

Young children's moral judgments depend on the social relationship between agents

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Abstract

Moral judgments can vary depending on the social relationship between agents. We presented 4- and 6-year-old peer dyads ($N = 128$) with stories, in which a parent (parent condition) or a peer protagonist (peer condition) faced a child in need of help (e.g., the child is thirsty). The dyads had to decide whether the protagonist helped at a cost (e.g., by giving up their water) or not. 6-year-olds expected a parent to help her child more than they expected a child to help a peer. Moreover, children justified their expectations more often with normative statements (e.g., "She has to help") in the parent condition than in the peer condition. Thus, refusal to help a child was more acceptable coming from a peer than from a parent. This shows that young children take into account multiple perspectives and form different normative expectations for different social agents when making moral judgments.

Keywords: moral reasoning; collaborative decision-making; peer interactions; two social worlds; parent-child relationship; peer relationships

Research Highlights

- 6-year-olds expects others to help altruistically more than 4-year-olds.
- Preschoolers make different person judgments depending on the actors' social role.
- The content of children's justifications varies depending on actors' social roles

Young children's moral judgments depend on the social relationship between agents

To navigate their social interactions, children have to learn the social norms that govern their community and learn who should follow which rules in certain contexts (Searle, 1995). Moral norms, such as “One should not harm others” or “One should share with others”, are often viewed as universal and context-independent (Smetana, 2006; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013; Turiel, 1983). However, recent accounts highlight that moral judgments can be influenced by the contextual factors such as individual desires, group functioning, or culture (Haidt et al., 1993; Joseph & Haidt, 2007; Killen et al., 2013; Smetana, 1995). The social-relational approach (Rai & Fiske, 2011) especially focusses on the relationship between the individuals and posits that the moral norms one is expected to follow may vary depending on a person's role in their relationships with their social partners.

Children generally engage with two kinds of social partners: adults, specifically parents, and children, specifically same-aged peers (Damon, 1983; Piaget, 1932). Children's interactions with parents are mostly hierarchically structured and characterised by several asymmetries. On the one hand, there is an asymmetry in power. Parents are authority figures who provide children with guidance and knowledge. For example, up to age 4, children see adults as more reliable informants than peers (Kachel et al., 2018; Rakoczy et al., 2010; Zmyj et al., 2012). Thus, children often expect instructions from their parents and conform to them, often without questioning their validity (Youniss, 1980). On the other hand, there is an asymmetry in fairness and children's needs have priority over the needs of the adult. Parents are responsible for the welfare of their children and thus provide them with nurture and care. Children, however, do not have the responsibility of care towards their parents (Damon, 1983). Yet, despite the priority of children's needs, already during their second year of life, children help adults achieve their goals (Warneken & Tomasello, 2007), even at a cost (e.g., by giving

up their own toy; Svetlova et al., 2010); and share valued resources with adults (Brownell et al., 2009).

In contrast, children's interactions with peers are less hierarchically structured. Peers have equal authority and the need of one child is as important as the need of another child (Youniss, 1980). Highlighting their equal footing, 3-year-olds share their resources with peers when their peer gets fewer rewards than them after collaboration (Hamann et al., 2011). Five-year-olds actively coordinate and help each other by employing fair strategies such as turn-taking to ensure an equal outcome in collaborative tasks (Grueneisen & Tomasello, 2017; Knofe et al., 2019; Melis et al., 2016). Around ages 3 to 4, children start paying attention to who their peer partners are: they act more generously towards friends than towards strangers or disliked peers (Birch & Billman, 1986; Moore, 2009) and towards in-group than towards out-group peers (Renno & Shutts, 2015).

Children also form different judgments about the prosocial behaviours of third-parties, depending on the characteristics of and the relationship between the actors. Between ages 4 to 6, children expect others to share more with a needy recipient than with a wealthy one (Wörle & Paulus, 2018) and more with a liked peer than with a disliked peer (Paulus & Moore, 2014). Moreover, around age 7, children evaluate unhelpful friends as meaner than unhelpful strangers (Marshall et al., 2020). Children also get good at evaluating the circumstances and the reasons (or excuses) behind unfair behaviour. Schmidt, Svetlova, Johe, and Tomasello (2016) presented 3-, 5-, and 8-year-olds with a puppet who allocated food items unequally between two recipients. The unequal distribution was either prompted by one recipient giving legitimate reasons based on need ("I am hungry") or illegitimate reasons based on desire ("I want more"). Only 8-year-olds accepted legitimate reasons, but not illegitimate reasons, for the unfair distribution.

Making moral person judgements and justifying these judgments rest on two essential skills: 1) understanding morality (e.g., awareness of social norms) and 2) theory of mind (e.g.,

intentions of people involved; Piaget, 1932). The first skill relies on children's species-unique propensities for cooperation and shared intentionality (Tomasello, 2019). Around age 3, children understand that the moral norms need to be respected by every member of the social group agent-neutrally. The second skill relies on understanding the intentions of the people involved (e.g., whether the harm was caused intentionally or not), and "perspectival thinking" that simulates and incorporates different perspectives (Köymen & Tomasello, in press; O'Madagain & Tomasello, 2019), especially when the perspectives of the transgressor and the victim have to be taken into account simultaneously. Any deviation from social norms requires an explanation or an excuse.

Already during the preschool period, children spontaneously provide appropriate reasons for their moral judgments based on their moral common ground with conversational partners, particularly peer partners (Mammen et al., 2018, 2019). However, there are no studies, to our knowledge, investigating whether children differentiate their moral judgments between adults, particularly parents, and peers. Investigating whether and at which age children differentiate their moral person judgments depending on the actors can inform us about how flexible children's moral judgments are and whether they take into account the dynamics between social partners to evaluate which rules apply to whom in the given situation.

