Chapter 13
Promoting Prosocial Behavior

Objectives
On completion of this chapter, you should be able to describe:

• Examples of prosocial behavior.
• Benefits of prosocial behavior to the child and others.
• What motivates children to be prosocial.
• The steps involved in acting in a prosocial way.
• Factors that influence prosocial behavior.
• Strategies to increase children’s prosocial behavior.
• Family communication strategies related to prosocial behavior.
• Pitfalls to avoid while promoting children’s prosocial behavior.
Prosocial Behavior and Children

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<th>Helping</th>
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All of these terms describe prosocial behaviors and represent positive values of society. They are the opposite of antisocial conduct, such as selfishness and aggression. Prosocial behaviors are voluntary actions aimed at helping or benefiting others (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). They often are performed without the doer’s anticipation of any personal benefit (Grusec, Davidov & Lundell, 2004). At times, they also involve some physical or social risk to the individual performing them, such as when a person defends someone who is being bullied or falsely accused. The disposition to engage in such actions is learned and practiced as a child, eventually carrying over into adulthood (Wittmer, 2008; Eisenberg, 2003). Evidence suggests that the roots of caring, sharing, helping, and cooperating are in every child. Although older children demonstrate a wider range of prosocial behaviors, even very young children have the capacity to demonstrate prosocial responses in various circumstances (Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinrad, 2006).

Prosocial behavior is a significant component of social competence. Regardless of age, children’s interactions tend to be more positive than negative. For instance, studies dating back 30 years suggest that the ratio of children’s prosocial behaviors to antisocial acts is no less than 3:1 and may be as high as 8:1 (Moore, 1982). This means that for every negative behavior, children average three to eight positive actions. More recent research confirms this pattern. For instance, preschoolers routinely attempt to help, show sympathy, or engage in other prosocial behaviors much more often than they are aggressive (Eisenberg, Fabes & Spinard, 2006). These tendencies to be helpful and kind remain relatively stable throughout the preschool and elementary years (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). Thus, childhood is an optimal period for the development of prosocial attitudes and conduct.

Although it is obvious that children benefit when acts of kindness are directed toward them, children who help, share, cooperate, comfort, or rescue also benefit from behaving in a prosocial manner (Saarni et al., 2006).

Benefits of Prosocial Behavior

There are social, emotional, and academic advantages to being kind. Children who engage in prosocial acts develop feelings of satisfaction and competence from assisting others. When children help with the family dishes, share information with a friend, comfort an unhappy playmate, or work with others to achieve a final product, they come away thinking: “I am useful. I can do something. I am important.” The resulting perception of being capable and valuable contributes to a healthy self-image (Trawick-Smith, 2009). Kindness also communicates affection and friendship. It contributes to positive feelings in both doers and receivers, providing entry into social situations and strengthening ongoing relationships (Hartup & Moore, 1990).

Children whose interactions are characterized by kindness maximize the successful social encounters they experience. This increases the likelihood that their kind acts will continue in the future. In fact, children’s natural sharing behavior at age 4 has been linked with prosocial behavior into adulthood (Eisenberg et al., 1999). Prosocial behavior also increases children’s chances for receiving help or cooperation when they need it. Children who are more prosocial are more likely to be on the receiving end of prosocial acts (Cassidy et al., 2003; Persson, 2005).

Children who are the beneficiaries of any type of prosocial action get a closer look at how such behaviors are carried out. Each episode serves as a model from which they derive useful information to apply to future encounters. Recipients also have chances to learn how to respond positively to the kindness that others extend to them. Individuals who never learn this skill eventually receive fewer offers of comfort and support.

Children who are prosocial are more likely to be in supportive peer relationships (Hughes & Ensor, 2010; Lerner et al., 2005). They tend to have at least one or two friends, engage in less aggression and conflict with others, and are more popular with peers (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Adults often describe prosocial children as socially skilled (Cassidy et al., 2003).

Finally, there is clear evidence that early prosocial behavior strongly predicts current and future academic achievement (Wentzel, 2009). This may be because children who are prosocial are more able to ask for assistance from peers and adults, further developing their cognitive abilities and thus creating a more positive school climate for themselves. Box 13-1 summarizes the benefits of prosocial behavior.

Besides benefiting the individual, prosocial behavior has advantages for groups as well. Group settings...
in which children are encouraged to be cooperative and helpful result in more friendly interactions and productive group efforts than settings in which little attention is paid to these values (Gazda et al., 2005). Moreover, routine or tedious chores, such as cleanup, are more easily managed. When everyone pitches in, tasks are quickly accomplished and no one person feels overly burdened. An added benefit is that children begin to develop a positive group image in which they view both themselves and other group participants as genial and competent (Marion, 2011).

**Children’s Motivation to Act in a Prosocial Way**

There are multiple reasons why children are kind, helpful, or cooperative. Some may be acting to prevent harm (inviting a child to play so her feelings aren’t hurt). Others react spontaneously to an event (Jeremy falls off of the swings. Fred runs over yelling, “Are you O.K.?”). Still others want to make up for the distress their own behavior caused (Kurt knocked Jeremy aside to get the robot he wanted first. He then notices that Jeremy is near tears and hands over a second robot smiling, “You can have this one.”). A prosocial behavior may occur because someone has directed the child (“Give her some of your blocks, please.”). A plea for help may be yet another reason for prosocial behavior (“Could you please get the teacher for me?”). Finally, a child may act simply for the benefit of someone else, no strings attached (Hastings, Utendale & Sullivan, 2008).

Children’s inspiration to be prosocial is influenced by developmental factors such as age, ability to think of others, level of sympathy toward the victim, and moral motivation (Malti et al., 2009; Vaish, Carpenter & Tomasello, 2009). It is also influenced by experience—observing prosocial acts, experiencing kindness, and experiencing reactions to their own efforts to be prosocial. In the early years, children practice kind acts with their parents and then peers. Preschoolers and early elementary students use self-centered or needs-oriented reasons for action, selecting behaviors to make themselves feel better (to stop the crying, or to get praise from adults). This reasoning decreases in the later elementary years. Over time, the reasons for prosocial behavior become more abstract, relying on principles and moral standards as a guide for taking action (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

**Steps to Becoming Prosocial**

At one time, it was thought that if children could be taught to think in prosocial ways the appropriate actions would automatically follow. Unfortunately, kind thoughts have not been significantly linked to prosocial acts. Although even older toddlers and preschoolers can explain that sharing, taking turns, and working together are good things to do, they do not necessarily act in these ways when doing so would be appropriate. For example:

> While pretending to be a police officer, Brian would look his teacher in the eyes and clearly state: “The rule is: Keep your hands to yourself. Hitting other children hurts.” He would then walk away from this recitation, see someone doing something he interpreted as wrong, grab the block from his belt (his billy club), and conk the offender over the head.

Brian had the right idea, but the wrong follow-up actions. To be truly prosocial, children must get beyond simply thinking about what is right to doing what is right. That involves the following three steps, progressing from thought to appropriate action (see Figure 13-1):

1. **Becoming aware** that sharing, help, or cooperation is needed.
2. **Deciding** to act.
3. **Taking action** to be prosocial.

**Step 1: Becoming Aware**

First and foremost, children must become aware that someone would benefit from a prosocial response (Honig & Wittmer, 1996). This requires accurately interpreting what they see and hear, which means recognizing typical distress signals such as crying, sighing, grimacing, or struggling—as well as correctly identifying verbal cues—“This is too much for me to
differently if an adult or other child said something like, “Are you okay?” or “That’s too bad your tower fell.” These comments prompt awareness that the situation could indeed be distressing to Abdul.

All children benefit from direction to notice those who could use some help. For young children who are hearing impaired and do not hear cues of distress, adult intervention is particularly useful. Each year, Ms. Barkley teaches her entire kindergarten class the American Sign Language signs for “stop” and “look” and uses these daily to point out helping opportunities with peers. Whenever a potential situation occurs, she says the word while simultaneously signing, “Stop. Look.” This benefits all of the students in her room.

