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Dear parent or guardian,

We are contacting you because your child participated in a research study that we conducted at your child's school (with your consent). We now have the results of that study, and would like to share them with you.

First, let us explain the background of our study. Researchers from a number of disciplines are curious about the roots of human altruism. Among primates, it is common for individuals to help other members of their groups, but this help is mainly directed towards close relatives or partners who reciprocate directly. Humans, in contrast, often act altruistically towards individuals that they aren't related to and who they may never meet. We love our own children and families, but we also donate blood during blood drives, give to charity, recycle our trash, and vote in elections. These kinds of cooperative behaviors play a crucial role in all human societies, and suggest that humans have a strong preference for outcomes that benefit others. Is this preference unique, or do we share it with other primates? How do these kinds of preferences develop during childhood?

A number of studies have shown that despite being intelligent and cooperative animals, chimpanzees do *not* have a preference for outcomes that benefit other familiar chimpanzees. In contrast, even young human children appear to have such a preference. A previous study has shown that by 7.5 years of age, children show preferences for outcomes that benefit others in anonymous interactions (donors do not know who they are helping), but younger children didn't seem to show these preferences. However, this anonymous situation is very different than the face-to-face task that the chimpanzees were given. We thought that in face-to-face interactions, children's altruistic preferences would emerge earlier.

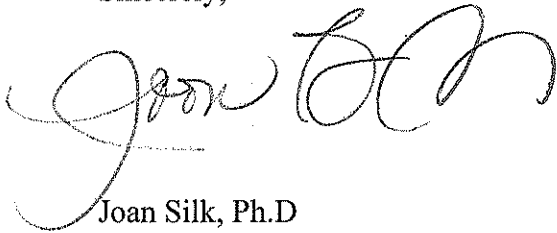
During the study, children were paired with another child from their classroom to play a game. In this game, they received goldfish crackers (or raisins, if you requested that crackers not be used). Each child got the opportunity to be a Chooser, and then a Receiver. The children operated a simple apparatus that allowed them to deliver rewards to themselves and/or their partners. The Chooser got to pick one of two options, each of which delivered different amounts of crackers to the Receiver. We found that children as young as 4 years of age preferred the option that benefited the Receiver. However, it appears as though children aged 3 years may not have such a preference. This suggests that, in this game, altruistic behavior develops between the ages of 3 and 4. It is, of course, possible that children might show altruistic behavior even earlier in another type of game.

It is interesting that in our study, in which children were able to see and interact with their partners, altruistic preferences emerged at 4 years of age, while altruistic preferences do not emerge until 7.5 years of age in anonymous interactions. This suggests that children are concerned about the welfare of other children, and these preferences are stronger when they are face-to-face with their partners. In addition, children may be sensitive to the opinions of others, and may want others to think of them as generous. Learning social norms about generosity and selfishness, and sensitivity to how others perceive you, may be of crucial importance to the development of altruistic behavior.

This might suggest that different cultures with different norms may lead children to demonstrate different patterns of altruistic behavior. We are currently adapting this study so that researchers can take it to different cultures around the world. Understanding how preferences for outcomes that benefit others develop in different cultures will help us understanding how and when altruistic sentiments emerge in the minds of children.

Thank you so much for participating with your child!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joan Silk". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "S".

Joan Silk, Ph.D
Department of Anthropology
UCLA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bailey House". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized.

Bailey House, Graduate Student
Department of Anthropology
UCLA