

CHILDREN'S EMPATHY AND FAMILY INCOME: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERN

Gianti Amanda¹; Rose Mini Agoes Salim²

^{1,2}Faculty of Psychology, Early Childhood Psychology, University of Indonesia
Jl. Lkr. Kampus Raya, Pondok Cina, Depok 16424, Indonesia
¹giantiamanda@gmail.com; ²romy.prianto@gmail.com

Received: 04th March 2019/ Revised: 03rd May 2019/ Accepted: 20th May 2019

How to Cite: Amanda, G., & Salim, R. M. A. (2019). Children's empathy and family income: The mediating role of family communication pattern. *Humaniora*, 10(2), 121-126.
<https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v10i2.5510>

ABSTRACT

The research examined whether the communication patterns in the family by conversation and conformity orientations served as mediators of the relation between children's empathy and family income. The research was conducted to parents of children age six to eight years old as the participants (N = 233) in Jakarta, Indonesia. The parents' completed questionnaire for children's empathy, family income, and family communication pattern. The relation was analyzed using PROCESS Hayes. The results showed that the family communication pattern partially mediated the children's empathy and family income. This research result shows a couple of findings. First, the children who come from a low-income family with family conformity orientation have lower empathy. The second finding is that the children with the family who have family conversation orientation have higher empathy. This second finding works for both low and high incomes family. Besides, only conformity orientation is found to mediate the effect of family income on child's empathy. This research finds there are connections between family environment and children's behavior. Developing the children's empathy going to be positive for their social-emotional outcomes in the future is paramount because the children learn to express and regulate their emotion in a positive way when they have higher empathy.

Keywords: children's empathy, family income, family communication pattern

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional child development develops throughout elementary-age, which are very important for future children life outcomes. Social-Emotional child development also correlates with children school readiness and early academic development. Children pro-social behavior is found correlate with children outcome in adulthood (Blair, McKinnon, & Daneri, 2018). Pro-social is a behavioral domain of empathy; when children empathize to another, they would likely show the pro-social behavior. Empathy is understanding and sharing in another's emotional state or context (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). Children's care to others must be developed since at a very young age. One of the behaviors that important in interpersonal relationship is pro-social behavior, as behavior outcome of the empathy.

Lots of researches in early childhood focus primarily on socio-emotional development with three domains include helping, sharing, and comforting. The comforting behavior correlates with empathy. When children show

empathy, they have the motivation to comforting others. Beforehand, they feel the negative emotional state which triggers the empathic feelings. Empathy can be the reaction when someone shows emotional feelings, and the emotional reaction becomes the motivation behind lots of forms of pro-social behaviour (Paulus & Leitherer, 2017).

Preschool children age three to six years feel the positive emotions when they share something with others, and when they do not share, they will feel negative emotions. When they emotionally can feel and sense how they are feeling and how other feelings then they emotionally grow. Children with age older than seven until 13 years show more positive emotions in helping others than when they are younger (Sabato & Kogut, 2019). Children emotions could predict their social behavior and competence. Previous research shows that when children show the understanding of their emotions, they also show pro-social behavior and continuously develop higher giving behavior (Paulus & Moore, 2017).

Empathy is a valid response from another emotional state or condition to understand others feeling or how

they are expected to feel. Two dimensions of empathy are cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy explains as the capacity to understand others feelings after that happen through the cognitive process for someone constructs their mental state. Moreover, affective empathy is described as the tendency to emotionally experience any response of affective feeling of another (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014).

Empathy is needed to understand how others are thinking, how others feel their emotions, and how to respond to that feeling. In childhood, low empathy is associated with poor peer relationships, hostility, and bullying. Parents have a significant role in the development of empathy in children. Children's empathy may be seen as a product of specific parenting behaviors such as authoritativeness, gentle discipline, inductive reasoning, and sensitive responding to children's distress (Stern & Cassidy, 2018).