As children become aware of cues that someone is in distress, they may feel sympathy or empathy for that person, or they may feel personal distress over the situation. Feeling distress for the other person is more likely to lead to prosocial action, whereas feeling distress for one’s self is less likely to lead to such action. Initially, a very young child’s emotional reaction is to mimic the distress signals by crying or sighing. As children mature, they become more able to feel
empathy and are more adept at coupling their emotional response with some gesture of assistance. In fact, the more empathy and sympathy a child feels for the person, the more likely they are to take action (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

**Step 2: Deciding to Act**

After children identify a person in need, they are faced with the decision of whether or not to act. Three factors that influence this decision include children’s relationship to the person in need, their mood, and whether they think of themselves as basically prosocial beings.

**Relationship.** Children of all ages are most likely to respond with kindness to people they like and with whom they have established relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Although children may react compassionately to people they do not know, friends are more often kinder to one another than they are to strangers. Prosocial acts such as sharing are also more likely to occur if the recipient is someone who has shared with the giver previously or if sharing will require the receiver to do likewise in the future (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Under these circumstances, children feel obligated to one another based on their notions of fairness and reciprocity.

**Mood.** Mood also affects whether or not children decide to pursue a prosocial course of action. Children of all ages who are in a positive frame of mind are more likely to be prosocial than those in a negative or neutral mood (Ladd, 2005). When children are happy, they become optimistic about the outcome of their efforts. They may even undertake difficult or socially costly prosocial actions with the expectation of ultimate success. On the other hand, children who are angry or sad often cannot see beyond their own unhappy circumstances to aid others, or they may believe that their actions will fail anyway. Exceptions to this rule occur when older children who are in a bad mood perceive that kind behavior will actually improve their state of mind. Their subsequent acts of kindness may be carried out in the hope of making themselves feel better. However, if they see no self-serving benefits to their actions, such children will decide not to engage in prosocial activities.

**Self-perception.** A child’s decision of whether to behave in a prosocial way may also hinge on how kind the child considers herself or himself to be. Children who frequently hear themselves described as cooperative or helpful believe they are and often choose to act in ways that support this self-image (Paley, 1992). Children who have no such self-perceptions may shy away from deciding to carry out a prosocial act because such behaviors do not fit the way they see themselves in relation to others.

**Step 3: Taking Action**

If children assume responsibility for sharing, helping, or cooperating, they must then select and perform a behavior they think is appropriate to the situation. Their conduct in such circumstances is influenced by two abilities: perspective-taking and instrumental know-how (Berk, 2009).

In **perspective-taking**, children recognize what would be useful to someone else whose needs may not mirror their own at the moment. Very young children have limited perspective-taking skills. For instance, when 2-year-old Juanita offered her caregiver the bunny blanket when the door shut on the adult’s hand, she meant well, but did not understand what was truly needed to rectify the situation. Her ineffectiveness is not surprising. However, as these abilities emerge, children in the lower elementary grades become better equipped to help and to cooperate. This is especially true in situations in which the setting is familiar or the circumstances of distress resemble something they themselves have experienced. By the age of six, perspective-taking skills begin to improve along with children’s social cognition. They become increasingly able to project appropriate responses in unfamiliar situations (Carlo et al., 2010).

**Instrumental know-how** involves having the knowledge and skills necessary to act competently (Brown, Odom & McConnell, 2008). Children who have many skills at their disposal are the most effective in carrying out their ideas. Those who have few skills may have good intentions, but their efforts often are counterproductive or inept. Moreover, younger children who are the most prosocial also are the most likely to engage in some antisocial behaviors. Due to their inexperience, they cannot always discriminate appropriate actions from inappropriate ones. Gradually, children become more aware of what differentiates these two types of behavior and become better able to initiate actions that are useful and appropriate.

Children may experience difficulty in proceeding through any one of the three steps just described. For instance, children may overlook or misinterpret cues that convey another person’s need for a prosocial response. They also may choose an inappropriate action when trying to help. A child who is trying to comfort may shove a favorite storybook in another child’s face, hug so hard that it hurts, or say something lacking tact, like “Well, you don’t smell THAT bad.”
Young helpers may miss the mark by adding water to the acrylic paint to make it go further or by using toothpaste to scrub the whiteboard because they have heard that it cleans so well. In a similar vein, children attempting to defend someone may become aggressive or “catty” as a way to show their favor. At times, children may assume that cooperation means giving up all of one’s own ideas or settling for mediocrity in an effort to please everyone. These are all natural mistakes children make in learning how to be kind to one another. As children mature and gain experience, these become less frequent.

**Influences on Children’s Prosocial Behavior**

Two fourth graders are sitting at the lunch table waiting for their friends to arrive. They witness a second-grade boy spill the contents of his lunch box all over the floor right next to their table. One child giggles. The other smiles, but gets up to help him.

What makes one person act with kindness and another not? As with many other areas of development, scientists have tried to determine the factors that contribute to prosocial behavior beyond daily interactions with peers. The list continues to expand. As might be expected, it includes elements of biology, social-cognitive understanding, language, social experiences, cultural expectations, and adult behaviors.

**Biology and Prosocial Behavior**

Prosocial behavior may be due in part to biology (Grusec, Davidson & Lundell, 2004). Studies provide evidence for biological links to the development of empathy, sympathy, and prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, 2003; Hastings, Zahn-Waxler & McShane, 2005).

**Temperament.** From the research, it appears that the combination of temperament, sensitivity to the emotions of self and others, and the regulation of emotions is connected with an individual’s ability to react to situations in a prosocial manner (Eisenberg et al., 2006). For instance, children who are more prone to have pleasant dispositions, which recognize the distress of others, but are not overly upset by this distress, are more likely to react in a prosocial manner. A child who sees the world in a bleak manner and who is likely to become more distressed by someone else’s dismay is more caught up in worry over herself than the other child in need and is not likely to take appropriate helpful action.

Children who can regulate their emotions, but are prone to intense emotions are more apt to experience sympathy for others. However, it is not necessarily the intensity of emotions that is most important; instead, it is the control of the emotions and regulation of the action that counts. Prosocial children tend to be those who are able to regulate their emotions and take action (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

**Gender.** The majority of studies have shown no gender differences in children’s willingness to engage in prosocial behavior. It would seem that both boys and girls have an equal capacity to be prosocial. Some research has found there is a difference in gender in the occurrence of prosocial behavior. Girls have been found to engage in prosocial behaviors more often than boys (Keane & Calkins, 2004; Russell et al., 2003). Others have found no difference (Hastings, Rubin & DeRose, 2005). Age also can make a difference in the extent to which children are prosocial and in the reasoning they use to guide their actions.

**Age.** Simply growing older does not guarantee that a person will become more prosocial. However, it generally can be said that children’s capacity for prosocial behavior expands with age (Eisenberg et al., 2006). The first signs begin early in life. Infants and toddlers seem to recognize and often will react to a companion who is crying or in obvious distress (Thompson, 2006; Wittmer, 2008). Behaviors such as sharing, helping, cooperating, donating, comforting, and defending become much more common as children mature (Pratt, Skoe & Arnold, 2004).

**Social-Cognitive Understanding and Prosocial Behavior**

Social-cognitive understanding includes thinking about how others are thinking and feeling. To do this, one must have some degree of sympathy, empathy, perspective-taking, and theory of mind. Each is linked to prosocial behavior (Carlo et al., 2010; Hastings, et. al, 2008). Thus, children who can understand the emotions of others are most likely to carry out prosocial acts and to demonstrate greater overall social competence (Hughes & Ensor, 2010; Saarni et al., 2006). Further, when children experience and participate in conversations about emotions, they are more likely to act in kind ways (Garner, Dusmore, Southham-Gerrow, 2008).

**Language and Prosocial Behavior**

Language is powerful. Children’s ability to understand and to use language is very important in communicating needs and getting those needs met. In particular, as children expand their use of emotion words, they learn...
more about themselves, come to better understand the behavior of others, and respond empathically and sympathetically to others (Saarni et al., 2006; Epstein, 2009). As children acquire early language abilities to discuss, think about, and reflect on behaviors of self and others, they demonstrate greater prosocial behavior and fewer problem behaviors (Hughes & Ensor, 2010).

