NEWS | POSTED MAY 14, 2026

New research explains how babies help their caregivers

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on May 13, 2026

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Wednesday, May 13, 2026 1:14pm

Developmental pathways of infant helping toward caregivers and unfamiliar adults: A longitudinal study

Read the Child Development article:

OXFORD ACADEMIC

Contact:

Jessica Efstathiou, Public Relations

E-MAIL

Does your infant put their arm through their sleeve when you get them dressed? As you sort laundry does your toddler pick up the shorts you dropped? These are examples of how infants help by participating in shared activities. As infants approach their first birthday, helping becomes evident in the context of shared chores and interactive routines with their caregivers or retrieving an out of reach object for an unfamiliar adult.

Researchers from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München in Munich, Germany aimed to address this by investigating how infants' helping behavior is associated with motor development and social-cognitive skills as well as early interactions with their caregiver.

Researchers studied 118 caregivers (mothers) and their infants (49 female and 69 male), at the infants' age of six months, 10 months, and 14 months.

Sample sizes varied across measurement points because families moved away or were temporarily unavailable. Children were recruited from local birth records in a European city, and families were predominantly middle class. Participating mothers were required to have sufficient language skills, and it was essential for their six-month old infants to be typically developed and born at full term. The study focused on the relationship between the primary caregiver and infants and in most cases this person was the mother. In alignment with German data collection policy guidelines, race and ethnicity data were not assessed.

Researchers assessed participating caregivers' interactions with their babies in a free play interaction. Motor development was accessible via parent report and infants' social understanding was examined using an eye-tracking task. Researcher analyzed infants' helping behavior towards an experimenter (such as helping to pick up items dropped from a tray) and shared chores with their caregiver (such as folding clothes or putting books on a shelf).

The study shows that infants learn to help through everyday interactions with their caregivers. Specifically, the more caregivers modeled the required behavior, the more infants helped the caregiver. The study shows a link between maternal modeling and helping toward the mother but not helping toward the experimenter.

The study is in line with the theory that infants come to help others by engaging in interactive routines with their caregiver, which are influenced by their motor skills. This underscores that early helping is partly prompted by concrete, situational behavioral cues. The results also emphasize that early helping behavior is shaped by the caregiver-child interaction and interwoven with both motor and social development.

The study is featured in a new *Child Development* article, "Developmental pathways of infant helping toward caregivers and unfamiliar adults: A longitudinal study," by Natalie Christner, Marina Kammermeier, Anja Kaßecker, and Markus Paulus from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München in Munich, Germany.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to speak with the author team to learn more about the research.

SRCD: Did anything in the results surprise you?

Author team: One result that surprised us was how infants' helping behavior toward a caregiver and toward an unfamiliar person was associated with different capabilities and interaction experiences. For example, caregivers' modeling of helping behavior was associated with helping the caregiver, but not directly with helping an unfamiliar person. This indicates that helping the caregiver is mostly guided by the concrete behavioral cues children encounter in a specific helping situation. Helping unfamiliar individuals, in contrast, is more associated with infants' ability to understand others' goals and to their experiences of sensitive responses to their own needs.

SRCD: What does this teach us about prosocial behavior?

Author team: Helping can be considered as a prosocial behavior, given that it benefits another person. In that sense, this research shows that prosocial behavior is shaped by early social interactional patterns and by individual capabilities, such as motor development and social cognition. The study further indicates that although infants show a general readiness to behave prosocially towards caregivers and unfamiliar individuals, their behavior is also shaped by the specific recipient. This means that infants draw on different abilities depending on who they are interacting with in a beneficial way.

SRCD: Can you explain how this research might help families, early childhood educators and researchers?

Author team: This research sheds light on the infant competencies and parenting practices that are linked to infants' helping behavior, and therefore might be important for supporting helping behavior from an early age. For families and early childhood educators, this research suggests that involving infants in shared routines, showing them how to help, and responding appropriately to their signaled needs may support infants' tendency to help others. For researchers, this study advances the understanding of the early development of helping behavior by testing central theoretical claims and opens up avenues for future research.

SRCD: What are some of the research limitations?

Author team: One limitation of the current study is that helping toward the caregiver and toward an unfamiliar person was assessed at the same age. Further longitudinal research will be needed to better understand how helping directed at different recipients develops across time. In addition, we have studied helping in a laboratory context. While this allows for standardized conditions across participants, it cannot fully capture the range of helping opportunities children encounter at home.

SRCD: What do you recommend for future research in this area?

Author team: An interesting next step is to study more closely how helping behavior in everyday, naturalistic settings relates to helping behavior observed in a laboratory context, as assessed in the current study. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate which pathways support other forms of helping and prosocial behavior more broadly, including emotional helping and sharing. The relevance of caregivers' interaction quality, concrete scaffolding behaviors, and social understanding likely differs across different types of prosocial behavior.

This research was supported by a grant from the German Research Foundation/Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

Summarized from an article in *Child Development*, "Developmental pathways of infant helping toward caregivers and unfamiliar adults: A longitudinal study," by Christner, N., Kammermeier, M., Kaßecker, A., and Paulus, M. from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München in Munich, Germany. Copyright 2026 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.