Children in the age of middle childhood show that they are developing their empathic skills, awareness to others, self-other differentiation, and perspective-taking ability. This capability reveals maturation of their prefrontal cortex and continuity to the higher level of social cognition. As the children developing, they could practice several changes with their empathy experience until they are adolescence. The two dimensions of children's empathy, which are cognitive empathy and affective empathy will be increased with the children age. There is also a difference between genders in individual differences in their empathy skills. The gender difference shows that females have higher empathy than males (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014).

Children's social-emotional development starts from the family. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems have stated that the family environment plays an important role in children's development (Xuan et al., 2018). Parents' socioeconomic status (SES) is relevant to children's individual differences in empathy. Low SES correlates with children's lower levels of empathy. Other than socioeconomic statuses, such as maternal support, high-quality parenting, warm parenting, and siblings' warmth also affects children empathy. The family environment also has a relationship with child empathy (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). The socioeconomic status of the parent will be observed from their income.

Indonesia has a minimum standard of income, which the amount depends on the provincial regulation. The standard of minimum monthly income in Jakarta for 2018 is 3,5 million rupiahs. There are family whose living below and above this minimum monthly income. The difference between family income can influence part of how family living.

The family environment is children social learning environment where they develop their behavior and character from the parents. With the parents and child socialization through communication, they share the roles, boundaries, disciplinary, and relationships. Parents influence children behavior by doing modeling, role-play, and reinforcement in child development (Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017). Parents and children are interacting through communication; each family has their own communication pattern (Odenweller & Harris, 2018). Family provides the essential context for children to learn the importance of interpersonal contact and concern for others, as well as the recognition, understanding, and sharing another's emotional states (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). Moreover, the communication between parent and child plays an important role in the family.

Current research has demonstrated the importance of

conversation and conformity orientation, which some of it are for the conflict and conflict resolution in family. Family communication is the result of the family relationship schemas. The schemas are based on experiences that happen in the relationship of family interaction with one and another (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Children behavior is influenced by the parent-child relationship through communication. When the children and parents communicate more clearly, the children will show more positive emotion and behavior towards others. When the children and parents communicate more poorly, then there is a higher risk of behavior problem (Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017).

Each family has different communication pattern. Some families pursue conformity of communication while others pursue the conversation in the family. Moreover, the difference in family communication based on the suitability of every individual according to a different topic. This pattern can be transferred to other members of the family. In this case, the family communication pattern creates two dimensions that are the conversation orientation and conformity orientation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2016). The conversation orientation shows the degree where members of the family could express their feelings, ideas, and opinions. Each family member is encouraged to participate in unstructured communication about any topics. In this family communication setting, the member of the family could openly and spontaneously interact with one another without any limits. There is a high and low end of each of the communication dimensions. When parents adopt high conversation orientation, they believe that communicating openly and often could give lots of benefit to the family. So this family educates and socializes with their children by discussing a lot of matters and topics. When parents have low conversation orientation, then they think it is not important for parents and children to share exchange ideas or thoughts (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

The second dimension of family communication pattern is conformity orientation, which shows the degree where members of the family have the same attitude, belief, and value. When a family adopts a high dimension of conformity orientation, they tend to create the same beliefs and attitudes towards ideas and topics. This family adopts the traditional family structure and shows the hierarchical stage of family. The parents expect every individual matter to follow the family decision, and the parents expect their children to follow the parents' order. When the family is at the low end of conformity orientation, they openly also look at the outside relationship and encourage the member of the family to be able to grow and respect personal space and interest (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

As explain by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), there are two core dimensions of communication in the family. These two dimensions depend on one and another. Therefore, to understand family communication, it is important to understand both dimensions. The conversation orientation dimensions could be explained by the conformity orientation dimensions. To get the most understanding one, so it is important to investigate both dimensions and not just investigate one dimension at a time (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Based on prior theory and research, this research will address the following question; Is there any correlation between children's empathy and family income with family communication pattern which is conversation orientation or conformity orientation as mediating role? The current

research has two hypotheses; the first one is whether family income and children's empathy mediated by the family conversation orientation communication pattern. The second hypotheses is; does the family income and children's empathy mediated by the family conformity orientation communication pattern?