**Sharing.** Sharing provides a good example of the combination of the influence of biology, social-cognitive understanding, and language in children’s growing prosocial development. In a typical early childhood program that serves toddlers and preschoolers, you are bound to see examples of children sharing. Children 18 months to 24 months old are not too likely to share. Yet, companions as young as 2 years old, will offer playthings to one another (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). They find sharing with adults easier, but their frequency of sharing is relatively low compared with older children. This is because younger children are by nature territorial and egocentric (Reynolds, 2008). They highly prize the possession of the moment, making it difficult for them to relinquish objects, even when they are no longer using them. This explains why 4-year-old Michael, who rides the tricycle and then runs off to dig in the sand, protests loudly when another child gets on the tricycle.

To Michael, the tricycle is his, and he dislikes giving it up even though he had lost interest in it.

Additionally, younger children lack the verbal negotiation skills necessary to resolve disputes over possessions or to strike bargains with people that satisfy each party. Consequently, their initial reasons for sharing focus on self-serving interests, such as sharing now so the recipient will be obliged to share with them in the future or to appease a peer who threatens, “I won’t be your friend if you don’t gimme some.”

Throughout the later preschool and early elementary years, children come to realize that sharing leads to shared activity and that playing with another person is often more fun than playing alone (Reynolds, 2008). During this time, children’s peer interactions increase and their sharing abilities become greater. The most dramatic changes occur between 6 and 12 years of age, which is also about when perspective-taking skills greatly expand (Carlo et al., 2010).

There are several reasons why older children share more easily. First, their more advanced intellectual abilities enable them to recognize that it is possible for two people to legitimately want the same thing at the same time, that possessions shared can be retrieved, and that sharing often is reciprocated (Berk, 2009). They also understand that there is a difference between sharing (which means temporary loss of

Dramatic play is a great place to practice sharing. These boys are sharing the task of cooking.
ownership) and donating (which is permanent), and they can understand, as well as make clear to others, which of the two is intended. In addition, they have more skills at their disposal that allow them to share in a variety of ways. If one approach, such as taking turns, is not satisfactory, they have such options to fall back on as bargaining, trading, or using an object together. These children also have had the opportunity to learn that those around them view sharing favorably, so they may use this strategy to elicit positive responses. Finally, older children find it easier to part with some items because they differentiate among the values of their possessions.

Children in the early elementary years are also motivated to share by a desire for acceptance from others. Prosocial acts such as sharing are seen as good, making it more likely that children who engage in such behavior will enjoy the approval of their peers. The self-sacrifice that comes with sharing is compensated by that approval.

Gradually, as children mature, their reasoning also becomes influenced by the principle of justice. Sharing becomes a way to satisfy that principle. At first, children define justice as strict equity, meaning that everyone deserves equal treatment regardless of circumstance. When sharing is called for, children figure that each person must have the same number of turns, that each turn must last the same amount of time, and that everyone must receive the same number of pieces. There is much discussion among peers at this age about fairness.

Eventually, children come to believe that equity includes special treatment for those who deserve it—based on extra effort, outstanding performance, or disadvantaged conditions (Damon, 1988). Under these circumstances, children decide that sharing does not have to be exactly the same to be fair. They recognize that a person who has fewer chances to play may require a longer turn or reason that someone who worked especially hard on a project deserves to go first. This reasoning is sometimes evident in children as young as 8 years of age, but for others, it appears much later. In either case, such thinking deepens children’s understanding of prosocial behavior, leading to more frequent instances of kindness than is possible earlier in life.

The differences between older and younger children in their ability to share underscore changes in their general development and reasoning abilities. Thus, children gradually move from self-oriented rationales (“He’ll like me better if I share.”) to other-oriented reasoning (“She’ll be unhappy if she doesn’t get a turn.”) and from concrete rationales (“I had it first.”) to more abstract ideals (“She needs it.”). Ultimately, children become better able to “put themselves in another person’s shoes” and do so to support their self-respect. The latter achievement tends to occur in later adolescence and is seldom seen in children younger than 12 years of age. Finally, there is evidence that the levels of reasoning described here relate to the actual behaviors children display (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Children who use more mature levels of moral reasoning display a bigger repertoire of prosocial skills and are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior than children at lower stages (see Table 13-1). Children’s maturity is determined by their own biological clock and by their social and cultural experiences.

### Social Experiences and Prosocial Behavior

The experiences children have in the social environment of family, peers, and school play a role in their prosocial development. In the family, as early as birth, the environment begins to impact prosocial behavior. The emotional attachment that occurs between baby and parent is believed to be the basis for prosocial development (Diener et al., 2007; Saarni et al., 2006). Also, the conversations that parents have with young children are linked with the development of empathy (Garner, Dunsmore & Southam-Gerrow, 2008; Thompson, 2006).

### Table 13-1 Comparison of Age and Sharing

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<tr>
<th>Younger (Ages 2 to 6)</th>
<th>Older (Ages 6 to 12)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-oriented motives</td>
<td>1. Other-oriented motives</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Recognize own claim</td>
<td>2. Recognize legitimacy of other’s claims</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Prize the possession of the moment</td>
<td>3. Differentiate value among objects</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. “Here and now” thinking</td>
<td>4. Thinking of future benefits; past experience may be used to guide behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Few verbal skills with which to bargain or negotiate</td>
<td>5. Well-developed verbal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Some difficulty seeing more than one option</td>
<td>6. Many alternative solutions</td>
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In the later years, in homes where children are given chores to do and in which everyone works to help for the good of the family, children demonstrate increased prosocial behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2006).

Children learn from each other. Thus peers provide great opportunities for both giving and receiving prosocial behavior. Most importantly, interacting with age-mates offers chances to practice positive acts of all kinds. Peers tend to “rub off” on each other, acquiring the behavior characteristics of the other (Bukowski, Velasquez & Brendgen, 2008). Simply being exposed to prosocial peers has been shown to produce children who are more prosocial over time (Fabes et al., 2005).

Further, having at least one reciprocal friendship is related to higher levels of prosocial behavior (Wentzel, Barry & Caldwell, 2004). Also, participating with peers in youth activities and community service opportunities are linked to later prosocial behaviors, particularly volunteerism (Youniss & Metz, 2004).

The overall quality of the school environment, particularly the human interactions between teacher and child and between child and child, are linked to children behaving in more or less prosocial ways. For instance, the higher the quality of care children receive in childcare, the greater the amount of prosocial behavior they exhibit (NICHD, 2002). Further, there is an association between the quality of the school and children’s self-regulation, empathy, and social competence (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Wilson, Pianata & Stuhlman, 2007). Finally, teacher attitudes and behaviors contribute significantly to children’s prosocial actions in the classroom. When teachers reportedly like their students, they generally attribute prosocial behavior intentions to their actions and respond in a positive manner toward their students. However, when they feel the opposite and respond more negatively, aggression is more common in student behavior (McAuliffe, Hubbard & Romano, 2009). It takes thoughtful, purposeful action to create quality interactions that promote prosocial behavior.

Cultural Expectations and Experiences and Prosocial Behavior

Cultures differ in the emphasis they place on prosocial behaviors such as sharing, helping, or cooperating. Some emphasize competition and individual achievement, whereas others stress cooperation and group harmony. Some have a high tolerance for violence; others do not. In any case, cultural influences play a role in the extent to which kindness is a factor in human interactions.

These influences are expressed in laws, in economic policies, through the media, and in the institutions people create. The ways in which members of the society think about children, how children spend their time, what they see and hear, how they are treated at home and in the community, and the expectations people have for children’s behavior are all culturally based. Children growing up in societies that value kindness, helpfulness, and cooperation are apt to internalize those values and display corresponding behaviors in their daily living. Additionally, cultures that promote warm, loving relationships between adults and children, as well as the early assignment of tasks and responsibilities that contribute to the common good, are likely to produce prosocial children (Hastings et al., 2008). The most common place in which societies’ youngest members encounter these cultural teachings is in the Microsystems of home and formal group settings such as the school or childcare center. The adults in these settings strongly influence whether children become more or less prosocial.

