

Altruism and Children

Brizel Trinidad, M.S., Lisa Lashley Psy.D., Charles J. Golden Ph.D.

Nova Southeastern University, College of Psychology

Altruism is the combination of willingly and spontaneously helping others. Many studies have focused on the origin of these traits, whether they are innate or learned. Researchers are examining inborn altruism and studying the influence of external forces, such as parental role modeling and prosocial tendencies, that have an influence on children's altruistic behavior (Clay, 2006). Altruism is often associated with altering levels of trust however, in children altruism takes on various forms and definitions with each developmental stage and as more complex interactions with others take place.

The term altruism was coined by a 19th-century philosopher Auguste Comte to indicate a moral principle that places great value on helping others accomplish their goals. Children begin to learn the effects of helping others and extending compassion towards others at a young age. This give and take interaction develops a form of trust that becomes the bases of altruism in later years. Researchers have found that even very young children without much prosocial tendencies or socialization are willingly and spontaneously able to help others.

Children learn to gain trust via various forms such as crying, babbling, and smiling. The interaction between the baby and the adult is manipulated by the attention, cooperation, and understanding between the two. The pattern of interplay creates the basis of trust for other adults. The child learns that the adult can be trusted and often generalizes that interaction with other adults. Although the same results cannot always be guaranteed, the interaction creates new exchanges and new forms of interplay are created such as compassion, kindness, and confidence.

Alternatively, trust is not essential in the process of altruism. As discovered children with low prosocial tendencies can express altruism.

Humans learn the impact of trust through the reciprocated process of giving and receiving. As trust is learned, altruism is enhanced. The relationship between the caregiver and child is important to set the stage for future relationships. It is through those first relationships that children learn the process of cause and effect. The outcome of desired needs such as food, toys, or change in clothes helps regulate the output of social interaction.

Babies hold different attitudes towards distinct individuals and tend to respond differently to such individuals (Wynn, 2009). As discussed, caregivers can reinforce an attitude or behavior, increasing the likelihood of its occurrence. Children begin to trust a process of giving and receiving. Erik Erikson identified this process as 'the first task of the ego.' In this process, children are able to possess control over gratification, a new concept that continues to grow in development. The different relationships children have detail the varying levels of trust.

To empirically illustrate the maturational process, Evans, Athenstaedt, and Krueger (2013) summarized a study that focused on how children of different ages interacted with adults. They noticed that three-year-olds trust almost instinctively while five-year-olds began to distrust misleading adults. The cautious five-year-olds' decisions were unreliable, indicating that the skill may not be fully developed. They concluded that if there are significant differences in altruistic intentions, those differences may be due to trust, leading to the conclusion that there is a structural relationship between trust and altruism. Trust levels change over time indicating that trust and altruism are also different at various developmental periods, on a continuum of growth and development.

Trust and altruism reflect and impact each other. Change in one variable may causes change on the other. The positive directional relationship becomes more complex with age and the development of cognitive maturation. As a child gains cognitive reasoning, executive functioning, and increases in relationships, trust takes on new perspectives. Piaget categorized the developmental formation of abstract reasoning allows children to delay immediate gratification. The trusting process changes from infancy. The child must learn to adapt and form trusting relationships in a different format. As trust is experienced differently altruism adjusts. Altruism reflected in the will and spontaneity to help others continue to mold with more formal cognitive developmental processes.

Further Readings

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