Chapter 18: Altruism Among Children


For an account of the various phases of development in children, from self-awareness and reaction to others’ distress to compassionate


5. Sagi and Hoffman had deduced the presence of a “rudimentary empathic reaction of distress,” which allows the newborn to tune into the emotional state of another infant, without clearly distinguishing its own emotions from those of others. According to the neuroscientist Jean Decety, “these results demonstrate that the newborn possesses the two essential aspects of empathy: 1) the ability to share emotions with people with whom it can identify; and 2) the distinction between self and other.” (Decety, J., “L’empathie est-elle une simulation mentale de la subjectivité d’autrui.” In Berthoz, A., Jorland, G., *et al.* *L’Empathie*, Odile Jacob, 2004.) Other researchers, like the neuroscientist Tania Singer, are more cautious in their interpretations, since indubitable signs of distinction between self and other appear only after the age of fourteen months. Questioned about this, Tania Singer thinks the discrimination made between the different cries by the newborn stems simply from the fact that its constitution allows it at birth to distinguish a human voice from an ordinary sound and to grant various degrees of importance to different kinds of voices. The intensity of emotional contagion could be linked to the degree of similarity between the infant and the crying child. According to Singer, the reason newborns do not cry upon hearing a recording of their own cries can be attributed to the fact that our brain anticipates the effects of our own reactions (our tears, for instance) and automatically neutralizes them before these reactions occur. That is why we cannot tickle ourselves. Similarly, placing one of my hands over another as a sign of comfort will have the same calming effect only if someone takes my hand when I am suffering (Tania Singer, in conversation, February 2012).


This experiment had already been successfully carried out in the same laboratory with older children, from twelve to sixteen months. Kuhlmeier, V., Wynn, K., & Bloom, P. (2003). Attribution of
dispositional states by 12-month-olds. Psychological Science, 14(5), 402–408. If this experiment is repeated with inanimate objects (instead of figurines presenting a human appearance), none of the objects are preferred over the other.


Carolyn Zahn-Waxler, who for over thirty years has studied the emergence of empathy among children, observed the way young children react in daily life when people close to them find themselves in difficulty. For example, she asked mothers to simulate the pain of bumping into something, or pretend to be sad or exhausted, or to seem to have trouble breathing. Almost always, the children behaved in a consoling way, kissing the mother and giving her other signs of affection, or acting in a considerate way, by bringing, for instance, a bottle to a younger brother or sister, or a blanket to someone shivering with cold. Zahn-Waxler, C., & Radke-Yarrow, M. (1982). The development of altruism: Alternative research strategies. Development of Prosocial Behavior, 109–137.


25. In the first experiment, the experimenter takes a treat out of his pocket, gives it to the child, and asks the child either to keep it for himself, or to give it to someone else: the child shows more happiness in the second case. In the second experiment, the experimenter gives some treats to the child, who puts them in his bowl. A little later, he suggests to the child that he give a treat to someone else: it’s in this situation that the child shows the most happiness.


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44. Ricard, E., La Dame des mots, Éditions NiL, 2012.


56. Jacques Lecomte, in conversation. According to him, belief in intergenerational re-occurrence of abuse comes from the statistical angle of inversion of probabilities (most abusive parents were abused, and so it is wrongly deduced that most abused children become abusive). See Lecomte, J., *Guérir de son enfance*, Odile Jacob, 2010.