Adult Behavior and Prosocial Behavior

Adults have a major impact on the degree to which children learn to be helpful and cooperative, and they use many means to exert their influence. The most effective strategies fall within the first three tiers of the Social
Support Pyramid you have been reading about in this text (see Figure 13-2). Keep reading to learn more.

As you might assume, the most fundamental way adults promote prosocial behavior is through the relationships they develop with children. When adults are warm and supportive, children become more securely attached to them and are more likely to behave in prosocial ways (Hastings et al., 2008).

Creating environments that either facilitate or inhibit the development of children’s prosocial behavior is another way adults influence the degree to which children are helpful and kind (Laible & Thompson, 2008). In group settings, the atmosphere most likely to promote nurturing, sharing, cooperating, and rescuing has the following characteristics (Bronson, 2006):

1. Participants anticipate that everyone will do his or her best to support one another.
2. Both adults and children contribute to decisions made, practices, and procedures.
3. Communication is direct, clear, and mutual.
4. Individual differences are respected.
5. Expectations are reasonable.
6. People like one another and feel a sense of belonging to the group.
7. There is an emphasis on group as well as individual accomplishments.

Adults shape such an environment by using an authoritative discipline style, modeling prosocial behavior, rewarding children’s attempts at prosocial actions, instructing children in prosocial values or skills, and providing children with practice of prosocial behaviors.

**Discipline strategies.** The authoritative approach to discipline espoused in this text can be a positive and powerful component to learning to behave in a prosocial manner (Hastings et al., 2008; Laible & Thompson, 2008). Talking through situations and giving rational reasons for reactions and compliance leads to internalized values in children (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Hastings et al., 2007). When adults maintain high expectations for children to engage in prosocial behavior and enforce rules that support this philosophy, kind and fair behavior toward peers not only occurs in the here and now, but in the years that follow (Pratt et al., 2003). However, when adults use withdrawal of love or assertion of power techniques, the results can be quite different (Knafo & Plomin, 2006). Refer back to Chapters 10 and 11 for more on these approaches and their results.

**Modeling.** Children who frequently observe people cooperating, helping, sharing, and giving are most likely to act in those ways themselves (Hastings et al., 2008). Thus, adults who model such actions, either with other adults or with children, help to increase children’s prosocial conduct now and into the future (Ladd, 2005). Children are likely to glean even more from the model if there is a simultaneous conversation focusing on how the act will benefit the other person (Hastings et al., 2008). Saying, “This will really make Janet feel better to know that we took the time to make her a get-well card,” instead of “It is kind to send a card,” puts the focus on the other person, not on the self.

Children emulate those models in their lives that are skilled in their behavior, are considered to be of high status by the observer, are helpful and friendly, and are in a position to administer both rewards and consequences (Thompson & Twibell, 2009). Models that are aloof, critical, directive, punitive, or powerless commonly are ignored. In addition, prosocial modeling has its greatest impact when what adults say is congruent with what they do (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Researchers have found that when there is inconsistency between words and deeds, the model is less credible and may even prompt children to engage in fewer prosocial acts. This follows the old adage “Actions speak louder than words.” Hence, adults who urge children to lend one another a hand, but seldom offer assistance themselves or do so grudgingly, show children that helping is not really a high priority. Furthermore, adults who insist that children always be truthful yet tell “little fibs” when it is convenient for them show children that lying is acceptable even when they say it is not.

The result in all cases is that children become less inclined to help or cooperate. On the other hand,
when children observe adults acting with kindness and deriving obvious pleasure from their actions, imitation becomes more likely (Fox & Lentini, 2006). Even characters on television can serve as models for prosocial behavior. Studies have shown that children who view prosocial behavior on television will engage in such behavior in real-life situations at a later time (Bernstein, 2000).

**Rewarding prosocial behavior.** A prosocial environment is one in which such conduct is likely to be rewarded. When children’s prosocial behaviors are reinforced, they are likely to increase their use of such actions within the same environment, so that they can be seen and rewarded again (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Technically, all adults have to do is watch for instances of children being kind and then enact positive consequences. Yet, adults commonly fail to make the most of this strategy. This happens when they take children’s prosocial behaviors for granted and do not reward them adequately or often enough. It also happens when adults inadvertently reward actions that actually counteract helpful or cooperative behavior. Finally, candy or stickers, used as rewards for kind acts, may actually lower the occurrence of prosocial behavior (Ramaswamy & Bergin, 2009).

To avoid these problems, adults must remember that prosocial behaviors are learned and are subject to the same conditions that characterize other learning episodes. That is, children must be motivated to learn and to feel successful. Neither of these criteria is met when adults ignore children who are trying to figure out what the positive expectations are or spend the majority of their time correcting them. Instead, adults must take as much care to enact positive consequences as they do with corrective ones.

**Prosocial attribution.** As mentioned earlier, people’s self-definition of how helpful they are is another factor that influences how much prosocial behavior they demonstrate. Thus, the more kind, generous, or compassionate children believe themselves to be, the more kindly, generously, and compassionately they will behave toward others (Bronson, 2006). Therefore, one way to promote prosocial acts is to encourage children to think of themselves in these ways using prosocial attributions (also called character attributions or dispositional attributions). A prosocial attribution is a statement to a child in which the adult attributes a prosocial behavior to a child, such as “You shared because you like to help others,” (Wittmer & Honig, 1994). Such prosocial attributions make it more likely that children will incorporate these actions and motivations into their images of whom they are and what they can do. These make future prosocial behavior more likely. Attributions must be specific and closely related to what the child has done or said. In addition, they should refer to the child’s dispositional kindness or internal motives, rather than simply labeling the actions as a positive thing. For instance, stating, “You are a good helper” or “You helped put away the toys” is not as effective as saying, “You put away the toys because you are a helpful person.” Using simple praise without the internal attribution makes it less likely that the behavior will transfer to new situations in the future (Eisenberg et al., 2006). However, when the praise and prosocial attribution are combined, the probability of the kind act occurring in another situation is increased.

**Cooperation.** Cooperation among children will be undermined if adults rely on competition as their primary means for motivating children. Children are encouraged to compete rather than cooperate when they are told: “Let’s see who can put the most blocks away,” “Whoever gets the most words right gets a star,” or “The nicest picture will go in the showcase.” In each instance, children are quick to determine that there will be only one winner and that helping or cooperating with someone else will sabotage their own chances for coming out on top. On the other hand, such situations could be modified to make it easier for the children to cooperate by focusing on group accomplishments rather than on individual achievement: “Let’s see how well we can all work together to put these blocks away,” “I’ll check the board to find out if the class got more words right today than it did yesterday,” or “When you’re finished painting your pictures, we’ll go out and hang them in the hall.” These conditions clear the way for children to come to one another’s assistance or to work together as appropriate.

In addition, group-administered rewards encourage children to work as a team to achieve a common aim. Putting a star up for each book read by the group or for each act of kindness helps keep track of the children’s progress as a whole and directs their attention to what the entire group can achieve. Thus, it is effective to monitor the group’s progress and then enact positive consequences when certain benchmarks are obtained rather than always rewarding children individually. This approach has been found to lead to friendlier, more cooperative behavior among the participants (Crothers & Kolbert, 2010). When adults try to administer tangible rewards to encourage prosocial behavior among children, the results are usually counterproductive. Children who are bribed in these ways attribute their actions to the tangible rewards rather than to the needs of others or their own inclinations to treat others kindly.
Promoting Prosocial Behavior

Chapter 13

• Playing games that promote cooperation and awareness of others
• Creating opportunities for children to help or cooperate in real-life situations

Children who actively participate in tasks or situations that enable them to rehearse prosocial skills demonstrate the greatest instances of such behaviors in similar circumstances (Ladd, 2005). These findings hold true from preschool through preadolescence, particularly for children younger than 6 years of age. The opportunity to physically reenact appropriate behaviors in relevant situations helps children better remember both the behavior and the cues that signal what conditions apply in a given circumstance (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfnger, 2010). For example, when Heidi watches a skit in which she must use a variety of cues to decide which puppet needs help, she is better equipped to recognize when help is needed in a real-life situation. Thus, the most productive approach for direct instruction is to combine verbal descriptions and explanations with practice of corresponding actions.