In this study, therefore, we investigated whether 4- and 6-year-old children have different expectations towards parents' and peers' helping behaviours. We created an interactive problem-solving task for peer dyads to observe which reasons guide children's moral judgments, as children have been observed to engage in more active reasoning with a co-equal peer rather than an adult partner (Mammen et al., 2019). We presented peer dyads the beginning of a story and asked them to jointly choose an ending to it. In the peer condition, the protagonist of the story was a child who was faced with a friend in need (e.g., the friend is thirsty because he/she did not bring his/her water). The dyads were asked to choose what the protagonist child did: he/she helped his/her friend at a cost by saying, "I'm thirsty, but you can have my water"

or he/she refused to help his/her friend by saying, "I'm thirsty, so you cannot have my water". In the parent condition, children were presented with the same story, except that the protagonist was the parent of the child in need. Each of the two endings would leave one character in need: either the protagonist or the needy child would be thirsty. Thus, helping in this scenario was not a merely prosocial act; it was also a moral obligation, because refusal to help would result in harm to the protagonist. Moreover, helping was not only necessary, but also costly (e.g., the protagonist had to give up his/her water even if he/she was also thirsty). We anticipated that the lack of an obvious "correct" way to end this story would elicit longer discussions between the children.

We predicted that children would choose the ending in which the protagonist helped more often than the ending in which the protagonist refused to help because children expect people to help their friends (Paulus & Moore, 2014) and parents to help their children (Damon, 1983). However, we also hypothesized that children would choose the ending in which the protagonist helped more often in the parent than in the peer condition, because a peer refusing to help is arguably more acceptable, due to their equal footing, than a parent refusing to help, even if both had the same reason for refusing to help. We predicted that children would refer to the obligation of helping by producing justifications with normative or generic statements (e.g., "She has to help"; "Mums/They always help") more often in the parent than in the peer condition. We also explored potential age differences. Previous studies have shown that around age 4, children consider the actors' relationship in their prosocial expectations (Paulus & Moore, 2014), but they do not correctly evaluate the legitimacy of the reasons/excuses for not acting prosocially until school ages (Schmidt et al., 2016).

Methods

Participants

The participants were 64 4-year-olds ($M = 4;7$, $Range = 4;0-5;0$; 32 girls) and 64 6-year-olds ($M = 6;6$, $Range = 6;0-7;0$; 32 girls) in same-age and same-sex dyads, that were formed based on the teachers' recommendation of frequent play partners. Children were native German speakers from different socio-economic backgrounds. Each dyad participated in both conditions (two trials each, four trials total).

Material

Children were given detective-IDs, which the experimenter (E) would stamp for each riddle solved correctly. In the first warm-up, the children had four sets of two pictures. Children had to tell the difference between the two pictures in each set. At the second warm-up, the children had three storybooks. Children had to choose one of two endings.

There were four experimental trials. We used two stories. In one story, there was a child who needed water; in the other story, there was a child who was cold and needed a scarf. Each story had two versions. In the peer condition, the protagonist was the friend of the needy child; in the parent condition, the protagonist was the parent of the needy child. The two possible endings to each story were: the protagonist helped or refused to help (see Appendix).

Procedure

All dyads were tested in quiet rooms in the nurseries. All trials (warm-up and experimental) were framed as riddles that the dyads had to solve. The experimenter (E) handed children their detective-IDs and said, "For each riddle you solve correctly, I will stamp your ID. We can check the correct answer from my solution-book in the end, and each of you will get a gift for every stamp." We framed all trials as having correct answers to make the children consider their choices more carefully and to prevent them from choosing endings randomly.

Warm-up 1

The first warm-up primed children to pay attention to characters' ages. E presented the first set of pictures (a boy flying a kite and a girl brushing her hair) and asked, "What are the differences between these two?" E did the same with the second set of pictures (a woman playing football and a man drinking tea) and asked, "Are these [set 2 characters] children or adults? Are these [set 1 characters] adults, too?" Then, E presented the last two sets of drawings, which depicted an adult and a child doing the same thing (set 3: a girl and a woman eating an apple; set 4: a boy and a man reading a book). E asked the children to name the differences between the pictures. If the children did not mention the age differences, E asked, "Why is she [the child] not wearing high heels?" or "Why does he [the adult] not have a dinosaur on his t-shirt?" E praised the children's answers and stamped their detective-IDs.

Warm-up 2

The second warm-up introduced children to the task of finding an ending to a story based on the protagonists' ages and primed them to justify their choices. All stories had one ending that was more likely to be right than the other one. While one could also argue for the unlikely ending to be right, we wanted to prime children to pick endings based on the inferences they draw from the protagonists' ages (adults typically do X; children typically do Y). Unlike the stories in the experimental trials, the stories in the warm-up trials did not involve any moral dilemmas but had clear correct answers because we did not want to prime children to resolve dilemmas in certain ways.

E presented the first story: "This girl is 4/6 years old like you. She is getting ready to leave the house." E then presented the two pictures as possible endings. "What happened next? Did she go to the kindergarten [picture 1] or to the office [picture 2]?" E elicited justifications, e.g., "Why not to the office?"; "Where do children usually go?" In the end, E always stated the reasons herself, "She went to the kindergarten because she's a child. Children usually go to the

kindergarten. Adults usually go to the office." Then, E stamped the children's detective-IDs for the correct answer.