The researchers gather a sample of elementary children from their parents that fill data. Moreover, the researchers also gather information about parents' family income and their communication pattern to examine whether family communication pattern would mediate the association between a child's empathy and family income. With this research, it is targeted more effective early intervention and prevention program.

METHODS

The 232 parents are asked to participate in this research. Data are collected from five elementary schools in Jakarta, Indonesia, by asking parents to fill a questionnaire, regarding children empathy, family income, and family communication pattern. The data are collected around October – November 2018. The educational background of the mother or father are 6% of junior high school, 47% of senior high school, and 47% holds a bachelor's degree and higher. Parents' marital status is 88% married, and 12% separated/divorced.

The measurements of the child's empathy use The basic Empathy Scale – Parent Report (BES-PR) (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014) to assess the children empathy. Seven-item adapted short form of the measure is translated into Bahasa Indonesia language that consists of dimension affective empathy and cognitive empathy. The seven-item in this measuring instrument is valid with a correlation value between 0,20–0,45 and Cronbach Alpha value of 0,57. Each item is scored from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). Here are some of examples of the items from the child's empathy scale, "her/ his parents' or siblings' emotions don't affect her/ him much", "s/he often gets swept up in her/his siblings' or friend's feelings", "s/he can often understand how people feel even before they tell/him".

Parents' economic status is measured by asking about parents' monthly income, and it is divided into several categories. These categories are; (1) under Jakarta monthly standard salary (Rp3.500.000); (2) between Jakarta monthly standard salary during 2018 and its double amount (Rp3.500.000 – Rp7.000.000); (3) three times Jakarta monthly standard salary during 2018 (Rp7.000.000 – Rp10.000.000); (4) above three times Jakarta standard monthly salary during 2018 (more than Rp10.000.000).

Family communication pattern is measured by the short adaptation form of Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2016). This instrument consists of nine items with two subscales; conformity orientation and conversation orientation. The score ranges from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). The internal consistency of the conversation orientation scale is 0,59, and conformity orientation is 0,68. Examples of the items for the conformity orientation family communication pattern are "I often say things like, you should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad", "I often say things like, you'll know better when you grow up", "In our home, the parents usually have the last word". Examples of the items for the conversation orientation of family communication pattern are, "I often say things like;

every member of the family should have some say in family decisions", "My child usually tells me what s/he is thinking about things", "I often say things like; you should always look at both sides of an issue".

Data analysis is measured by Pearson correlation and multiple regression (Hayes, 2013). In order to know the relationship between family income and child empathy, it utilizes the Pearson correlation. The statistical inferences are used to understand the mediating role of family communication pattern between child empathy and family income using the multiple regression. It is important to acknowledge the missing data, which is caused by incomplete filling data and questionnaire by parents, so unlikely to be used in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The means and standard deviations between the main variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, child empathy significantly correlates with family income and conversation orientation of communication pattern. Child empathy negatively correlates with conformity orientation communication pattern.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Child Empathy, Family Income, Conversation Orientation, and Conformity Orientation

No.	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Child Empathy	31,40	4,18	-			
2. Family Income	2,18	1,03	0,26**	-		
3. Conversation Orientation	19,03	2,81	0,27**	-0,03	-	
4. Conformity Orientation	18,87	4,22	-0,26**	-0,23*	0,08	-

Note: ** $p < 0,01$, * $p < 0,05$

Table 1 presents the total scores of the variables and related dimensions (mean scores and standard deviations) of the variables. According to Table 1, child empathy is significantly correlated with family income ($r = 0,26$, $p = 0,00$), conversation orientation ($r = 0,27$, $p = 0,00$), and negatively correlated with conformity orientation ($r = -0,26$, $p = 0,00$). This means that child empathy is positively correlated with both family communication pattern, which is conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Child empathy is also correlated with family income. This shows that when family income is lower and gets conformity orientation, child empathy is also lower. Family income is significantly negatively correlated with conformity orientation ($r = -0,23$, $p = 0,00$) and is not correlated with conversation orientation ($r = -0,03$, $p = 0,61$). Family income does not influence the child empathy of family with conversation orientation.

