

New study questions whether toddlers choose to help dogs impulsively

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Dog experimenters Fiona, Henry and Seymour. Credit: Duke University

A team of scientists from the U.S. have conducted new research—published in the journal *Human-Animal Interactions*—which aimed to show whether or not toddlers choose to help dogs impulsively within certain scenarios.

The researchers, in the study entitled "Do children help [dogs](#)

spontaneously?", found that a sample group of children aged two to three years were twice as likely to help a dog reach a treat or toy when the animal showed interest than if it did not.

Lead scientist Dr. Rachna Reddy, a postdoctoral fellow in [evolutionary anthropology](#) at Duke University, and her team, also found that the children were more likely to help the dogs get the out-of-reach items if they already lived with a pet dog, the dogs were livelier and if the item was a treat rather than a toy.

The experiments conducted with three friendly dogs—Fiona, Henry and Seymour—took place at the University of Michigan's child laboratory between 2015 and 2020 and formed part of the research that also involved researchers from the University of Michigan and Stony Brook University in New York.

Dr. Reddy, who is also a research associate in the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University, said, "These findings lend support to our hypothesis that children's early-developing proclivities for goal-reaching and prosociality extend beyond humans to other animals."

The scientists recruited 97 toddlers (51 girls and 46 boys) aged between 20 and 47 months from middle-class families in and around the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and surrounding towns. The majority of the children were white (71%) while the rest identified as either multiracial, black or African-American, Latino, or Asian. Forty-four children had dogs at home and 53 did not.

It was revealed that the toddlers gave dogs out-of-reach treats and toys in 50% of all events where dogs attempted to access these items themselves. In contrast, children offered dogs objects that dogs ignored only half as often, on only 26% of occasions.

As expected, the researchers say, having a dog at home, the dog being highly engaged, and the out-of-reach object being food rather than a toy also increased the children's likelihood of giving dogs objects on an event-by-event basis.

Dr. Reddy added, "From several perspectives, children's proclivities to attribute desires and goals to pet dogs during real-life, in-person interactions is unsurprising.

"However, we observed as early as two years of age, children behave in ways showing they are not only able to read the goal-directed behavior of another animal but can and do employ that knowledge to help an animal reach its own goal.

"In addition to informing us about childhood helping, these early child behaviors may have important evolutionary significance."

Dr. Reddy and the scientists suggest that future research will be necessary to examine additional psychological components of inter-specific instrumental helping, including the emotions that underlie [children](#)'s motivation to help dogs, how these motivations as well as cognitive attributions are shaped by culture, and how all of the preceding processes change throughout development.

More information: Rachna B. Reddy et al, Do children help dogs spontaneously?, *Human-Animal Interactions* (2023). [DOI: 10.1079/hai.2023.0001](https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2023.0001)

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