

# The Context of Early Helping Behavior

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## Introduction

- Children show a range of different helping behaviors by early in the second year of life (Warneken & Tomasello, 2007).
- One hypothesis is that early helping reflects a **natural, altruistic** tendency to help others, which develops without much support from socializing agents (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009).
- Experimental research and research with older children has suggested that attempts to reinforce helping behavior in fact is associated with less prosocial behavior (Eisenberg et al., 1992; Grusec, 1991; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008).
- An alternative view stresses the role of social experiences in the development of children's helping behavior (Rheingold, 1982).
- Past research tell us little about young children's experiences with helping. The current studies represent two investigations of the context of helping behavior in everyday life during the second year.

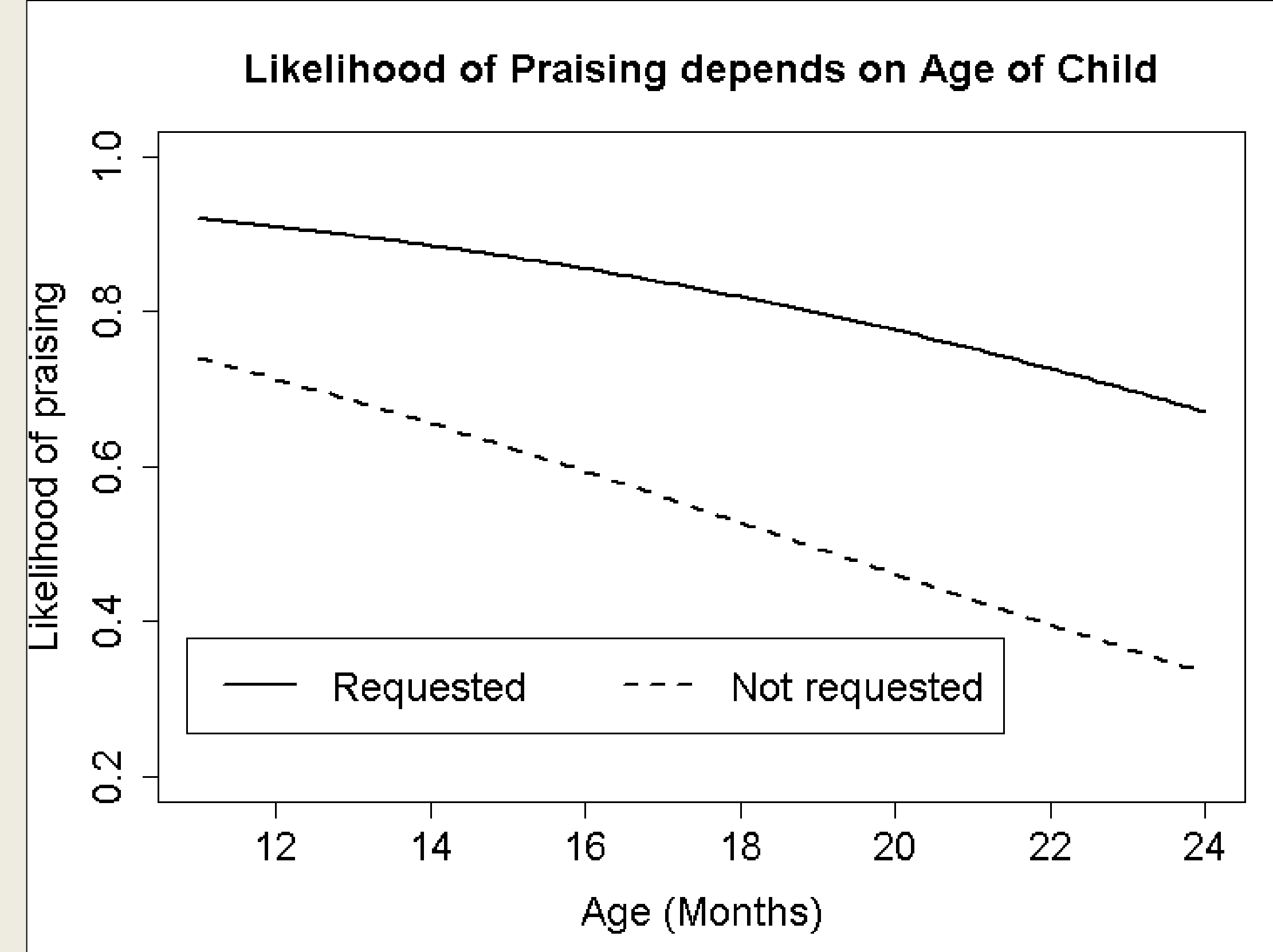


Figure 1: Predicted likelihood of reporting praise as a function of child age and whether or not the helping was requested (Study 1)