Analysis of mediation is done by using the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). The statistical analysis has been done bootstrapping to get the representation of sampling distribution, which makes normal theory analysis does not need to be done. Bootstrap respects that irregularity sampling distribution that is more likely to be

accurate than the normal theory approach (Hayes, 2013). SPSS macro Process is used to test mediation for the family communication pattern on children's empathy and family income.

The result indicates that family communication pattern partially mediates the relationship between children's empathy and family income (Table 2). Table 2 explains that family income negatively relates with conformity orientation ($B = -0,94$, $SE = 0,28$) and conformity orientation negatively relates to child's empathy ($B = -0,26$, $SE = 0,06$). Family

income does not correlate with conversation orientation ($B = -0,10$, $SE = 0,19$), and conversation orientation relates positively with child's empathy ($B = 0,43$, $SE = 0,28$). There is a significant indirect relationship between family income and child's empathy through family communication pattern. Figure 1 also shows regression model of child empathy and family income with conversation orientation and conformity.

Table 3 and Table 4 explain further explanation about the correlation. The researchers use one-way ANOVA. The

Table 2 Regression Table Child Empathy and Family Income with Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation as Mediating Role

Variable	M1(Conv)			M2 (Conf)			Y (Empathy)		
	Coeff	SE	P	Coeff	SE	P	Coeff	SE	P
X (FamInc)	-0,10	0,19	0,61	-0,94	0,28	0,00	1,08	0,27	0,00
M1 (Conv)							0,43	0,09	0,00
M2 (Conf)							-0,26	0,06	0,00
Constant	19,20	0,46	0,00	21,06	0,68	0,00	26,23	2,22	0,00
	R2 = 0,00			R2 = 0,05			R2 = 0,20		
	F (1, 208) = 0,26			F (1,208) = 11,20			F (3,206) = 17,59		
	P = 0,61			P = 0,00			P = 0,00		

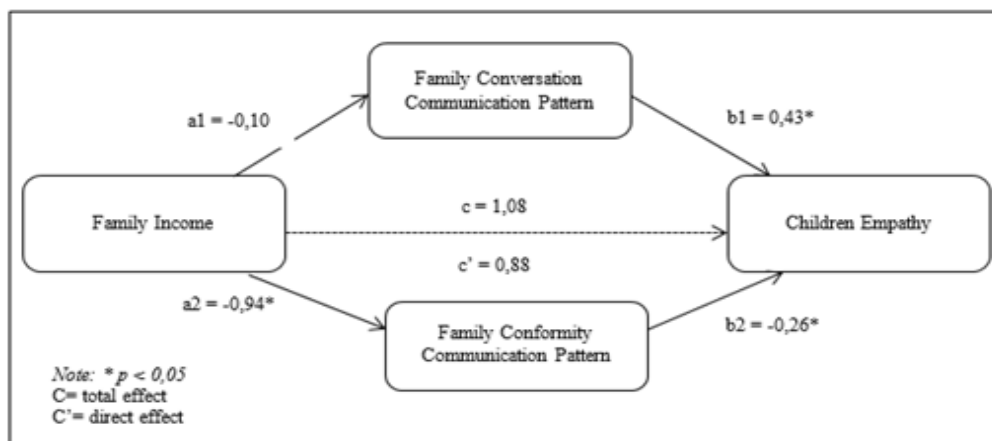


Figure 1 Regression Model of Child Empathy and Family Income with Conversation Orientation and Conformity

Table 3 ANOVA Comparisons Child Empathy and Family Income with Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation as Mediating Role

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Conversation	Between Groups	1,23	3	0,41	0,82	0,484
	Within Groups	103,79	207	0,50		
	Total	105,03	210			
Conformity	Between Groups	11,56	3	3,85	5,61	0,001
	Within Groups	142,78	208	0,69		
	Total	154,34	211			
Child Empathy	Between Groups	284,03	3	94,68	5,72	0,001
	Within Groups	3442,01	208	16,54		
	Total	3726,05	211			

Note: **p < 0,01, * p < 0,05.

