Relations between Empathy, Emotion Regulation, and Prosocial Behavior during Early Childhood

Sarah A. Probst*,†, Kristin J. Perry*, & Jamie M. Ostrov*
University at Buffalo, SUNY*, University of Michigan†

Background

- Motivation of prosocial behavior still unclear—may involve empathetic concern for others (see Paulus, 2014)
- Emotion regulation also believed to be involved in prosocial responding (see Eisenberg et al., 2015)
- ER moderates relation between empathy and prosocial behavior in adult sample (Lockwood et al., 2014)
- Does this relation function similarly in early childhood?

Method

- Trained research assistants reliably observed children’s social behavior at school over a period of several weeks; prosocial behaviors were among variables collected
- Empathy reported by research assistants after conclusion of observations using a teacher report of internalization and empathy (Hawley & Geldof, 2012) (α=.78)
- Emotion regulation reported by children’s classroom teachers using the Emotion Regulation Checklist (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997) (α=.78)

Results

- A hierarchical regression model was run to test the study aims which controlled for children’s age and gender. Emotion regulation moderated the relation between empathy and prosocial behavior (see table)
- An investigation of the simple slopes revealed empathy related to prosocial behavior at mean (β=.50, p<.001) and high (β=.80, p<.001), but not low (β=.20, p=.28), levels of emotion regulation

![Graph showing the relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior across different levels of emotion regulation.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1:</th>
<th>Prosocial Behavior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy-RA</td>
<td>.488*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion Regulation-TR</td>
<td>.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion Regulation x ER</td>
<td>.588**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: At Step 2, F and R² represent change in F and R² from Step 1. *p=.001, **p=.022

Conclusions

- Empathy was related to observed prosocial behavior in preschool children
- Emotion regulation moderated the association between empathy and prosocial behavior such that this effect was found only at mean and high levels of ER
- Results were consistent with prior findings from studies with older samples, indicating that these variables interact similarly across development

Notes

This research was conducted in the Department of Psychology at the University at Buffalo and was made possible due to a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS-1450777) to the third author.

Direct correspondence to:
Sarah Probst, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan: saprobst@umich.edu