E presented the second story by showing a picture of a woman who had her birthday. The dyads had to choose how she prepared her birthday: with colourful balloons and plates or as a dinner party with place mats. In this round, E steered the decision-making to the wrong ending (the one with the balloons) by saying, "I like this one" to show that there is only one correct answer and to prevent children from picking endings randomly. Consulting the solution-book, E announced that they picked the wrong ending. E asked why their answer was wrong and restated the reasons: "Children usually use colourful balloons. She is an adult. Adults usually celebrate like this." E did not stamp the detective-IDs.

In the third story, children had to pick what a man would drink after lunch: a soft drink or coffee. E led the discussion such that they would pick the coffee and then concluded: "He is an adult. Adults usually drink coffee. Children usually drink soft drinks." Then, E stamped the detective-IDs for the correct answer.

Experimental trials

In trial 1, E presented the children the first story, saying: "I am going to show you the beginning of a story and then you two will find out, what happened next." E presented the first story in the peer condition by introducing the child protagonist facing a friend in need: "Ben and his *friend* George went outside to play. George brought his scarf. Ben did not feel like bringing his scarf". E continued, "This is the beginning of the story. Here are two endings for the story." In the help ending, George said, "I'm cold, but you can have my scarf anyway". In the no-help ending, George said, "I'm cold, so you cannot have my scarf". In trial 2, children were presented with the same story in the parent condition. The only difference was that the protagonist was the father of the needy boy ("Ben and his *dad* went outside ..."). In trial 3, E presented the second story in the parent condition: "Zoe and her *mum* were having a picnic; Zoe's mum brought some water, Zoe did not feel like bringing her water". In the help ending,

the mum said, "I'm thirsty, but you can have my water anyway." In the no-help ending, the mum said, "I'm thirsty, so you cannot have my water". Finally, in trial 4, children were presented with the same story in the peer condition. The only difference was that the protagonist was the friend of the needy girl ("Zoe and her *friend* Gesa were having a picnic ...").

After presenting each story and its two possible endings, E said, "Do you think the [helper] gave the scarf/water to [victim] or do you think the [refuser] wore the scarf/ drank the water? Think about it together and explain to each other, why. Call me when you've made your decision". E then left the children alone to decide and only re-entered when the children had made their decision or were distracted. E did not give any feedback on their choices after each trial because we did not want to prime or bias children's reasoning or assessment of the situation in the subsequent trials but said that they could check for the answers later. The order of the two stories and two conditions were counterbalanced. If the first story had the peer condition first, the second story had the parent condition first and vice versa.

After the experimental trials, E conducted a post-test interview with the dyads about their choices in the last story. E showed the picture of the ending the dyads chose in the penultimate trial and asked, "Why did you choose this ending?" If children did not answer or gave insufficient reasons (e.g., "because we liked it"), E repeated the question. This procedure was repeated once more for the final trial. We conducted the post-test interview only for the last two trials (i.e., one story in both the peer and the parent conditions), because we suspected that children would be confused and/or perhaps would not remember the reasons that guided their decisions for the first trials. This interview was carried out together with the two children in a dyad because children were asked to explain their joint decisions and their responses would not be independent even if they were interviewed individually. After the post-test, E gave the children rewards.

Coding

First, we coded which ending the dyads chose in each trial: *help* vs. *no-help*. The children's peer conversations during the experimental trials and their responses to the post-test questions were transcribed. From the transcript, we identified all the *justifications* about their choice for an ending to the story. Justifications that were not related to the content of the stories such as "Because I like it" were identified as *insufficient* and excluded from further analysis. The remaining sufficient justifications were those that referred to the actors (parent/child) and/or the actions of the actors (helping/refusing). For each sufficient justification, we coded which ending it supports: help ending (e.g., "The father does not want him to be cold.") or no-help ending (e.g., "She [the child] could have brought her own water.").

Next, we coded each justification as a normative/generic statement, if it entailed:

- normative modal verbs "must/ought" and adjectives (e.g., "unfair"), e.g., "She must help";
- generic statements, e.g., "Moms help";
- statements with "always" or "never", e.g., "My mother always helps".

The rest of the justifications were coded as non-normative/generic, and referred, for example, to the group membership of the actors (e.g., "She is a mother"), potential consequences (e.g., "She will catch a cold") or repeated facts from the stories (e.g., "He is thirsty").

A second coder, who was blind to the hypotheses, coded 25% of the transcripts for singling out the [sufficient] justifications, the ending justifications support and the normative/generic justifications. The agreement was $\kappa = .91$; $\kappa = .91$; and $\kappa = .97$ respectively.

Results

One 4-year-old dyad did not choose any ending in one trial, which was excluded from analysis 1. Out of the 255 trials, children chose the help ending in 167 trials (65%) and the

no-help ending in 88 trials (35%). Six-year-olds chose the help ending more often than 4-year-olds (77% vs. 54%). In the parent condition, children chose the help ending more often than in the peer condition (74% vs. 56%, see Figure 1). We first compared the dyads' choices in each age group and condition to chance, using one sample t-tests. The mean number of trials in which 4-year-olds chose the help-ending did not differ from chance neither in the peer condition ($t(31) = -0.40, p = 0.69, d = 0.07$), nor in the parent condition ($t(31) = 1.56, p = 0.13, d = 0.28$). The mean number of trials in which 6-year-olds chose the help ending was significantly above chance both in the peer condition ($t(31) = 2.27, p = 0.03, d = 0.40$), and in the parent condition ($t(31) = 7.47, p < 0.001, d = 1.32$).

