

LINE ON LIFE

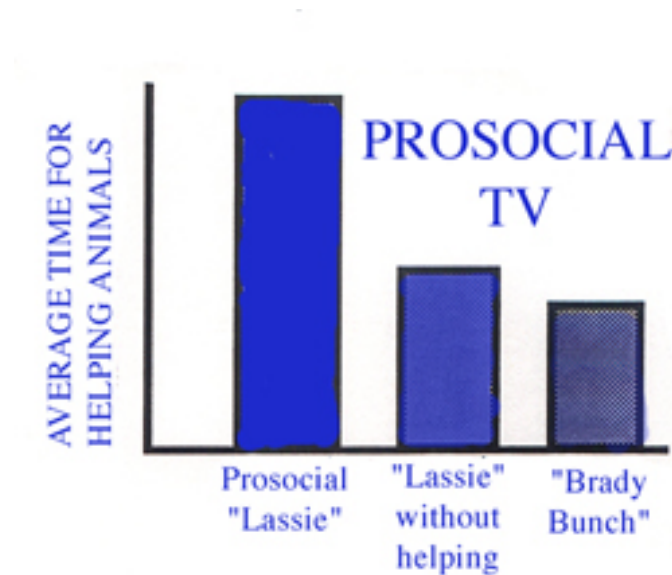
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Prosocial Television *

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Most of us know that viewing violence on television tends to increase aggression in children. Is the opposite also true? Do prosocial programs increase the prosocial behavior in children who watch them?

Many research studies seem to support television's ability to produce greater prosocial behavior in children. Several studies between 1970 and 1975 had children view generous models on videotape. As an example, one depicted people donating their winnings to charity. Children viewing this type of video were significantly more likely to be generous in a similar situation. In 1981, another study indicated that viewing models on television can influence children to be friendlier, less prejudiced and use constructive forms of self-control.



In 1975, real TV shows were used. One group of first-grade children viewed an episode of "Lassie" in which a child risks his life to rescue one of Lassie's pups. In the two control groups of first graders, one saw another Lassie episode and the other saw an episode of the "Brady Bunch." Neither control episode contained prosocial behavior. Later the children were allowed to choose between activities to win prizes or working for the welfare of animals in need. After viewing the prosocial Lassie program, the children were more willing to give up prizes to help the animals.

Television programs can also help to make children more willing to cooperate. A 1979 psychological study

dealt with second- and third-grade children. They either watched an episode of "The Waltons" showing a cooperative solution to a conflict, a similar program that did not show cooperation or no program at all. In playing games later with other children, those who viewed the cooperative TV show were significantly more cooperative than those in the other groups.

Some experiments tailored the video models to specific situations involved. In 1977, a psychological study used 200 Canadian children who were in various team sports — baseball, lacrosse and ice hockey. The children viewed videos in their own sport that showed prosocial behaviors — like helping others or apologizing for a misdeed — aggressive behaviors or neutral behaviors. The prosocial examples increased the prosocial behavior in most of the children in that group. Surprisingly, the antisocial examples did *not* relate to any significant change in the children's behavior!

The greater impact of prosocial models over antisocial models in TV was not limited to the above study. In a review of almost 200 studies, it was consistently shown that prosocial TV programs have highly significant results in fostering prosocial behavior in children. In addition, the effect of prosocial modeling on TV was close to twice as great as the effect of antisocial models on TV. In the light of these results, the author of the review concluded:

"Many organizations and groups have chosen to work for the removal of violence in televised programs. It is a defensive position: eliminate the negative. I would recommend accentuating the positive; apply money and effort in creating new entertainment programs with prosocial themes, especially for children (to whom the empirical evidence most clearly applies). Although fewer studies exist on prosocial themes, the effect size is so much larger, holds up better under more stringent experimental conditions, and is consistently higher for boys and girls, that potential for prosocial effects overrides the smaller but persistent effects of antisocial programs."

However — when learning from models — there are certain **necessary conditions**. First, the learner must both *pay attention* to the model and *remember* what the model did. In addition, the learner must be *able to reproduce* the modeled behavior.

Other conditions also increase the probability of copying the modeled behavior. Imitation is more likely if the model is *successful* at a task or is *rewarded* for a response. Once this response is imitated, continued reinforcement will determine if it is repeated.

Qualities of the model also make a difference. Models are more likely to be imitated, if they are attractive, rewarding, admired and/or higher in social status. These qualities are found in **significant others** — parents, siblings, other relative and friends. Even though TV can increase prosocial behavior, parents are far more effective. Rather than depending on television to make your child more prosocial, you can be much more effective by modeling prosocial behavior yourself and rewarding children when they imitate the desired behavior. In other words, to get your children to be more prosocial — *you* need to be more prosocial and reward *your* children for copying your behavior.

* Adapted from Richard A. Lippa's *Introduction to Social Psychology*, Wadsworth Publishing, 1990, pages 490-491.