Table 4 Tukey Post Hoc Comparisons Child Empathy and Family Income with Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation as Mediating Role

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Conversation	1	60	4,6958	0,80002	2,75	6,00
	2	88	4,8381	0,59697	3,25	6,00
	3	28	4,7202	0,57342	3,50	5,75
	4	35	4,6500	0,87699	2,50	6,00
	Total	211	4,7508	0,70720	2,50	6,00
Conformity	1	61	3,9574	0,83675	2,00	6,00
	2	88	3,9614	0,78892	2,00	6,00
	3	28	3,4071	1,00441	1,20	5,40
	4	35	3,4857	0,75504	2,40	5,60
	Total	212	3,8085	0,85527	1,20	6,00
Child Empathy	1	61	29,7869	4,07887	18,00	38,00
	2	88	31,4773	4,16603	19,00	41,00
	3	28	32,5714	3,86272	24,00	40,00
	4	35	32,9714	3,95181	23,00	38,00
	Total	212	31,3821	4,20226	18,00	41,00

result is presented in Table 3. Due to the significant results obtained through the one-way ANOVA, a posthoc analysis using the Tukey post hoc test is then conducted. The result shows in Table 4. The comparisons result shows that participant on the below family income ($M = 4,0$, $SD = 0,78$) uses more conformity communication pattern than the standard ($M = 3,4$, $SD = 1,0$), and above standard family income ($M = 3,4$, $SD = 0,7$).

There is a statistically significant difference between groups. Tukey post hoc comparisons show that participant on the below standard family income uses more conformity communication pattern than the standard and above standard family income. There is a significant difference for the conformity communication pattern between the family with below standard income and the family with standard and above standard income. There is a significant difference for the child's empathy between family with below standard income and the family with standard and above standard income.

In this research, the researchers examine a mediation model between a child's empathy and family income that is mediated by family communication pattern. The present research shows how important to examine other factors in the family to understand child empathy and all the contributing factors. Children learn from their environment, and the family environment is children most important social learning. Children and parents socialize through communication and transfer through modeling, roleplay, and reinforcement (Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017).

This research reveals three findings. The first finding is that the effects of family income can be partially mediated by the type of family communication pattern that is the conversation and conformity orientation. The second finding is that regardless of the family income, family with conversation orientation communication pattern could have higher child empathy. The third finding also says if a family with low income or higher income but have conversation orientation can have higher child empathy. The last finding is when the family income is low, and they carry interaction between family with conformity orientation communication, then the child empathy is also lower.

Although empathy positively correlates with

family SES and lower SES associated with lower levels of empathy (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2014). This research gives new information that the family communication pattern could mediate child empathy development. When the family has low SES, but the parent share cooperative communication pattern, then child empathy could be higher. When parent could share more clear communication with children, then they would develop more positive emotion. Nonetheless, when the parent and children communicating poorly, then there could be a potential for behavior problem (Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017). This finding correlates with previous research that has stated parents that use inductive reasoning in the parent-child interaction; then they will explain children behaviors. With this kind of interaction and relationship during early childhood, it could improve the children's social and emotional understanding (Scrimgeour et al., 2013).

Previous research shows that when parents model social relationship and give children emotional security in the family, then it would affect the children's pro-social behavior. Pro-social behavior is the behavior outcome of empathy. Given the cooperative co-parenting behavior delivers security for young children so they could also focus on another emotions and behaviors, also develop children perspective-taking skills that are needed for social situations (Scrimgeour et al., 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, it can be concluded that there is a significant mediation between family income and child's empathy through conformity orientation. There is no significant correlation between family income and the child's empathy that is mediated by conversation orientation. It means that developing the family communication pattern towards the conversation orientation can increase a child's empathy regardless of their family income and socioeconomic status.

