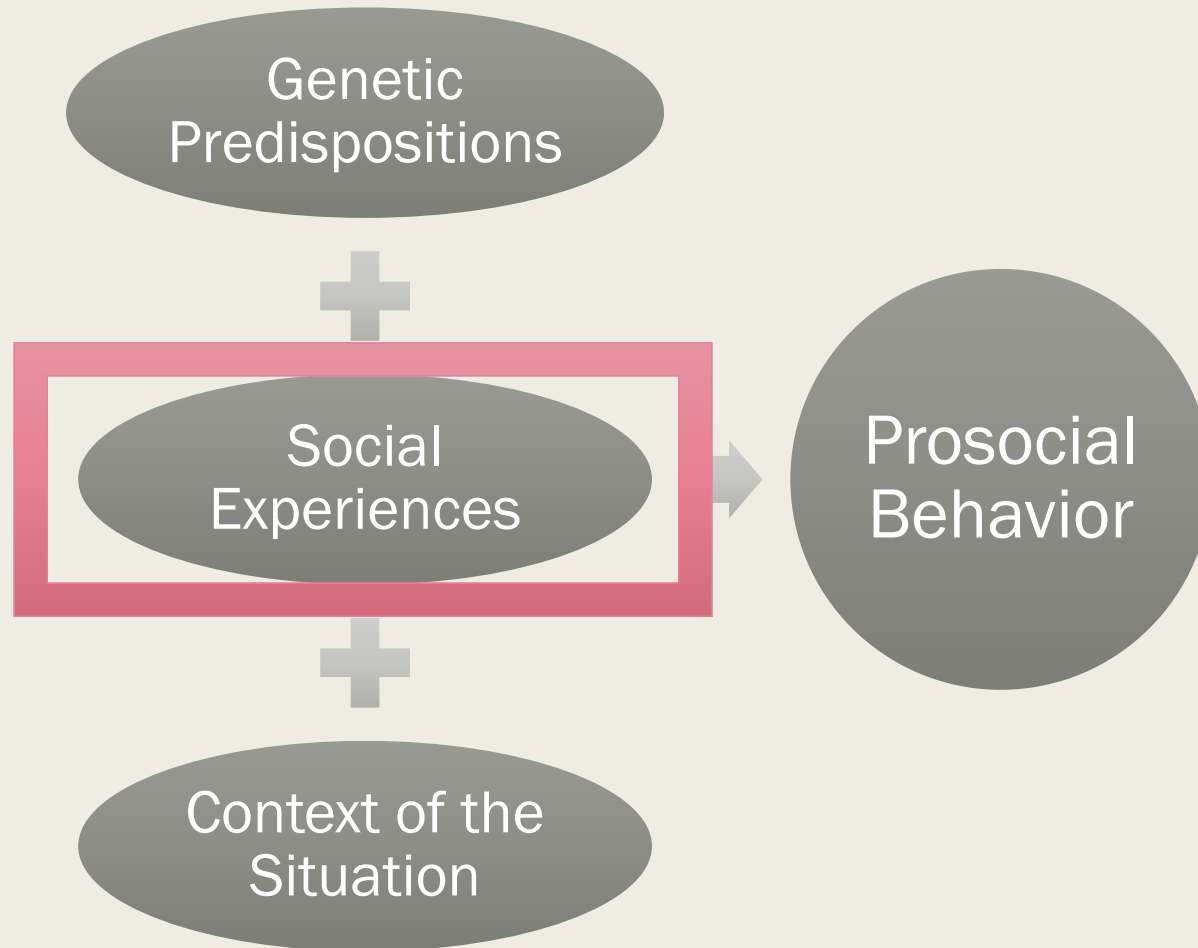
Warneken & Tomasello, 2006

- Warneken and Tomasello tested the idea that young children (but not chimpanzees) have the capacity to understand what other people want and need as well as respond in kind and helpful ways.



[18-month-old](#)

What influences prosocial behavior?



Relationships:

The Socially Attuned Newborn

■ Newborns...

- *Prefer to hear human voices compared to other sounds*
- *Prefer to see human faces compared to other face-like stimuli*
- *Recognize their mother's voices in contrast to other female voices*
- *Recognize the patterns in their birth language(s) in contrast to other languages*

■ Infants...

- *Recognize their caregivers*
- *Expect contingent responses from social partners*
- *Have appropriate responses to other's emotional displays*
- *Are (physical, mathematical, linguistic, and social) pattern detectors*