Direct instruction. Children’s prosocial behavior also increases when they are taught to think and act in kind, helpful, and cooperative ways (Bronson, 2006; Brown, Odom & McConnel, 2008). Such teaching focuses on the individual skills that lead to helping and cooperating. Recognizing prosocial behavior when it is displayed, identifying the needs of another, anticipating the consequences of acts, and generating multiple solutions to interpersonal problems are all prosocial skills. A variety of strategies have been used to teach these skills to children of varying ages, including the following:

- Discussing the value of prosocial behavior and giving examples of how children can act accordingly
- Telling stories that illustrate prosocial principles
- Demonstrating prosocial behavior using small figures, dolls, puppets, televised vignettes, or live models
- Reenacting previously observed prosocial actions.
- Role-playing situations in which they take on the behaviors of helper and person in need of assistance

Practice with prosocial behavior. Actual participation in prosocial activities seems to foster prosocial
behavior in the future (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Many researchers believe that for children to develop a future interest in behaving in a prosocial manner, they must actually engage in the behavior and experience firsthand the empathic rewards it can offer. When children practice behaving with kindness and caring, they also experience the satisfaction of social approval from adults. Finally, when children act in a prosocial manner, they come to believe that they are capable and competent beings. They begin to identify themselves as prosocial people.

All of the adult practices previously described can be translated into more specific intervention skills that may be used individually or in combination to positively influence children’s prosocial behavior. Read the following skill section carefully and think about how you might use each skill with children you know. In addition, consider the case of Courtney, whose “helpful” behavior is challenging to the other children and to the teachers with whom she interacts each day.

### Challenging Behavior

**Meet Courtney**

Courtney, age 8, loved everything about helping! She was the first one with a sponge whenever anything spilled. She was quick to offer a suggestion if peers seemed stumped about what to do next. She could be depended on to comfort others in distress. Lately however, her teachers noticed that on the playground (shared with a younger class), she had taken to picking up the youngest children and bodily moving them from place to place to “help” them get around. She was also seen forcing younger children to sit on her lap so she could “help” them read a story. She “helped” children in the sandbox and on the swings, even when they said they wanted to do things themselves. If children protested, Courtney became upset. Her behavior became more coercive and her actions more rough. Her teachers wondered what to do. They didn’t want to squelch Courtney’s desire to be helpful, but her overpowering behavior was becoming a challenge for herself, the other children, and the supervising adults.

If you were Courtney’s teacher, how might you approach this situation? As you read through the skills portion of the chapter, think about Courtney and her classmates. Which of these skills might you employ to help Courtney get her “helping behavior” on the right track?

### Skills for Promoting Prosocial Behavior in Children

**Creating a Prosocial Environment**

Using the skills you have learned in previous chapters will help you create an atmosphere that is conducive to the development of prosocial behavior. Some additional strategies include the following:

1. **Label prosocial acts as they occur naturally.** When children clean the guinea pig’s cage, tell them they are showing concern for the animal’s well-being. When Theresa announces that she received a get-well card during her recent absence, point out that sending the card was the way someone chose to comfort her. Explain that children who remain quiet while a peer gives a report are helping him or her to concentrate. When children take turns, mention that this is a way of cooperating with one another. All of these instances enable you to highlight prosocial behavior rather than lecturing or moralizing about it.

2. **Point out instances in which an unintentional lack of kindness was shown, and describe an alternate, prosocial approach.** Through inexperience or thoughtlessness, people sometimes are inconsiderate, selfish, uncooperative, or uncharitable. When this happens, point out to children the effects that behavior had on the person to whom it was directed, and describe a more appropriate action. Rather than labeling the child as “selfish,” say, “When you didn’t give her any, it hurt her feelings.” Thus, if children laugh when one of them trips and drops his or her lunch tray, say, “It embarrassed Sam when you laughed. He feels really uncomfortable. Help him to pick up the tray.”

3. **Create opportunities for children to cooperate.** Each day, include projects and routines that require the efforts of more than one person. Consider the tasks that you may normally do and identify ones that teams of children could assist with, such as feeding classroom pets or setting up experiments. Encourage children to help one another as occasions arise. Be sure to ask special needs children to assist their peers whenever the opportunity arises. When children ask you to help, try instead to find another child who could fulfill that role.
4. Use prosocial reasoning when talking with children. Offer explanations for classroom expectations that are prosocial in nature. For instance, explain that turn-taking gives everyone a chance to try a new object or experience. Point out that comforting a friend in distress makes the unhappy child feel better and often makes the comforter feel better, too. Focus on other-oriented rationales as well as benefits to the doer. Discuss the special needs represented by each child and how fairness requires taking into account individual circumstances. Ask children to talk about the prosocial reasons behind certain activities in the classroom, such as why people wait to tell their idea until after another person has finished. Set aside time to talk with children about specific incidents in which they and their peers were kind to one another. Reflect on these circumstances, and encourage children to discuss how prosocial acts make people feel.

5. Reward prosocial behavior. Remain alert to children’s attempts to be helpful, cooperative, or kind. Avoid taking these actions for granted or waiting for dramatic episodes before administering a reward. Instead, acknowledge small kindnesses, such as when children move out of the way, help to carry something, play together without bickering, share an idea, or offer encouragement to someone else. Show approval and appreciation by smiling and using positive personal messages and prosocial attributions.

6. Administer group rewards. Think of situations that have the potential for children to work together. These may be newly introduced conditions (such as a special project) or circumstances that traditionally have focused more on individual achievement. For instance, if you have emphasized each child taking care of his or her own area or materials, plan to change this routine to encourage children to work together to clean up a larger area. Implement your plan. Afterward, use effective praise with children to reinforce their cooperation and helpfulness.

7. Demonstrate a variety of prosocial behaviors. Carefully examine your own behavior with children and with other adults and then set an example for children to follow. Although it may seem easiest to comfort, rescue, or help children, do not forget to share and cooperate as well.

8. Demonstrate constructive ways of responding to other people’s prosocial behavior. Regardless of whether you are interacting with children or adults, and in spite of whether you want help, a positive response contributes to the prosocial environment. If you desire the help that is offered, say, “Thank you” with a pleased expression on your face. If you would rather do something on your own, or if the proposed assistance would not be helpful, do not simply brush the child or adult aside. Instead, acknowledge the kindness and explain that this is something you would like to do yourself or describe an action that would be more useful. In both cases, you are modeling appropriate ways of either accepting or declining help.

9. Be positive when engaging in prosocial behavior. Because children tend to imitate adults who seem to enjoy giving help and cooperation, exhibit obvious pleasure in prosocial situations. Smile and say things like, “It makes me feel good to help you.”

10. Point out the prosocial behaviors modeled by yourself and others. Children are better able to understand the prosocial models they see when their model’s behavior is explained. Provide children with such information by saying things like “Arthur was having a hard time coming up with words for his song, so Lamont is helping him by making a list of some words that rhyme,” or “Randi and Mike have decided to use the workbench together. Randi will use the hammer while Mike uses the saw. Then, they’ll trade.”

11. Use positive attribution to increase children’s prosocial self-images. Say specific things, such as, “Elke, you were really helpful to Danielle when you reached up high for the dictionary she needed,” or “Lonny and Javon, you were cooperative when you worked together on the diorama. That made the work easier for both of you,” or “Jackson, you showed a lot of kindness when you wiped your sister’s tears. It made her feel better knowing you were concerned about her.”

Using Teaching and Coaching to Promote Prosocial Behavior

Receiving direct training in helping and cooperating leads to an increase in children’s prosocial behavior. Such instruction can be provided through on-the-spot teaching and coaching in naturally occurring situations or through preplanned activities. In both cases, the role of the adult is to teach children basic facts about kindness, to demonstrate applications to real-life situations, and to give children a chance to rehearse related skills. Each approach has certain elements in common, but also unique characteristics that must be understood to implement them successfully.

continued
Skills for Promoting Prosocial Behavior in Children—continued

Providing on-the-Spot Instruction

As you will recall, there are three steps involved in developing prosocial behaviors: awareness, decision making, and action. The main focus of on-the-spot instruction is to assist children at any point beyond which they seem unable to proceed.

