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Want a Young Child to "Help" or "Be a Helper"? Choice of Words Matters

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"Helping" Versus "Being a Helper": Invoking the Self to Increase Helping in Young Children

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How do you get a preschooler to help with chores and other household tasks? A new study suggests that adults' word choice can make a big difference.

The study, by researchers at the University of California, San Diego, the University of Washington, and Stanford University, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers carried out two experiments with about one hundred and fifty 3- to 6-year-olds from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds who came from middle- to upper-middle-class homes. In both experiments, an adult experimenter began by talking to children about helping. The only difference between the two studies was that in one, helping was referred to with a verb (e.g., "Some children choose to *help*"), while in the other, it was referred to with a noun (e.g., "Some children choose to be *helpers*"). Then the children began playing with toys. While they were playing, the adult provided four opportunities for the youngsters to stop and help the experimenter—to pick up a mess, open a container, put away toys, and pick up crayons that had spilled on the floor. In each case, the children had to stop playing to help.

The researchers also gathered baseline data, looking at to what extent a child chose to help the experimenter when helping was never mentioned.

Children who heard the noun wording (*helper*) helped significantly more than children who heard the verb wording (*help*). When the experimenter talked to youngsters about helping, using verb wording, the children didn't help any more than when the experimenter never brought up helping at all.

"These findings suggest that parents and teachers can encourage young children to be more helpful by using nouns like *helper* instead of verbs like *helping* when making a request of a child," says Christopher J. Bryan, assistant professor of psychology at the University of California, San Diego, who worked on the study. "Using the noun *helper* may send a signal that helping implies something positive about one's identity, which may in

turn motivate children to help more."

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Summarized from *Child Development*, "Helping" Versus "Being a Helper": Invoking the Self to Increase Helping in Young Children, by Bryan, CJ (University of California, San Diego), Master, A (University of Washington), and Walton, GM (Stanford University). Copyright 2014 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.