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Wiener Kinderstudien

Tips for parents - from research to everyday life

#1: Helping & Sharing:
How can I support social behaviour in my child?



Social behavior is important in order to get along in a community, to find friends and for a harmonious family life. Although children begin to help other people at a remarkably young age¹⁾, they still have to learn to pay attention to other people's needs in everyday life. At first, sharing valuable things like candy with other people is very difficult for young children²⁾. Based on current research, we have put together some practical tips on how you can support your child in this learning process:

Show your child, how it's done!

Parents serve an important role modelling function: If you behave pro-socially yourself, for example by helping other people or valuing fairness, your child will observe and adopt these behaviors.

Why is that? Children attentively perceive other people's actions, even if they are only observing an interaction. Children learn a lot through observation and imitation. If prosocial behavior is something normal in their everyday life, children will show it themselves.

Help your child to understand other people (and themselves)!

Talk to your child about her or his desires, needs and perspectives, but also of those of other people. You can also make use of books and stories for this. Only if a child understands what others need and how people that have been treated unfairly feel, can he or she behave pro-socially.

Why is that? Children have to learn first, that other people have their own feelings, thoughts and needs. Children often do not understand that other people can know or think things other than themselves, until they are about 4 years old³⁾. They will learn faster if somebody talks to them about how they and other people see the world, how they feel and what they need.

Rewards are not always a good idea!

Children, who received a reward for their help in a study, later on helped less than children, who only received a friendly thanks⁴⁾.

Why is that? Children are self-motivated to help others, as long as they are able to and as long as they understand, what the other person needs. If they are rewarded for this behavior, it may weaken their original self-motivation to help. Then, children will only help, if they get rewarded for it.

Provide opportunities for your child to interact with others!

If children interact a lot with others and can make social experiences with their peers, e.g. in kindergarten, they are more socially competent and more prosocial⁵⁾.

Why is that? (Pro)social behavior has to be learned. The more children can communicate and interact with others, and the more opportunity they have to behave in fair and social ways, the better they can practice these behaviors. Moreover, when they help others, they will perceive themselves as competent and will gain self-confidence.

Erfahren Sie mehr unter:
www.kinderstudien.at

¹⁾ Warneken, F. and M. Tomasello, Science, 2006. 311(5765): p. 1301 – 3.

²⁾ Fehr, E., H. Bernhard, and B. Rockenbach, Nature, 2008. 454(7208): p. 1079 – 83.

³⁾ Wellman, H.M., D. Cross, and J. Watson, Child Dev, 2001. 72(3): p. 655–84.

⁴⁾ Warneken, F. and M. Tomasello, Dev Psychol, 2008. 44(6): p. 1785–8.

⁵⁾ Paulus, M. and M. Leithner, J Exp Child Psychol, 2017. 161: p. 202–210.