The Study

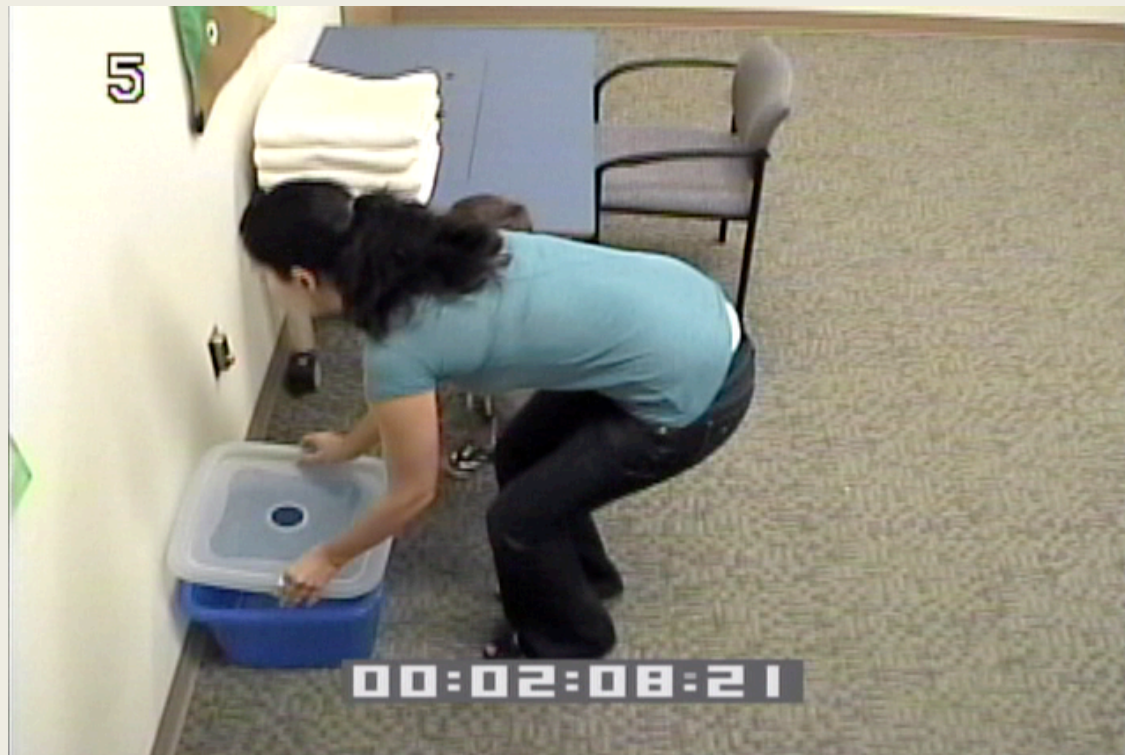
- Research question: What aspects of infants' relationship experiences relate to their prosocial behaviors at 18 months of age?
- Multiple types of situations in which children could be prosocial with an unfamiliar adult:
 - *Helping (neutral affect)*
 - *Helping (sad affect)*
 - *Sharing (neutral affect)*

The Prosocial Tasks

HELPING TASKS (TWO SAD, TWO NEUTRAL)	
Bin Task	E needs the lid taken off the bin, but her hands are full.
Cupboard Task	E needs the door to a cabinet opened, but her hands are full.
Clothespin Task	E needs a clothespin on the ground, but she can't reach it.
Tape Task	E needs a roll of tape on the ground, but she can't reach it.

SHARING TASKS (BOTH NEUTRAL)	
Snack Task	Child has lots of snack, but E has none.
Toy Task	Child has six farm animal toys, but E has none.

The Prosocial Tasks



Helping Task (Bin, Neutral)

Results: Prosocial Profiles

- Not Prosocial (Low Social Engagement; 31%)
 - *Did not interact with experimenter*
 - *Did not behave prosocially*

- Moderately Prosocial (High Social Engagement; 48%)
 - *Interacted with experimenter*
 - *Occasionally behaved prosocially*

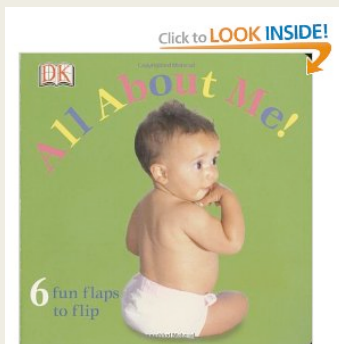
- Frequent Helpers (High Social Engagement; 21%)
 - *Interacted with the experimenter*
 - *Often behaved prosocially (especially when the adult needed help)*

Results: What social experiences predicted prosocial profile membership?

- **Maternal Sensitivity:** Warm, responsive interactions



- **Maternal Use of Mental State Words:** Talking about thoughts and feelings



Happy, sad,
wants, needs,
scared, knows

What else does research tell us about early prosocial behavior and caregiving?

- Rewards undermine prosocial behavior in toddlerhood (Warneken & Tomasello, 2008)
- Praising and encouraging prosocial behavior in early toddlerhood predicts more prosocial behavior in later toddlerhood (Hammond & Carpendale, 2015; Pettygrove et al., 2013)
- Scaffolding prosocial behavior (e.g., simplifying tasks) increases toddlers' prosocial behavior (Brownell, 2016)
- Talking about emotions increases toddlers' prosocial behavior (Brownell et al., 2013 and others)
- As children get older, they show a preference for helping “in-group” members versus “out-group” members (Weller & Lagattuta, 2013)
- Sensitive parenting continues to influence (and be influenced by) children's prosocial behavior well into elementary school (Newton et al., 2014)

What are the evidence-based practices for encouraging prosocial behavior in young children?

- Be sensitive. Respond promptly and with compassion when children need you.
- Treat the children in your care like they have real goals, feelings, and intentions, even at the youngest ages.
- Talk about children's goals, feelings, and intentions, and the goals, feelings, and intentions of others.
- Model prosocial behavior and kindness.
- Simplify tasks, identify and explain prosocial opportunities, and praise and point out the effects of prosocial acts.
- Avoid rewarding behaviors that come naturally.

Young children are building a mental model of what social relationships and interactions look like and whether or not other people are kind, attuned, and responsive, and have mental states worth valuing and considering. We can help that model be one of *attunement* and *kindness* to others.



Thank you.