1. Observe children for signs of prosocial behavior. Watch children carefully. Take note when they show consideration for another person, when they attempt to assist someone, or when they join forces, even briefly.

2. Ask children directly to help you. This is particularly important when working with preschoolers who have not yet developed the observational skills to accurately recognize when help is needed. Pointing out your need for assistance gives them practice in recognizing situational cues and performing corresponding behaviors related to kindness.

3. Make children aware when someone else needs help or cooperation. There are times when children fail to recognize distress signals or other signs that indicate that help or cooperation is desired. Rectify this by giving children relevant information to assist them in becoming more attuned to the circumstances at hand. If Marianne seems oblivious to Barney’s struggle to carry a heavy board, say: “Look at Barney. He’s working awfully hard. He looks like he could use some help.” Likewise, if children are outside trying to pick teams, and several children are laughing at a private joke, it may be difficult for others to hear whose name is being called. As a result, those who are straining to listen may try to elicit cooperation by telling the jokesters to “pipe down,” or “shut up.” Such language could easily be misinterpreted by those to whom it is directed or even seen as a challenge to continue. Information from you at this point would be useful: “You are having a good laugh. It’s hard for other people to hear. They’re just asking you to cooperate by being a little quieter.”

4. Teach children signals they might use to elicit help or cooperation from others. In the preceding example, children who were trying to get their loud age-mates to cooperate used an antagonistic strategy, which could have backfired. They, too, could benefit from some basic information, such as: “When you yelled at them, it just made them get louder. Instead, you can walk over and explain why you want them to be quiet.” Toddlers and preschoolers, as well as children in highly charged situations, respond best to direct suggestions. Offer these in the form of a script or sample words that they might use: “Tell Marianne, ‘This board’s too big for me to carry alone.’” With your support and encouragement, most school-age children who are not passionately involved in a situation will be able to generate their own ideas for what to say.

5. Point out situations in which people could decide to help or cooperate. At times, children are aware that someone needs their help or cooperation, but they don’t know what to do next. This is when you can highlight that a prosocial decision can be made by saying something such as “Janice looks like she needs your help.” We can decide to help her, or “Mr. Crouch wants us all to work together on this project. We’ll have to decide whether or not to do that.”

6. Discuss situations in which it would be best to decide not to cooperate. Help children sort out the reasons for such decisions. These would involve circumstances in which people or property are endangered or moral codes are violated. For example, joining together for the purpose of stealing, cheating on an exam, or spray-painting the lavatory walls would be inappropriate cooperative efforts. With school-age children, discuss peer pressure and generate strategies and scripts children might use to cope in uncomfortable peer-related circumstances.

7. Assist children in determining what type of help or cooperation is most suitable for a particular situation. After children show some signs of wanting to help or cooperate, aid them in deciding what action to take. Provide information for them to consider, such as “Sometimes, when people are unhappy, it helps when someone hugs them or says nice things to them,” or “Sometimes, people feel satisfaction from attempting to do something that is difficult, and their pleasure is spoiled if another person takes over.”

8. Demonstrations also are useful. Showing a child how to unlock the wheelchair of a classmate in need, illustrating to children how one person can steady a doll while another puts on the clothes, or demonstrating how it takes two people to make the computer game work are all ways to make these types of discussions more concrete. In addition, discuss ways children can support another person’s effort without offering direct, physical assistance.

Point out the importance of a reassuring smile, the “thumbs-up” sign, or cheering from the sidelines.
These are all ways children can provide comfort and encouragement. Finally, teach children to ask questions such as: “Do you want help?” “How can I help you?” “What do you need?” and “What would you like me to do?” This enables children to acquire information about what kind of behavior another person might perceive as helpful or cooperative in a given situation.

9. **Teach children how to share.** Teaching children how to share is not the same as telling them to do it. Children often need some guided experience with sharing before they will readily share objects and materials. Use planned activities and on-the-spot instruction to acquaint children with many different ways to share materials and territory such as taking turns, using an object/place simultaneously, dividing materials/territory, finding a substitute object/place, or compromising (see Box 13-2).

Another strategy is to teach children who are waiting for a turn to ask, “How will I know when your turn is over?” This requires the child in possession of an item to designate a signal for completion and gives the waiting child something specific to look for. Older children appreciate being able to say, “Okay, but I get it next.” Establishing their turn in the order of possession satisfies their need for some control in the situation.

Finally, help children recognize legitimate instances in which sharing can be expected (e.g., using class materials) and other times when sharing cannot be expected (e.g., using someone else’s private property). All of these techniques touch on nuances of sharing that cannot be conveyed by simply demanding that children “share.”

10. **Work at increasing children’s perspective-taking skills.** For children to understand when help or cooperation is needed or when an act of kindness is called for, they must learn to put themselves in the place of another person. Although this skill will often emerge around age 6, it can be taught to children who are as young as 3, 4, and 5 years of age, and it can benefit people of all ages. Promote children’s conscious understanding of prosocial behavior by using open-ended questions, such as “How did you know that would happen?” or “What made you think of trying that?” Promote children’s consequential thinking by asking such questions as, “What will happen if . . .?” or “What will happen next . . .?” Finally, promote children’s alternative thinking with such statements as, “William wants to finish the project himself. What could you do to help him do that?” or “What’s another way you could help?”

11. **Provide opportunities for children to increase their instrumental know-how.** Teach children these strategies:

- Help children put feelings into words so they are able to express their own emotions and understand the expression of other people’s emotions.
- Provide numerous formal and informal opportunities for children to make decisions in the classroom. This gives children practice in generating alternatives to problems and in developing confidence in their abilities to find positive solutions.
- Finally, give children chances to learn useful skills. Sorting and organizing materials in the classroom, holding doors while others carry things, and using actual tools to fix broken toys are only some of the possibilities.

12. **Work with children to evaluate the results of their actions.** Children learn a lot from taking a retrospective look at what they have done as close to the event as possible: “Did jumping on the box solve the problem?” “Were there enough of you, or did you need more people to work on that project?” “Were you able to give Raymond all the information he needed?” or “How do you think it worked out for everybody to have a five-minute turn with the microscope?”

If children are unable to assess their own performances, offer some information yourself or help them gather information from others. This evaluation could be conducted during a private conversation with a child or as a group assessment of group effort. Regardless of how well their prosocial venture worked out, praise children for attempting it.

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**BOX 13-2 Strategies to Teach Children to Share.**

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1. Demonstrating what sharing looks like.
2. Suggesting multiple ways to share from which children might choose.
3. Pointing out instances of sharing as they occur.
4. Reading stories that illustrate ways to share as discussion starters.
5. Giving children sample scripts to use in asking for something, as well as for expressing their desire to finish using something.
6. Helping children negotiate the sequence for using an item; for instance, “I get it next, then Mary gets a turn”.

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At this point, it is obvious that Kenton is unsuccessfully trying to elicit Josh's help. Now is when the adult intervention is appropriate.

**ADULT:** Josh, Kenton is asking you for help. Sometimes, when people help, they do the job for someone. However, it sounds like you think if you make the car for Kenton, it will have to be yours. Another way people help is by showing someone how to do it. That way, Kenton can make his own with your help. How does that sound to you?

**JOSH:** Okay.

**KENTON:** Yeah.

Josh demonstrated how his car went together. After this was well underway, the adult commented briefly on the boys' cooperative behavior as well as on Josh's willingness to help a friend.

In this situation, the adult enabled one child to become aware of another child's signals and provided information about a possible course of action. She also rewarded the children for demonstrating prosocial behavior. Later in the day, she could take a moment to informally talk with Kenton and Josh about their reactions to the helping episode.

### Coordinating Planned Activities to Teach Prosocial Behavior

Planned activities are lessons adults develop in advance and carry out with children individually or in groups. The best activities are not necessarily the most elaborate; rather, they are those that have been well prepared and then implemented in ways that are sensitive to children's interests and needs. The following list illustrates how best to accomplish this.