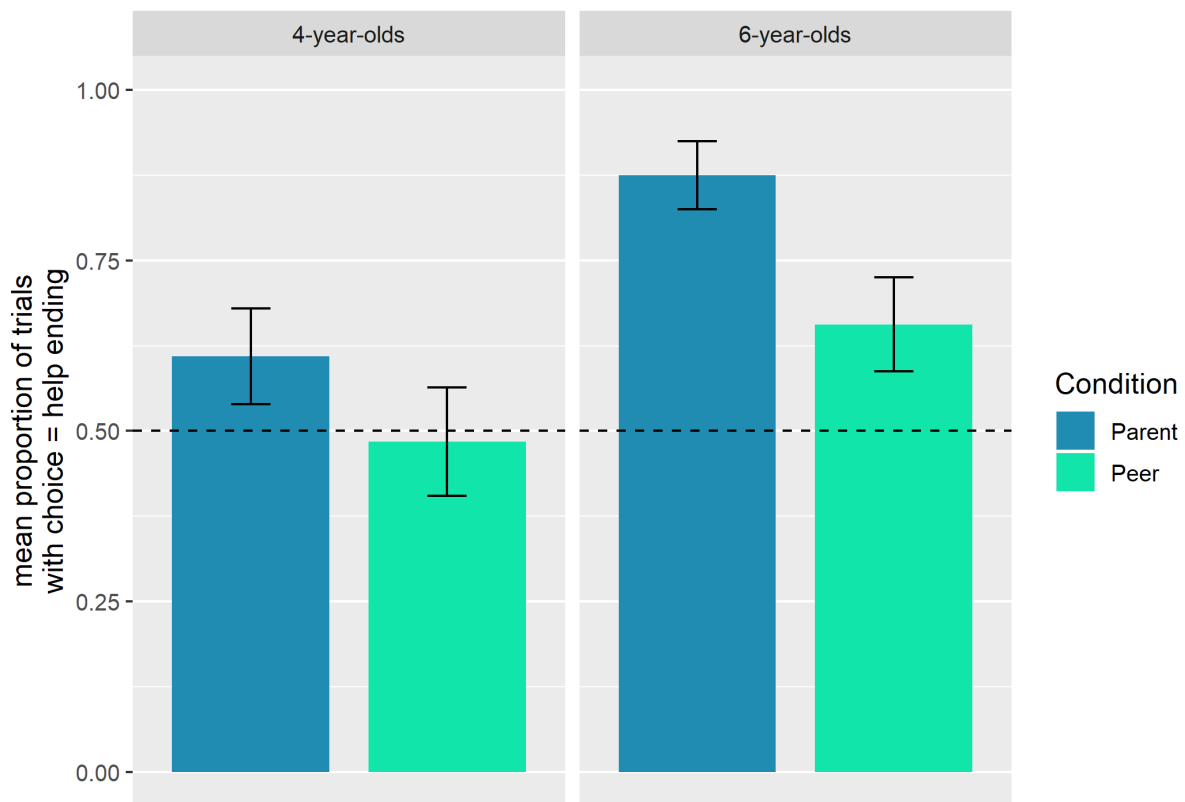


Figure 1. Mean proportion of trials in which dyads chose the help ending (error bars represent standard errors; dashed line represents chance level)

We next investigated whether age and condition had an effect on the children's choices (analysis 1); on their use of normative/generic justifications for the help ending (analysis 2);

and for the no-help ending (analysis 3); and for the no-help ending (analysis 4) in their peer discussions. For each analysis we used Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMM) with binomial error distribution for two reasons. 1) We had a within-subject design and multiple observations from each dyad in each condition. GLMM allowed us to include random slopes of condition (parent vs. peer), story (water vs. scarf), and trial order over the random intercept of dyad-ID to account for random variation caused by these factors within each dyad. 2) The number of justifications children produced varied across trials and dyads, depending for example on children's verbal skills or the dynamics of the dyad. When the unit of analysis was each justification, GLMM allowed us to include the dyad-ID and a unique trial-ID (composed of the dyad-ID and the trial) as random intercepts to group the justifications by a dyad in each trial. We used the random intercept of dyad, rather than the intercept of individual child speaker because what one child said influenced what the other said so the observations from the children within a dyad were not independent.

In analysis 2, the unit of analysis was each trial. The response variable was a binomial measure of the chosen ending (help vs. no-help). The full model included the predictors age (4 vs. 6), condition (peer vs. parent) and their interaction; the control variables gender, story (picnic vs. scarf) and trial order (z-transformed); and the random slopes of condition, story and trial order over the random intercept of dyad-ID. To test the significance of the full model, we compared its fit with a null model that lacked age, condition, and their interaction. The full model improved the fit ($\chi^2 = 22.70$; $df = 3$; $p < .001$). Comparing the full model with a reduced model lacking the interaction term suggested that the interaction was not significant ($\chi^2 = 2.05$; $df = 1$; $p = .152$). We therefore dropped the interaction term to get interpretable main effects. The reduced model revealed a main effect of age ($\chi^2 = 8.46$; $df = 1$; $p = .004$) and condition ($\chi^2 = 12.19$; $df = 1$; $p < .001$). Six-year-olds chose the help ending more often than 4-year-olds. Both age groups chose the help ending more often in the parent than in the peer condition (see

figure 1). There was no significant effect of gender ($\chi^2 = 2.09$; $df = 1$; $p = .149$), story, ($\chi^2 = 0.01$; $df = 1$; $p = .928$) or trial order ($\chi^2 = 0.00$; $df = 1$; $p = .957$).

