

Tiny dictators: understanding altruism in young children

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Fairness and altruism are fundamental aspects of human social behavior, often observed across various contexts and age groups. Previous research has suggested that time constraints can influence decision-making processes, particularly in scenarios involving resource allocation. This study investigates the developmental origins of fairness in preschool children (aged 4 to 5) through a modified dictator game, examining their responses under time pressure. Children from six nursery schools (N=115) participated in a within-between subject design study, where children engaged in both “give” and “take” versions of the game. In the “Give” condition, children decided how many stickers to donate, while in the “Take” condition, they chose how many stickers to take from another child’s endowment. Time pressure was introduced, prompting children to re-allocate resources within a specified time frame, with the penalty of receiving nothing if they failed to do so. Results indicate that initial resource allocation significantly influenced subsequent sticker sharing, with children in the “Give” condition displaying less generosity than those in the “Take” condition. Notably, time pressure consistently led to increased sharing across both allocation conditions. These findings highlight the early emergence of a sense of fairness and altruism in preschool-aged children, irrespective of endowment or status quo effects. The study contributes valuable insights into the interplay between contextual factors and prosocial decision-making in early childhood. The modified dictator game employed in this study serves as a valuable tool for investigating the development fairness and altruism, shedding light on the intricate interplay between economic games and prosocial tendencies.

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