1. **Decide what prosocial skill you want to teach.**
   Choose one of the skills described in this chapter, such as becoming aware that someone needs help, deciding to help, or taking action to help.

2. **Consider multiple optional lessons for the skill.**
   Lessons that include both discussion and active participation are the most effective. Active participation means getting children physically involved in the activity by handling props, moving about, and talking rather than simply listening. Some examples of successful activities include the following:

**SITUATION:** Kenton and Josh, two 6-year-olds, are playing with a construction toy that has many interconnecting pieces. Josh builds an elaborate vehicle, which Kenton admires.

**KENTON:** Make me one like yours.

**JOSH:** Well, if I make it, it'll be mine.

**KENTON:** But I want one. Make me one.

**JOSH:** Then it'll be mine!

**KENTON:** You make it. I can't get the pieces to fit.
4. Develop a plan of action that outlines the prosocial activity from start to finish. Write this plan down as a way to remember it and further think it through. Include what you will say to introduce the activity, any instructions you may have to give, how you will handle materials, how you will have children use them, the sequence of steps you will follow, and how you will close. Anticipate what you will say or do if children seem uninterested or unable to carry out your directions. See Box 13-3 for a sample activity plan.

5. Gather the materials you will need. Make any additional props that are necessary.

6. Implement your plan. Use skills you have learned in previous chapters related to nonverbal and verbal communication, reflecting, asking questions, and playing to enhance your presentation.

7. Evaluate your activity in terms of immediate and long-term prosocial outcomes. Typical evaluation questions include the following: Who were the children who participated? What did children actually say or do in this activity? How did children demonstrate interest or lack of interest? Later in the day, did children refer either to the activity or the prosocial skill covered in the activity in their conversation or play? Over time, do children spontaneously demonstrate prosocial behaviors highlighted by the activity?

8. Repeat the same prosocial activity, or a variation of it, at another time. Children learn prosocial concepts through repeated exposure over time. Therefore, do not expect to see immediate behavior change or the adoption of prosocial skills in their everyday interactions after just one or two presentations of a particular skill.

Communicating with Children’s Families
Children’s prosocial behaviors within the family setting can and should be encouraged by family members. Following are some strategies that will enable you to join forces with parents and other significant people in children’s lives to promote children’s prosocial behavior.

1. Communicate your classroom philosophy of cooperation to families. Cooperative activities, group projects, and individual work give children a message that each person in the classroom has an important role in the smooth functioning of that setting. Communicate your philosophy to parents in the form of a newsletter in which you describe what prosocial behavior is and how it is encouraged in the classroom.

2. Initiate and model cooperative activities in the program that include family members. There are many tasks to be done in a classroom such as special maintenance of computers, washing door and window frames, sterilizing toys, planting bushes or trees on school grounds, or fundraising for new play equipment that may provide logical opportunities to continued
activity_name: sharing a lump of play dough

goal: to help children practice sharing

materials:
A 2-pound lump of play dough, a table with five chairs (one for an adult, four for children), one plastic knife, one pair of scissors, one 12-inch length of wire.

procedure:
1. Place a lump of play dough in the center of the table.
2. Neutralize the dough by keeping one hand on it. Say: “I have one big ball of play dough, and there are four children who want to use it. Tell me how everyone can have a chance.”
3. Listen to children’s ideas; elicit suggestions from everyone.
4. Clarify each child’s perspective by paraphrasing his or her ideas to the group. Follow up with, “And what do you think of that?”
5. Remain impartial throughout this process. Do not show disapproval of any child’s idea, regardless of its content.
6. Remind children as necessary that the first step in playing with the dough is deciding how that will take place.
7. If children become bogged down, repeat pertinent helping facts and principles.
8. Summarize the solution when it has been achieved.
10. Carry out the agreed-upon solution.

box 13-3 sample activity to promote prosocial behavior.

3. invite parents and other family members to help in the formal group setting. Expand the old concept of “room mothers” to include every member of the child’s family. At the beginning of the program year, send out a “family interest survey” eliciting information about things adult family members are interested in doing, such as repairing toys, sewing, accompanying field trips, designing bulletin boards, or telling stories. Among the most valuable contributions families can make to the classroom are activities that represent their cultural heritage that may be unfamiliar to many students. Families may be reluctant to respond in writing, so carry out conversations with parents at informal times as a way of both finding out information and encouraging them to participate.

4. answer families’ questions about the role of competition and cooperation in their children’s lives. At the same time that cooperation is being fostered in the classroom, some parents may express concern...
that to be “successful in life” their children need to feel competitive.

Hold discussions with family members on this topic or introduce it as part of a newsletter to families. Encourage parents to express their views and acknowledge their perceptions. Point out some of the differences between “doing one’s best” and “beating the opposition.” For example, give families some specifics as to how children’s achievement may be measured in many ways such as reviewing how much better they did this time than last. Suggest keeping journal entries regarding the emotions of the individual when working toward an identified goal. Help parents understand how to support their children through the disappointments and hard times that inevitably come with competition and comparisons. Rather than denying their children’s perceptions of “failure,” aid parents in understanding how to use affective reflections and continuing responses to encourage children to reveal and, therefore, better understand their emotions at such times. Point out developmental norms with regard to how children at various ages assess their success or failure. In addition, mention, if appropriate, that while some children become more motivated to do as the adult wishes when prompted by a competitive statement or challenge, friction among children also increases.

5. Assist adults in figuring out how their children can be helpful at home. In many families, certain routine chores are assigned to the youngest members. Jobs such as making one’s own bed in the morning, clearing dishes from the table, meal planning, and even simple meal preparation are well within the abilities of most children. Responsibility for these tasks gives children a sense of contributing to the life of their family, as well as increasing their self-perceptions of competence and worth.

Encourage adult family members to have discussions with their offspring as to the ways in which the children can be helpful at home. Suggest that the family draw up a list of chores to be done and let young family members choose from among the list. Sometimes children prefer doing the same task over and over; at other times, they would rather change jobs frequently. Suggest that the family make a decision about this, and explore the possibility that the same strategy need not necessarily apply to every child. In other words, some children in a family may hold the same responsibility while others may switch. Offer a visible means of letting everyone know that a job is done, such as a chart with stars or other stickers that the children are responsible for marking.

Caution parents against fostering competition among their children. Negative comparisons have the effect of discouraging rather than encouraging participation. Suggest instead that some chores may be more efficiently handled when several people cooperate. Also include standards for completion to avoid misunderstandings. For example, in one family, 8-year-old Aaron was to sweep the kitchen after dinner. His father was cross with him for not returning the broom and dustpan to the closet. After some discussion, both parties realized that although the adult assumed that putting things away was part of the job, the child did not see that as part of his responsibility. As a consequence, the chore was changed to sweeping the floor and putting away the tools.

Finally, explain to adults the importance of not taking children’s work for granted. Children are more likely to continue their efforts when their assistance has been acknowledged and the positive influence of their contributions on the operations of the family has been appreciated.

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**Pitfalls to Avoid**

Whether you are teaching children prosocial behavior by creating an atmosphere that is conducive to acts of kindness, providing on-the-spot instruction, or using planned activities, there are certain mistakes to avoid.

1. **Failing to recognize children’s efforts to be prosocial.** Children who are just learning to help and cooperate may be awkward in their attempts or may initially pursue a course of action that at first bears little resemblance to kindness. When this happens, adults may misinterpret these behaviors as purposefully uncooperative or unhelpful. Harmful behavior should be limited, but children should receive support for their good intentions as well as information on how to improve their performance. This means it will be necessary to ascertain what a child was trying to achieve before taking corrective action. Thus, if children are adding water to the acrylic paint or scrubbing the window with toothpaste, don’t automatically assume that their motives are to ruin the materials or to strike out at you. Instead, ask questions such as: “What were you trying to do?” “What did you think would happen?” or “Why are you . . . ?” If they give an indication
that their intent was to be helpful, acknowledge their efforts and explain why they aren’t helpful, suggesting alternative actions that would be useful. Make sure that your voice tone is sincerely questioning and not accusatory.

These same strategies can be employed in any situation in which a child is attempting to help, cooperate, comfort, or rescue via some inappropriate means. There will be occasions when you do set a limit or enforce a consequence only to discover later that the child truly was trying to help. If this happens, go back to the child, explain that you now understand what he or she was trying to do, and discuss why corrective action was necessary. Give the child specific ideas about what to do instead.

2. Bringing a prosocial model’s behavior to a child’s attention through negative comparison or through competition. As has been stated previously, children are more likely to imitate models whose behavior is pointed out to them. However, adults should not use these situations to make unfavorable comparisons between the model’s behavior and that of the child. Statements like, “Look at Roger. He’s so polite. Why can’t you be more like that?” make the child feel defensive rather than receptive and do not make imitation likely. A better approach would be to say: “Roger accidentally bumped into Maureen, so he said, ‘Excuse me.’ That was a very polite thing to do.” This latter statement provides factual information in a nonjudgmental way.

3. Coercing children to engage in insincere prosocial behavior. It is not uncommon for adults who are trying to teach children consideration to manipulate them into expressions of kindness that the children do not really feel. This is illustrated by the parent who insists that 12-year-old Raymond “be nice and give Aunt Martha a kiss,” even though the child has protested that he doesn’t like to do it. He complies, not to be kind to Aunt Martha, but to avoid trouble. Similar difficulties arise when children are prodded into saying they are sorry when they are not. They learn that apologizing is the quickest way out of a dilemma rather than a sincere expression of remorse. Likewise, children who are urged to bestow false compliments on others as a way to charm them are learning that hypocrisy is acceptable.

To avoid these undesirable outcomes, adults must refrain from being preoccupied with the outer trappings of kindness at the expense of helping children develop the empathy that is necessary for true kindness to occur. Hence, it would be better to give the child information about the other person that might prompt empathic feelings: “Aunt Martha is glad to see you. She loves you very much. It would make her feel good to know that you care about her, too.” “When you were trying to practice with your crutches, you banged Jerry in the leg. That hurt a lot,” or “You told me you thought Carrie’s spider was neat. She’d probably like to hear that from you.”

4. Making children share everything all the time. There is no doubt that sharing is an important interpersonal skill that children should learn about. Unfortunately, there are times when adults promote this virtue too enthusiastically. They make children give up items that they have really not finished using as soon as other children want them. For instance, Elizabeth was using three grocery bags to sort the food in her “store.” One bag was for boxes, one was for cans, and one was for plastic fruit. She needed all three bags. Helen approached and asked if she could have one of the bags to make a “dress.” Elizabeth protested, but the adult insisted that Helen be given a bag. The adult dumped out the fruit and gave a sack to Helen.

In this case, Elizabeth had a legitimate right to finish using the bag. It would have been easier for her to share it willingly after her game was over. A better approach would have been to say: “Elizaabeth, when you are finished playing your game, Helen would like a chance to use a bag. Tell her when you are ready.” A variation of this problem occurs when adults arbitrarily regulate turn-taking as a way to get children to share. For example, as soon as a child gets on a tricycle, the adult admonishes, “Once around the yard, and then you’ll have to get off so someone else can have a turn.” This approach is used in a well-meaning effort to avoid conflict or to be fair. However, it often ends up with no child feeling truly satisfied. Furthermore, it requires constant adult monitoring.

Instead, allow children to fully use the materials to which they have access. It would be better, if at all possible, to expand the amount of equipment available so that children are not pressured into having to give up something with which they are deeply involved. If this is not possible, prompt empathic feelings by pointing out that others are waiting and would like a turn, too. Finally, remember to praise children when they finally relinquish what they have been using to someone else. Point out how their actions pleased the child who wanted to be next.
Chapter 13  Promoting Prosocial Behavior

Summary

Children who are kind develop feelings of satisfaction and competence, have many successful encounters, and get help and cooperation from others in return. Groups in which prosocial behavior is fostered are friendlier and more productive than those in which it is ignored.

To behave in ways perceived as prosocial, children first must become aware of situations in which such acts would be beneficial. Then, they have to decide if and how they will act and finally, take the action (or lack of action) they have decided on. Desiring to act with prosocial intent and knowing how best to do it are not necessarily learned at the same time. As children mature and gain experience, they become more proficient at matching their prosocial actions to the needs of others. Children’s abilities to take on another’s perspective also affect their prosocial behavior; that is, children with good role-taking abilities are generally more inclined to engage in prosocial behavior. This link becomes stronger with age. Gender, age, family, peers, school, and culture influence children’s prosocial behavior.

Particular societal characteristics either promote or inhibit prosocial conduct. The most profound influences on children’s helpful and cooperative behavior are the adults: the warmth of their relationship with children, the discipline strategies, the behaviors they model, the behaviors in children they reward, and the prosocial values and skills they teach. Teaching children kindness can be accomplished through creating an atmosphere conducive to prosocial actions, through on-the-spot instruction, and through planned activities. Partnerships between the family and the professionals who work with the children enhance children’s intentions and skills toward prosocial behavior.

Key Terms

- character attributions
- dispositional attributions
- instrumental know-how
- perspective-taking
- prosocial attributions
- prosocial behavior

Discussion Questions

1. Identify several aspects of prosocial behavior. Discuss their similarities and differences using examples from real life.
2. In small groups, talk about the benefits and risks of behaving in prosocial ways. When appropriate, tell about some personal instances in which you did or did not behave this way and the consequences of those behaviors.
3. Geraldo is working hard at constructing a bridge out of tongue depressors. He seems to be having difficulty getting it to stay up. Patrick is watching.
   a. Describe the steps Patrick will go through in acting with kindness toward Geraldo.
   b. Discuss all the possible choices Patrick will have to make and the potential outcomes of each decision.
4. Describe the influence of age on children’s prosocial behavior. Discuss the emergence and the increase or decline of particular types of prosocial behaviors as children get older. Give reasons based on your understanding of children’s development.
5. Discuss cultural influences on children’s prosocial behavior. Describe experiences in your own upbringing to illustrate. Describe particular family or social values that had an impact.
6. Describe the attributes of the atmosphere of a formal group setting that facilitate the development of children’s prosocial behavior. Discuss specifically how the discipline strategies you have learned thus far contribute to this atmosphere.
7. Describe six ways in which adults can model cooperation in the formal group setting and in the home. Discuss how children can translate these techniques into their own behavior.
8. Using examples from the formal group setting in which you work, describe instances in which adults
   a. Rewarded children’s prosocial behavior.
   b. Overlooked children’s prosocial behavior.
   c. Inadvertently punished children’s prosocial behavior.

   Discuss any aftermath you observed, either immediately or within a short time.
9. Discuss the role of direct instruction on children’s prosocial behavior. Relate specific skills that foster helping and cooperating to particular strategies for teaching these skills.

10. Referring to Appendix A, NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, find the principles and ideals to use in judging the ethics of the following situation: Two teachers in your program are excited about an activity they heard about at a recent workshop. Each time children do a kind act, they earn a point. The child with the most points at the end of the week is named “kindness kid” for a day.

Field Assignments

1. Choose a prosocial skill. In a few sentences, describe an activity you will use to teach children about the behavior you have selected. Carry out your plan with children. Describe how you carried out your plan and how the children responded. Briefly talk about how you might change or improve your plan for repetition in the future.

2. Identify a job you ordinarily carry out yourself in your field placement. Describe at least three ways you could get children involved in helping you. Implement one of your strategies, and then describe what actually happened. Discuss what it is about your plan that you might repeat in the future and what you might change.

3. Focus on modeling prosocial behavior. Describe a prosocial behavior that you modeled and how you did it. Next, discuss a situation in which you pointed out prosocial modeling by yourself or by another person. Write the words you used.

4. Select a prosocial skill to teach children. Use the on-the-spot strategies identified in this chapter. Document children’s progress over time.

5. Describe a conversation between you (or another professional) and an adult family member in which a child’s prosocial behavior was discussed. Outline the nature of the behavior as well as any strategies that were suggested to encourage the prosocial actions. Write a brief evaluation based on the material covered in this and earlier chapters.