During the experimental trials, 6-year-olds produced more justifications than 4-year-olds (203 vs. 37). Six-year-olds produced 16 insufficient justifications (8%); 4-year-olds produced 4 insufficient justifications (11%) (see also table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of justification types across experimental trials and post-test interview

	condition	dyads	justifications	insufficient justifications	normative/generic statements*
Experimental trials					
4-year-olds	parent	7	22	3 (13.64%)	7 (36.84%)
	peer	4	15	1 (6.67%)	2 (14.29%)
6-year-olds	parent	24	108	7 (6.48%)	45 (44.55%)
	peer	23	95	9 (9.47%)	22 (25.58%)
Post-test interviews					
4-year-olds	parent	29	34	17 (50.00%)	3 (17.65%)
	peer	26	27	12 (44.44%)	2 (13.33%)
6-year-olds	parent	31	40	1 (2.50%)	19 (48.72%)
	peer	28	35	1 (2.86%)	13 (38.24%)

* proportion shown of sufficient justifications

Table 2. Number of sufficient justifications supporting each ending in the experimental trials

	condition	dyads	Sufficient justifications (total)	Justifications for help-ending ¹	Justifications for no-help ending ²
4-year-olds	parent	7	19	13	6
	peer	4	14	7	7
6-year-olds	parent	24	101	78	23
	peer	23	86	49	37

¹ Subset used for analysis 3

² Subset used for analysis 4

In analysis 3, we used a subset of those 147 justifications from the peer conversations in the experimental trials that supported the help ending (see

Table 2). The unit of analysis was each justification. The response variable was a binomial measure of whether the justification was normative/generic or not. The full model included the

predictors age, condition, and their interaction; the control variables gender, story, trial order; and the random intercepts of dyad-ID and unique trial-ID. To test the significance of the full model, we compared its fit with a null model that lacked age, condition, and their interaction. The full model improved the fit ($\chi^2 = 7.86$; $df = 3$; $p = .049$). Comparing the full model with a reduced model lacking the interaction term suggested that the interaction was not significant ($\chi^2 = 0.01$; $df = 1$; $p = .919$). We therefore dropped the interaction term. The reduced model revealed a main effect of condition ($\chi^2 = 7.488$; $df = 1$; $p = .006$): children produced more normative/generic justifications in the parent than in the peer condition (see figure 2). There was no significant effect of age ($\chi^2 = 0.47$; $df = 1$; $p = .492$), gender ($\chi^2 = 1.79$; $df = 1$; $p = .181$), trial order ($\chi^2 = 0.54$; $df = 1$; $p = .463$), or story ($\chi^2 = 1.39$; $df = 1$; $p = .239$).

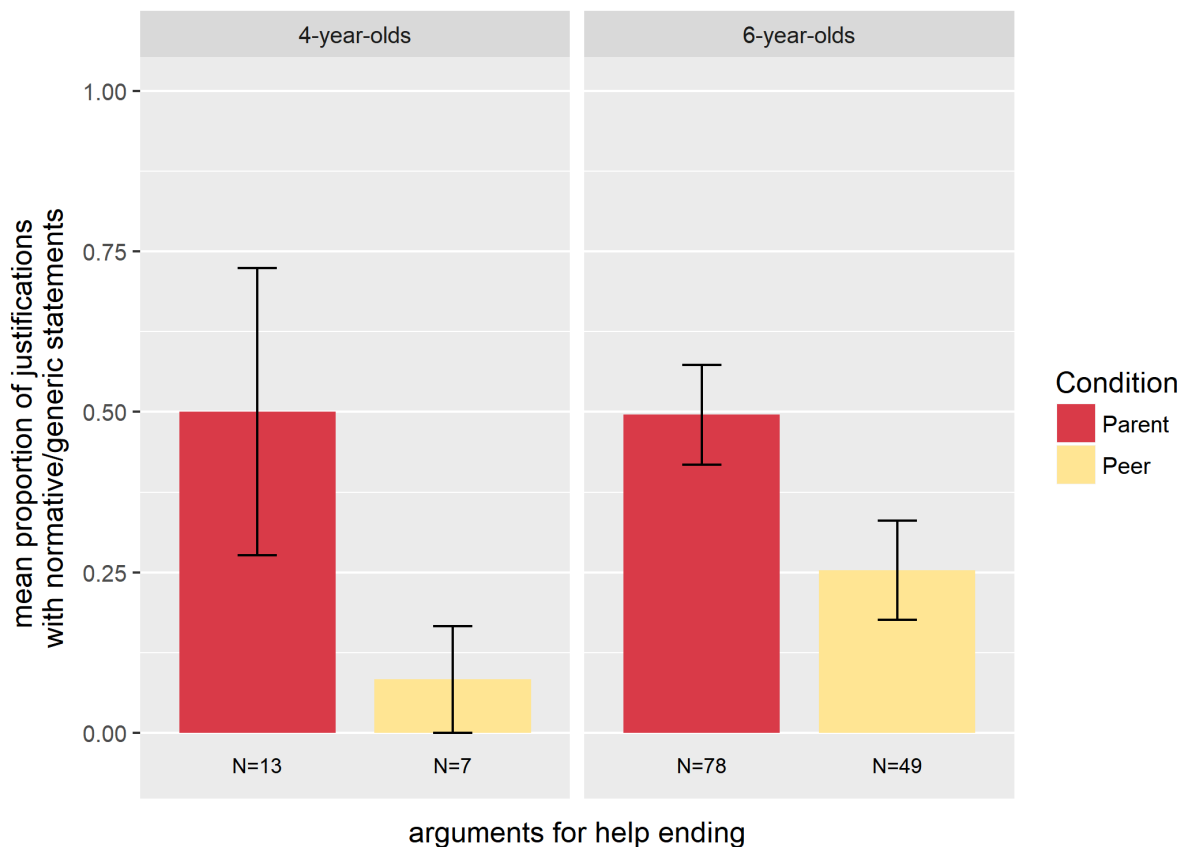


Figure 2. Mean proportion of justifications for the help ending with normative/generic statements (error bars represent standard errors)

In analysis 4, we used the subset of 73 justifications from the peer conversations in the experimental trials that supported the no-help ending (see

Table 2). The response variable and the factors in full and null models were the same as in analysis 2. The full model did not improve the fit ($\chi^2 = 0.53$; $df = 3$; $p = .912$). Thus, there was no significant effect of condition or age on the justifications that supported the no-help ending (see figure 3).

