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


This longitudinal study of a large national sample of American children 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.

- The relationships between maternal sensitivity and children’s prosocial behaviors were bidirectional.
- Paternal sensitivity was associated with subsequent prosocial behavior, but the relationship was not bidirectional. That is, 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.
- Girls were rated as more prosocial than boys, and parents of girls were rated as more sensitive than parents of boys (only during third grade).

Implications for Programs:

- Programs may wish to incorporate information in their parenting curricula about the bidirectional relationships between child prosocial behaviors and parental sensitivity.
- Programs could provide parents with the opportunity to learn skills for promoting prosocial behavior in their children.
- Programs may wish to develop activities that model prosocial behavior for children and give them opportunities to engage in prosocial behavior.

Implications for Policies:

- Policies may want to offer service members time away from their work duties to engage in prosocial behaviors, both with their unit and with their families.
- Policies may wish to recommend positive parenting curriculum for Service members following deployment to help parents be sensitive to their children’s feelings/needs.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could incorporate interventions and experimental methods to evaluate causal associations between parental sensitivity and children’s prosocial behavior.
- Future research could evaluate why bidirectional associations were found for children’s prosocial behavior and maternal, but not paternal, sensitivity.
- Future research could identify other aspects of positive parenting that contribute to prosocial behavior.
Longitudinal data were gathered from 10 sites across the United States when children were 54 months old, and in third, fifth, and sixth grades. These data were part of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. Mothers and teachers completed a questionnaire evaluating children’s prosocial behavior with peers in third, fifth, and sixth grades. A trained rater coded parental sensitivity during structured observational tasks at 54 months, third grade, and fifth grade. Structural equation modeling was used to evaluate bidirectional relationships between children’s prosocial behavior and parental sensitivity in mothers and fathers, independently.

The sample included 1,364 children as well as their parents (1,155 mothers, 459 fathers) and teachers. Boys and girls were roughly equally represented; one-quarter were from an ethnic minority. 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. No additional demographic information for study participants was reported in this manuscript.

Relatively few fathers were included in the models, limiting conclusions that can be drawn regarding relationships between paternal sensitivity and children’s prosocial behaviors. Parental sensitivity was obtained during engagement in a limited number of structured tasks. Additional tasks or unstructured tasks may have influenced ratings of parental sensitivity. Paternal perceptions of children’s prosocial behavior were not obtained. Observed gender differences in prosocial behavior may be partly attributable to the nature of the prosocial behaviors assessed (i.e., emotionally responsive behavior).

The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was...

The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...

The limitations of this study are...

The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...

Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating