

Being around children makes adults more generous

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Adults are more compassionate and are up to twice as likely to donate to charity when children are present, according to a new study from psychologists.

The research, conducted by [social psychologists](#) at the University of Bath and Cardiff University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), examined how the presence of children influences adults' compassionate motivations and behaviours.

Across eight experiments and more than 2,000 participants, the researchers asked adults to describe what typical children are like. After focusing on children in this way, participants subsequently indicated higher motivations towards compassionate values, such as helpfulness and social justice, and they reported greater empathy with the plight of other adults.

In a field study, which built on these findings, the researchers found that adult passers-by on a shopping street in Bath were more likely to donate to charity when more children were around relative

to adults.

When no children were present and all passers-by were adults, a student research team from the University of Bath observed roughly one donation every ten minutes. But when children and adults were equally present on the shopping street, adult passers-by made two donations every ten minutes.

These effects could not be accounted for by higher footfall during busy times or whether donors were accompanied by a child or not. Instead, they suggest that the presence of children can nudge adults to behave more generously and donate more often. The on-street donations were made to 'Bath Marrow', a charity which supports people with blood cancer.

Interestingly, these findings point to a widely applicable effect. The researchers observed that the 'child salience effect' was evident among both parents and non-parents, men and women, younger and older participants, and even among those who had relatively negative attitudes towards children. The researchers involved suggest these effects could also have widespread implications.

Lead researcher Dr. Lukas Wolf from the Department of Psychology at Bath explains: "While previous evidence has shown that we are typically more helpful and empathetic towards children, no research has been done to date to examine whether the presence of children alone encourages us to be more pro-social towards others in general. Our research addresses this gap by showing that the presence of children elicits broad pro-social motivation and donation behaviour towards causes not directly related to children."

Dr. Wolf says that this potential for widespread effect is important because it indicates society needs to consider new ways to involve children more directly in various aspects of life.

"Our findings showing the importance of children for compassionate behaviour in society provides a glimpse of a much bigger impact," he says.

"Children are indirectly dependent on how adults behave towards each other and towards the planet. Yet, children are also separated from many adult environments, such as workplaces and from political bodies where [important decisions](#) affect their futures."

He adds: "The finding that the presence of children motivates adults to be more compassionate towards others calls for more integration of [children](#) in contexts where [adults](#) make important long-term decisions, such as on climate change."

Various initiatives over recent years have been established to increase the prominence of young voices, for example Children's Parliaments. Future work from the researchers involved in this study will look in more detail at the nature of the child salience effect and its ramifications for society and the planet.

Their results are published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

More information: Lukas J. Wolf et al, The Salience of Children Increases Adult Prosocial Values, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506211007605](#)

Provided by University of Bath

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