Beyond Selfishness
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By Alfie Kohn

You realize you leave your wallet on the bus and you give up hope of ever seeing it again. But someone calls that evening asking how to return the wallet to you.

In one sense, you may feel like the Bulk of the evidence points in the direction of the existence of altruism, he says.

New research describes how we feel when helping someone, but that doesn't mean we came to that person's aid in order to feel good. We may have acted out of a simple desire to help. In fact, there is good evidence for the existence of genuine altruism. Consider:

* Do we help just to impress others? “If looking good were the motive, you'd be more likely to help with others watching,” says Latane. His experiments show just the opposite. More evidence comes from an experiment Staub did in 1978: Children who voluntarily shared their candy turned out to have a lower need for approval than those who didn't share. “If I’m feeling good about myself, I can respond to the needs of others,” Staub explains. So helping needn’t be motivated by a desire for approval.

By the time children are 3 or 4, prosocial behavior is common. One group of researchers videotaped 26 3-to-5-year-olds during 30 hours of free play and recorded about 1,200 acts of sharing, helping, comforting and cooperating. Children can be selfish and mean, of course, but there's no reason to think that these characteristics are more common or “natural” than prosocial inclinations.

Two toddlers are roughhousing when one suddenly begins to cry. The other child rushes to fetch his own security blanket and offers it to his playmate.

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Pretend you are one of the subjects in a brand-new study of Batson's. You are told that by performing well on a game with numbers, you might be able to help someone.

But some investigators aren't satisfied with knowing just when prosocial acts will take place or by whom. “Why should we help other people? Why not help Number One? That's the rock-bottom question,” says University of Massachusetts psychologist Ervin Staub, who's been wrestling with that problem since the mid-1960s.

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