We conducted separate analyses for help-ending (analysis 2) and no-help ending (analysis 3) because we were especially interested in how children would treat each ending and how they would justify their choice of each ending in each condition.

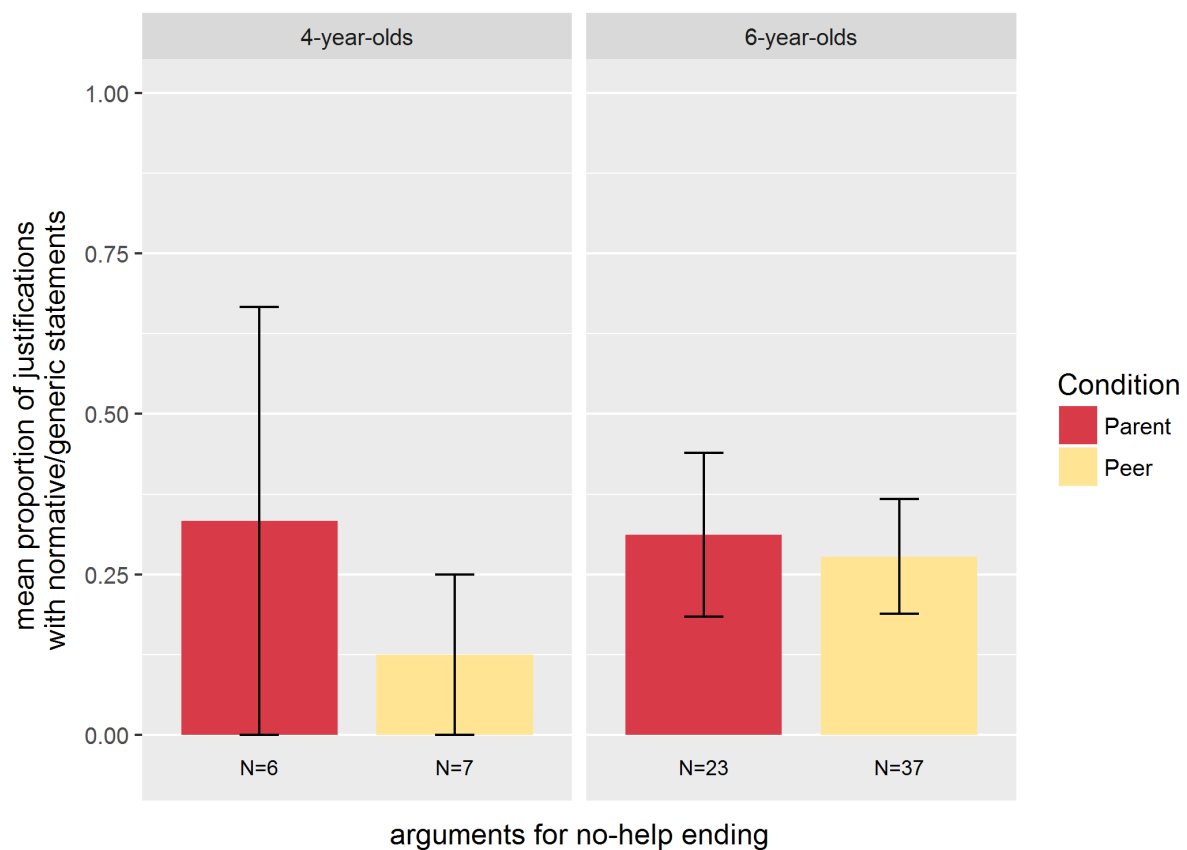


Figure 3. Mean proportion of justifications for the no-help ending with normative/generic statements (error bars represent standard errors)

During the post-test interview, 6-year-olds produced more justifications than 4-year-olds (75 vs. 61). 48% of the justifications by the 4-year-olds and 3% of the justifications by the 6-year-olds were insufficient. Similar to their spontaneous justifications, when explaining their choice of the help ending, 6-year-olds used normative/generic statements in 26 of the 59 justifications (8 in the peer condition; 18 in the parent condition) and 4-year-olds in 3 of the 16 justifications (all in the parent condition). When explaining their choice of no-help ending, 6-year-olds used normative/generic statements in 6 of the 14 relevant justifications (1 in the parent condition; 5 in the peer condition) and 4-year-olds in 2 of the 16 relevant justifications for the no-help ending (all in the peer condition).

Discussion

Our results suggest that when making moral judgments, preschoolers pay attention to the social relationships between the individuals to determine whether one should help a person in need. When the protagonist was the parent of the needy child, children chose the help ending more often than when the protagonist was a friend of the needy child. In other words, the protagonist's excuse for refusing to help (e.g., "I am cold/thirsty") was accepted more often coming from a peer than from a parent. Children engaged in "perspectival thinking" and considered the perspectives of different social agents on the same moral issue. They accepted more often that a child does not have to help if they have a legitimate excuse; whereas parents were expected to help even if they had the same excuse. This finding supports the notion that children differentiate between the two social worlds of their childhood, parent-child and peer interactions. Other than previous studies showing that children reason differently with peers than with their mothers (e.g., Kruger & Tomasello, 1986), this study is the first to show that children also form different person judgments about their social partners in these two worlds.