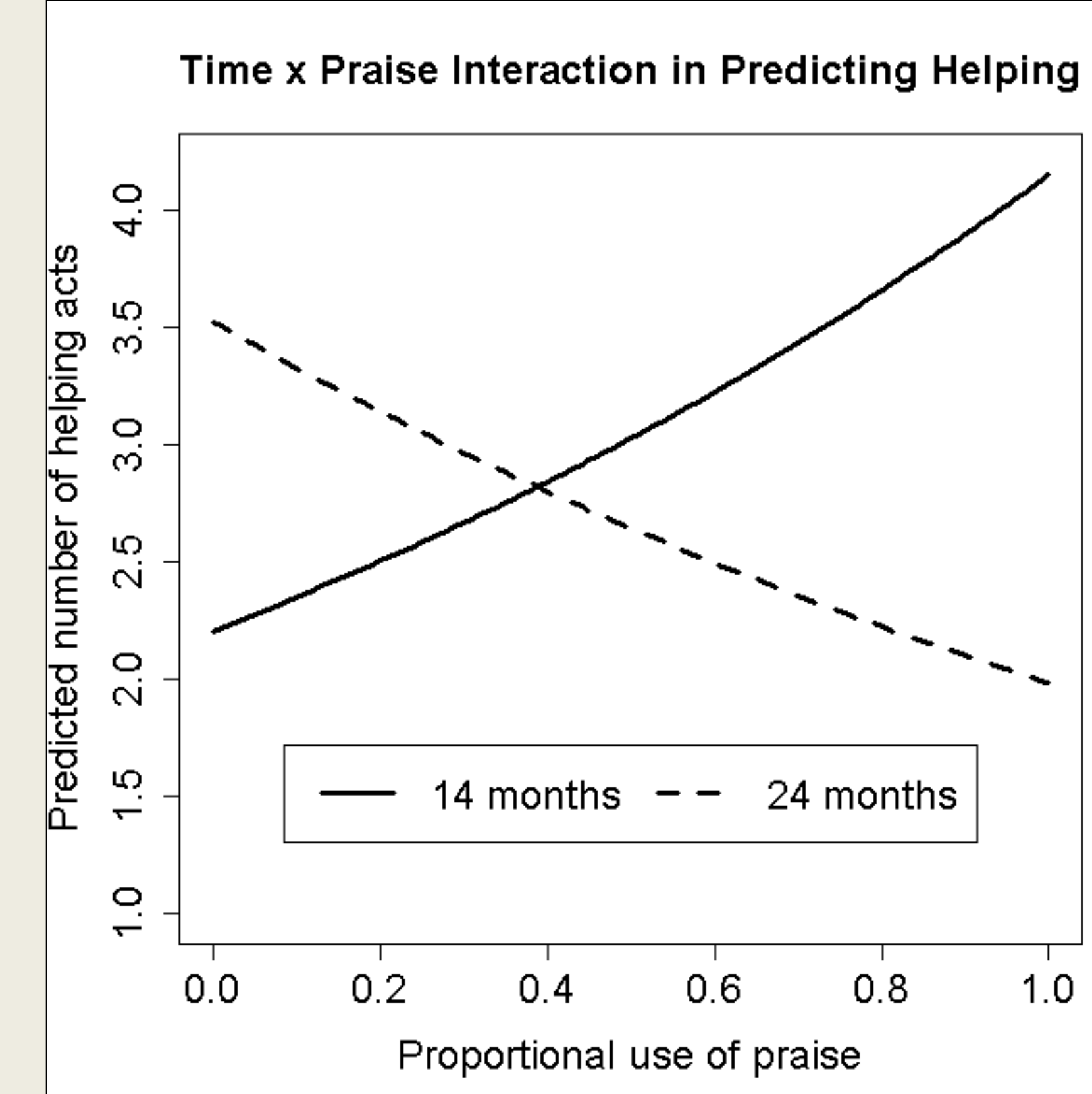


Figure 2: Predicted number of helping instances as a function of praise and child age (Study 2)



Figure 3: Child throwing away broken hanger

## Study 1: Methods

### Participants:

76 mothers of infants aged between 11.0 and 24.0 months ( $M_{age} = 16.17$ , 36 female, 40 male)

### Procedure:

As part of a phone interview, mothers were asked to

- List the kinds of helping behavior their children engaged in (if any)
- Describe a recent instance when their child helped.

## Study 1: Results

- The tendency to report one or more types of helping behavior increased with child age,  $b = 0.57$ ,  $p = .026$ .
- Number of **simple** types helping behaviors did *not* depend on age of the child (handing, feeding, holding). In contrast, the number of **cleaning** (e.g. wiping table, putting things away) and **other** (e.g. watering plants, making bed) types increased with child age,  $\chi^2(2) = 13.16$ ,  $p = .001$ .
- 35% of described behaviors were requested, 66% elicited some form of praise
- The likelihood of receiving praise was negatively related to child age,  $b = -0.12$ ,  $p = .049$ , and was greater for requested than for non-requested behavior,  $b = 1.33$ ,  $p = .033$  (Figure 1).
- Mothers reported positive child emotion in nearly half of the situations where the child was able to help.

## Study 2: Methods

### Participants:

12 families, visited when target child (8 male) was 14 and 24 months of age. Data from an additional 14 families are currently being collected.

### Procedure:

Families were videotaped for 2.5 hours while engaging in their everyday activities. All occurrences of helping behavior were coded from video recordings

## Study 2: Results

- 10 out of 12 children engaged in helping behavior at both visits.
- 51% of helping behaviors were requested and 63% of instances elicited some form of praise from children. There was no effect of age.
- Again, children were more likely to receive praise if the helping behavior was requested,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.80$ ,  $p = .016$ .
- Parent praise was positively related to the number of helping acts at 14 months, but negatively related to helping at 24 months, Visit x Praise:  $\chi^2(1) = 3.24$ ,  $p = .071$ .
- Parents were more likely to correct or extend the helping behavior at the 24-month visit,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.86$ ,  $p = .027$ .

## Discussion

### 1. Children receive social signals about helping behavior already around the first birthday

The role of social experiences in the emergence of helping behavior has been the subject of controversy. The present findings suggest that children receive encouragement and praise for helping behavior from the first birthday. Young children's use of these experiences deserves further attention in future research.

### 2. Reactions to children's helping behavior depend on child and situation

The present study found evidence that mothers give less praise to older than to younger children for helping, possibly because the older children are expected to help. Mother's praise also depends on whether they have previously requested the helping.

### 3. The effect of social experiences could depend on the child's age

We found tentative evidence that younger and older children respond differently to praise. It is possible that praise is crucial to support the emerging ability to help, whereas attempts to improve the quality of the child's helping is more important later, when the helping behavior is more firmly established.