

# The development of sympathy in different child–adult relationships

## A longitudinal study from 5 to 7 years



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## Introduction

The aim of the present study is to investigate factors that contribute to the development of sympathy in children from 5 to 7 years. Variables that are considered as particularly important are

- different socialising relationships (mother–child, father–child, teacher–child in childcare and teacher–child in school) and
- child's characteristics (gender, inhibition, aggressiveness)

The hypothesis is that the more warmth and support children experience in the interaction with significant adults, the more sympathy they will show. The most sympathy will be shown by children who receive warmth and support in all the relationships. Concerning the child's characteristics, the hypothesis is that they will have both direct as well as indirect effects on children's sympathy, by interacting with the relationship–variables. For example, a former study has shown that, for five year old girls, aggressiveness had a main effect, but inhibition interacted with the mother–child relationship, with inhibited girls showing more sympathy when mothers were perceived as being warm and supportive (Kienbaum, 2003).

## Methods

**Sample:** N=90 children, their parents and teachers from kindergarten and school.  
3 timepoints of measurement, each one year apart

### Sympathy:

*a) self-report by the children:* Five items from Zhou, Valiente, and Eisenberg (2003) (e.g., “when I see another child who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for him or her”; “I feel sorry for people who don't have the things I have”). The children are asked whether the sentence is like him/her or not, and if so, how much ( $\alpha = .73$  in Kienbaum & Malti, 2007)

*b) Other-reports by the teachers and parents:* Five items from Zhou, Valiente, and Eisenberg (2003) (e.g., “this child often feels sorry for other children who are being teased”; “this child usually feels sympathy for other children who are upset or sad”)

*c) for half of the sample: observations in two standardized situations* (Kienbaum, 2003). The children are observed when they witness the simulated distress of a puppet in two situations, “sadness” and “pain” (see figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

### Relationships between the child and the grown ups:

Interview about the *child's perceptions* of the *mother's /father's/ teacher's* behavior in situations when the child experiences sadness or anxiety. Example : “Imagine you have a budgie and you forgot to close the door of its cage after you gave it food. The bird flies away. You are sad. What does your mummy say to you?” The spontaneous utterances of the children are categorized into

+ Empathetic reactions (e.g. “Come to me, don't be sad!”)

- Non-empathetic reactions (e.g. “It's your own fault”)

For each relationship, 12 situations are presented that are illustrated by pictures (see figure 3)



Figure 3

**Child characteristics:** *Other-report* questionnaires that are filled out by the parents and the teachers

**Shyness:** Questionnaire for parents (8 items, Asendorpf, 1993;  $\alpha = .91$  in Kienbaum, 2003)

e.g. “my child is shy toward unknown adults”; “my child is shy toward unknown peers”

Questionnaire for child care teachers (7 items, Thomas & Chess, 1977;  $\alpha = .90$  in Kienbaum, 2003)

e.g. “the child is shy with adults he/she doesn't know”; “the child is bashful when meeting new children”

**Aggressiveness:** Questionnaire for parents (4 items,  $\alpha = .84$  in Kienbaum, 2003)

e.g. “my child is aggressive toward other children”; “my child teases other children”

Questionnaire for child care teachers (6 items,  $\alpha = .87$  in Kienbaum, 2003)

e.g. “when playing with other children this child argues with them”; “the child lets other children know when he/she does not like something by yelling or fighting”

### Literature

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