Six-year-olds chose the help ending more often than 4-year-olds, who did not display a preference for either ending in both conditions. Previous findings show that the frequency of

altruistic/costly helping increases with age (Smith et al., 2013; Svetlova et al., 2010). Our results suggest that with age, children also *expect others* to engage in altruistic/costly helping more frequently. Another reason for this age difference could be that 4-year-olds might have been swayed by the excuses by the protagonists. Schmidt et al. (2016) found that as long as the actors provided a reason, even if illegitimate, children excused behaviours that were not prosocial. In our study, the protagonists provided legitimate reasons based on need (“I am cold/thirsty”), which might have made their refusal to help more acceptable. Nonetheless, our findings diverged from those by Schmidt et al. (2016) in the sense that at age 6, children were selective in their evaluations of the excuses: the same reason was perceived to be less legitimate when produced by a parent than by a peer. This pattern was the same across the two stories with different resource types (shareable water vs. impartible scarf).

Our findings support the social-relational approach (Rai & Fiske, 2011) and challenge views that regard moral norms as universal (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1983). When moral norms apply universally, seemingly immoral behaviour (e.g., not helping someone) can be explained either by the complexity of situations with multiple competing moral concerns (Smetana, 2006) or by different “informational assumptions”, i.e., different interpretations of a given situation by the actors (e.g., Wainryb, 1991). Neither was the case in our study. The protagonists were not faced with a moral dilemma, but merely had to prioritise the need of the other over their own. None of the actors was ignorant or misinformed about the situation. Thus, our study shows that the same behaviour can be judged as morally acceptable coming from some actors but not from others.

In our study, we compared children’s judgments about a parent’s and a friend’s behaviour. Parents and friends differ on several dimensions, not only age, but also kin-relatedness. We chose parents and friends as typical of children’s most common social interactions. We opted against comparing friends to unrelated adults because whether and to which degree children have experiences with non-kin adults might vary. We opted against comparing parents and

siblings because some power differences due to age might be observed amongst siblings. Nonetheless, children's understanding of the obligations/expectations linked to kin-relations develops throughout preschool years (e.g., Spokes & Spelke, 2016, 2018); they might have perceived that parents, due their kin relations with their children, are more obligated to help. Thus, one limitation of our study is that we cannot determine precisely whether age or kin-relatedness is impacting children's person judgments.

Another potential difference between peers and adults is that children attribute more competency to an adult than to a peer (Kachel et al., 2018; Rakoczy et al., 2010; Ruggeri et al., 2018) and might thus expect adults to help a person more often than a child. However, there is evidence to suggest that already very young children are capable of helping their peers reaching an out-of-reach item (Hepach et al., 2017) and the situations in our stories also did not require complex actions, but merely a transfer of one item. It is thus unlikely that competency alone drove the effect we observed.

When justifying their choice of the help ending, children in both age groups used normative/generic justifications ("Because parents care for their child") more often in the parent condition than in the peer condition. However, when justifying their choice of the no-help ending, there was no age or condition difference. Although refusing to help a needy child would violate the moral norm "One should help", not helping is not necessarily immoral, especially when one has good reasons/excuses. Accordingly, children justified choosing the no-help ending both normatively ("It would be unfair if she wouldn't have anything to drink.") and non-normatively (e.g., "She is thirsty").

Although there was no age difference on the content of children's justifications, the pattern was dominated by the 6-year-olds, who produced more justifications than the 4-year-olds. Although the analyses of the justifications are based on this skewed distribution, we found that when 4-year-olds did produce justifications for their choices, they followed the same pattern as the 6-year-olds and used more normative/generic justifications in the parent than in

the peer condition. This is in line with previous findings on preschoolers' reasoning with peers, which has found that although the content of the justifications of 3- and 5-year-olds is similar, children produce justifications more frequently with age (Köymen et al., 2014, 2016; Mammen et al., 2018).

In our analyses, we did not distinguish between normative justifications ("Moms have to help"), which highlight "obligations" and generic justifications ("Mums always help"), which highlight statistical generalizations. Although it would have been informative to disentangle descriptive generalisations and prescriptive norms, it was not feasible to do in our study because in our stories, generics expressing statistical and normative generalizations were phrased and functioned similarly. In fact, it is argued that generics such as "Nice kids clean up their toys" do not only express a statistical generalization, but also indicate that if children want to belong to the group of nice kids, they "ought to" clean up their toys (Cimpian, 2010).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that even in the parent condition most of the sufficient justifications were non-normative/generic. Children repeated facts from the stories (e.g., "She is cold"), pointed out potential consequences (e.g., "She will catch a cold") or the group memberships of the protagonists (e.g., "She is a mom"; "They are friends"). Although not entailing normative/generic statements, these justifications were often informative enough, since they rested on common ground assumptions that the children within a dyad shared with one another (e.g., "It's bad to catch a cold" or "Mums should always help"; Köymen et al., 2014; Mammen et al., 2018). However, when applicable, the use of generic/normative justifications could strengthen their argument. In the parent condition, children more often explicitly mentioned these assumptions to convince their partner and thus produced a higher share of normative/generic statements.

