

# What drives children to choose compassion?

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

University of Queensland researchers have found children will help people in distress unless there is a personal cost.

Dr. James Kirby from UQ's School of Psychology and his team worked with 285 [children](#) aged 4 and 5 to investigate what drives them to be

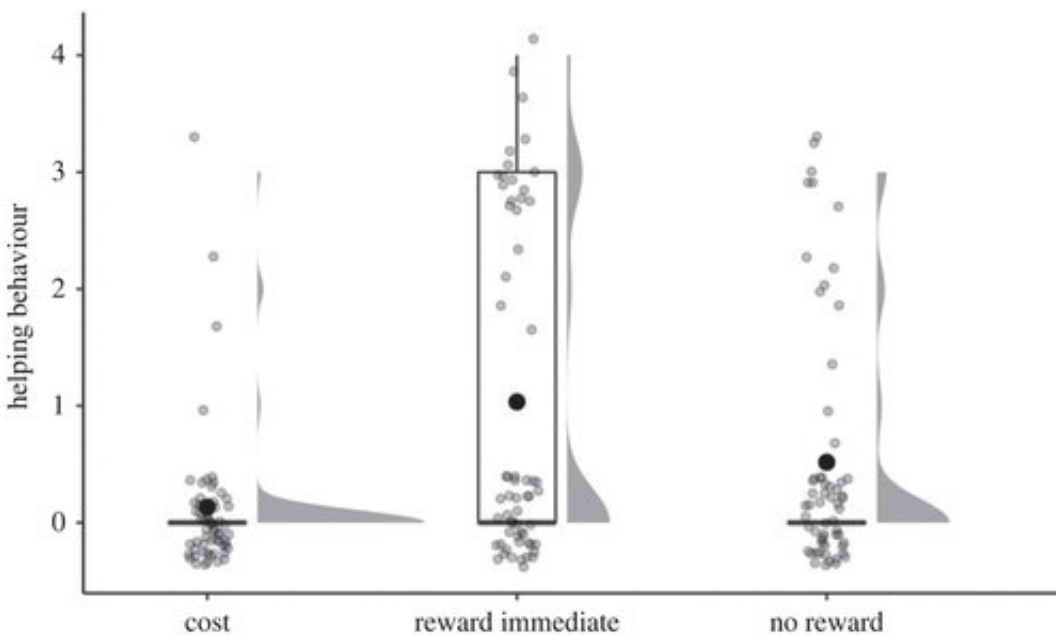
compassionate.

"We tested if their [compassion](#) response changed depending on who they were interacting with," Dr. Kirby said.

"Adults are an authority figure and children sometimes do what is required just because an adult is asking, which is why we also used puppets who are more on a child's level.

"Our research found children will assist every time if there is no personal cost to helping and this didn't change if it was an adult or puppet."

To understand if the compassion response changed if there was a cost involved, [stickers](#) were given to the children when they completed tasks.



Boxplot of the effect of condition on helping behavior, where higher values represent greater helping behavior. Black dots represent means and gray dots represent individual datapoints (jittered for visualization purposes). Credit: *Royal Society Open Science* (2023). DOI: 10.1098/rsos.221448

"We then saw that if they had to give up their reward stickers it was awfully hard for the children to help, even if the adult or puppet showed [distress](#)," Dr. Kirby said.

"It didn't mean the children were deliberately selfish because [adults](#) also really struggle giving up rewards and resources. Just because they valued the reward it didn't mean they were uncompassionate, as many of them offered passive compassion such as condolences like 'that's okay,' or 'maybe next time.'

"Most importantly, this study highlighted that if there were no personal costs or the children didn't have to give up rewards, they were deeply compassionate and helpful.

"Understanding what drives children to be compassionate is important for setting up positive learning and family environments."

The study is published in *Royal Society Open Science*.

It builds on [previous research](#) led by Ph.D. candidate Mitchell Green and Professor Mark Nielsen from UQ's School of Psychology about what factors influence the likelihood that children will be compassionate.

**More information:** James N. Kirby et al, Testing the bounds of compassion in young children, *Royal Society Open Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.221448](#)

Provided by University of Queensland

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