This research could also be implicated for practices. First of all, interventions can be targeted toward parents who are a risk for conformity orientation of communication

pattern. When parents do not openly discuss ideas and topics with their children, then they could put the children on the risk of developing lower empathy. The researchers could prepare parenting programs that are focused on practicing conversation orientation of communication pattern. Parents could learn about two-ways communication and discuss their decisions. The children could learn by observing their parents, and they will also learn about empathy itself.

When children develop higher empathy, it could lead to more positive emotion, which displays pro-social behavior, and the children's social-emotional is growing more generously. Children development is influenced by their environment, especially their parents. Parents' education also could influence children development. The family communication pattern has the potential to be connected with other parenting schemas, like family communicating behavior, and parenting styles and attachment. From the research, it can be found that there are connections between family environment and children's behavior. So if parents are planning to make an intervention for growing children's empathy, the parents' way of communicating can be done in the conversation pattern. Developing the children's empathy going to be positive for their social-emotional outcomes in the future, because the children learn to express and regulate their emotion in a positive way.

There are some limitations that should be considered. First, this research talks about family, but unfortunately, the information in it is from one of the parents' report (father or mother). For future research, the researchers suggest the research work on finding information from both parents. Other than that, it would get much more information and complete, if future research can get information also from the children. There are still lots of room for future research to conduct from different perspectives, first other than family income, it can include parents' education. Second, future research can focus on family communication pattern. Third, it can focus on research about parents and children empathy. Also, the research could focus on the age and gender of the child.

This study is approved by the Ethical Review Board Faculty of Psychology, Indonesia University. The researchers declare that they have no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Blair, C., McKinnon, R. D., & Daneri, M. P. (2018). Effect of the tools of the mind kindergarten program on children's social and emotional development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 43*(2), 52–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.01.002>.

Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of Family. *Communication Theory, 12*(1), 70-91. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/12.1.70>.

Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2006). Family communication patterns theory: A social cognitive approach. In D. O. Braithwaite & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives* (pp. 50-65). California: Sage Publications, Inc. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452204420.n4>.

Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2016). Understanding family communication patterns and family functioning: The roles of conversation orientation and conformity orientation. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 26*(1), 36–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2002.11679010>.

Odenweller, K. G., & Harris, T. M. (2018). Intergroup socialization: The influence of parents' family communication patterns on adult children's racial prejudice and tolerance. *Communication Quarterly, 66*(5), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2018.1452766>.

Offrey, L. D., & Rinaldi, C. M. (2017). Parent-child communication and adolescents' problem-solving strategies in hypothetical bullying situations. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 22*(3), 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2014.884006>.

Paulus, M., & Leitherer, M. (2017). Preschoolers' social experiences and empathy-based responding relate to their fair resource allocation. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 161*, 202–210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.03.005>.

Paulus, M., & Moore, C. (2017). Preschoolers' generosity increases with understanding of the affective benefits of sharing. *Development Science, 20*(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12417>.

Sabato, H., & Kogut, T. (2019). Feel good, do good? Subjective well-being and sharing behavior among children. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 177*, 335–350. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2018.08.009>.

Sánchez-Pérez, N., Fuentes, L. J., Jolliffe, D., & González-Salinas, C. (2014). Assessing children's empathy through a Spanish adaptation of the basic empathy scale: Parent's and child's report forms. *Frontiers in Psychology, 5*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01438>.

Scrimgeour, M. B., Blandon, A. Y., Stifter, C. A., & Buss, K. A. (2013). Cooperative coparenting moderates the association between parenting practices and children's prosocial behavior. *Journal of Family Psychology, 27*(3), 506–511. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032893>.

Stern, J. A., & Cassidy, J. (2018). Empathy from infancy to adolescence: An attachment perspective on the development of individual differences. *Developmental Review, 47*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2017.09.002>.

Xuan, X., Chen, F., Yuan, C., Zhang, X., Luo, Y., Xue, Y., & Wang, Y. (2018). The relationship between parental conflict and preschool children's behavior problems: A moderated mediation model of parenting stress and child emotionality. *Children and Youth Services Review, 95*, 209–216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.10.021>.