The justifications children gave during the post-test interview followed a similar pattern as the justifications in peer conversations, but most of these justifications were uninformative (e.g., "We liked this better"). Previous research suggests that young children do not often give

elaborate answers to why-questions by experimenters (Köymen & Tomasello, 2018). Most dyads who provided sufficient justifications during the interview only provided one justification, whereas in the discussions with their peers, children often exchanged multiple justifications, especially the 6-year-olds. This could be due to the fact that the experimenter did not prompt the children to elaborate on their justifications and that children are more likely to produce spontaneous justifications with peers than with adults (Mammen et al., 2019). Thus, looking at children's spontaneous reason-giving during peer discussions, rather than at the post-test interviews with the adult experimenter, might provide a better window into the reasons that guided the decision-making process.

Our findings provide further insights into how children make sense of their social world. Starting at 4 years of age, and more reliably at age 6, children use social information, such as the social status and relationships between the people, when forming expectations about and producing justifications for an actor's behaviour. They can recognize and simulate the perspectives of different agents depending on their social role (e.g. the victim, their parents, their friends) when making moral person judgments. Thus, young children are aware that the moral obligations of individuals vary according to their social relationships with others and use this knowledge to justify their moral judgments in their peer conversations.

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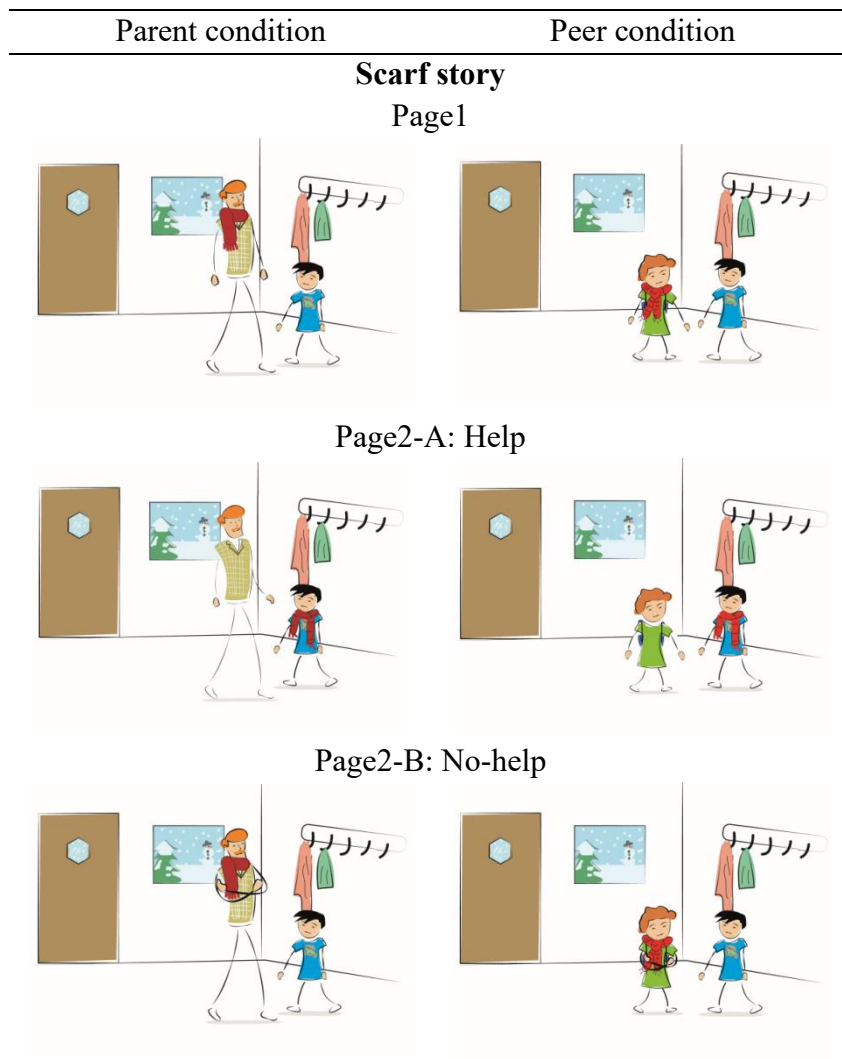
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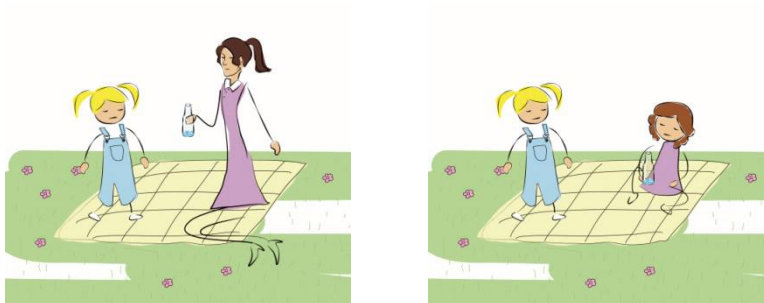
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Appendix

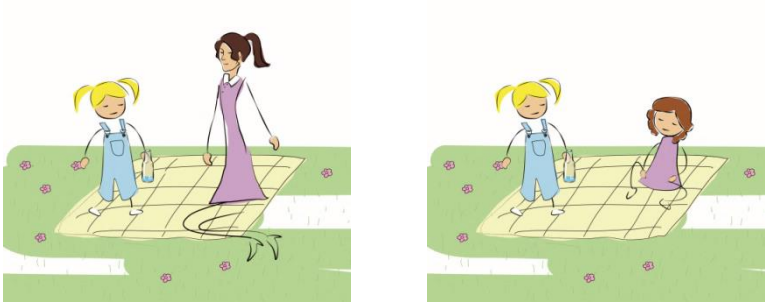
The picture books used in the experimental trials



Picnic story
Page1



Page2-A: Help



Page2-B: No-help

