

## Allowing Children to Choose to Give Has a Lasting Impact, Cornell Study Finds

By D.W. Nutt



Research team member Tommy Rucker and works with Ruby Yantorno-France, 3, at the Sciencenter in Ithaca. / Photo provided

The ability to share really is the gift that keeps on giving.

Cornell researchers have found that when children can choose to give something they cherish to another person, they are more likely to continue sharing later in life.

That's because the act of giving provides children a glimpse into themselves and their own motivations, said Nadia Chernyak, a graduate student in the field of human development and co-author of the study, just published in Psychological Science.

"When someone tells you, 'Go help your friend' versus you choose to help your friend, you might do the same thing in either case," Chernyak said. "But only when you chose to help your friend would you make an inference, 'Why did I do that? Well, I chose to do it, maybe I really like doing it.' And that compels people to keep doing it later on."

The findings are presented in a paper, "Giving Preschoolers Choice Increases Sharing Behavior," co-written with Chernyak's graduate adviser Tamar Kushnir, the Evalyn Edwards Milman assistant professor of child development in the College of Human Ecology.

The researchers worked with about 150 children at a number of local sites, including Ithaca's Sciencenter, and preschools in Ithaca and Cortland. In the experiment, children between ages 3 and 5 were introduced to a puppet named Doggie and were told he was feeling sad.

One group of children was given a difficult choice: they could share a sticker with Doggie or keep it for themselves. The next group of children was given an easier choice: they could share the sticker or have it put away. The last group was required by the researcher to share their sticker with Doggie.

The children were later introduced to another sad puppet, Ellie, and were given the choice of sharing up to three stickers with her. Those children who had initially made the difficult choice to help Doggie shared more stickers with Ellie. But the children who were given an easy choice, or who were required to give their sticker to Doggie, shared fewer stickers with Ellie.

"We place so much emphasis on choice, especially in this culture, especially in early childhood," Chernyak said. "The preschool age is actually an age at which children are just starting to develop ideas about what choice is."

While allowing children to make difficult choices may foster a deeper sense of self-awareness and greater generosity, that doesn't mean children should always be calling the shots, she said.

"I think parents actually have the difficult job of going and implementing these findings in the real world," Chernyak said. "It's not that I think choice is something that should always be used all the time and therefore children will just act morally. ... But it's an important construct to think about because it could be a powerful way to learn."

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