Theory of Mind, Emotion Awareness, and Moral Reasoning: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Children's Prosocial Development in Educational Contexts

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Abstract. Prosocial behavior is one of the most important topics in contemporary research. Researchers examined the relationships between prosocial behavior and Theory of Mind (ToM), emotion awareness and moral reasoning separately; however, there are few studies that explore how these three factors influence prosocial behavior integrated together. This paper focuses on how these three factors influence prosocial behavior in school. Based on scoping reviews, longitudinal studies and meta-analytic evidence, the study shows that ToM helps children to analyze and interpret others' behavior; Emotion awareness develops empathy and regulation; Moral reasoning guides fairness judgment. These three processes together predict children's empathy, cooperation, and moral sensitivity. Subsequently, this paper extends these models into educational context and proposes the strategies for these three aspects in classroom activities, teacher training and peer-based interventions. The study shows that enhancing the ability in these three areas can improve the prosocial climates in schools. Overall, this paper concludes that integrating cognitive, emotional, and moral education is important for promoting empathy, fairness, and social responsibility in children.

Keywords: Prosocial behavior; emotion awareness; moral reasoning; education context; empathy.

1. Introduction

Prosocial behavior, voluntary for the benefit of others, is the foundation of children's moral and social development, linked to better adjustment, peer relationships and classroom climate [1,2] and does not occur in isolation, but is the product of the ongoing interaction of cognitive, emotional and moral process [1,3,4]. Three capacities, Theory of Mind (ToM), emotion awareness and mroal reasoning, are involved.

ToM enables attribution of beliefs, desires, and intentions, supporting perspective-taking and interpretation of others' behavior [5,6].

Emotion awareness, the recognition, labeling, and understanding of one's own and others' emotions provides the cognitive basis for empathy and guides appropriate responses in a context. [7-10].

Moral reasoning supplies the evaluative lens for judging right and wrong, integrating insights from ToM and emotion awareness into intention-sensitive judgments [4,10,11].

While researchers focus on these three core capacities, they also acknowledge a neglected but consequential supporting process: language. As the medium through which children express and negotiate mental and emotional states, language helps connect cognitive perspective-taking with felt understanding. It thus contributes to intention-sensitive judgments and cooperative action [12-14].

This paper proposes an integrative framework showing how ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning jointly shape prosocial behavior in schools, thereby offering insights for enhancing social-emotional education. Moreover, language serves as a developmental bridge between cognitive and emotional understanding [12,13]. Moreover, this study considers implications for educational practices such as social-emotional learning and classroom moral discussions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of Mind and Moral Judgment

2.1.1 Conceptual links between tom and moral cognition

ToM refers to the ability to represent and reason about others' mental states such as beliefs, intentions, and ignorance, and to use those representations when interpreting human actions. Moral cognition involves evaluating right and wrong by integrating intentions, motives, and outcomes through mental state attribution processes, whereas punishment attribution concerns determining whether, and to what extent, a transgressor deserves sanction. Conceptually, ToM provides the cognitive foundation of moral reasoning, allowing children to interpret behavior in terms of intentions rather than mere consequences. As ToM develops, children gradually shift from outcome-based moral judgments (e.g., judging harm solely by its result) to intention-sensitive evaluations that incorporate mental states and motives.

2.1.2 From outcome to intention-based reasoning

Empirical findings consistently indicate that ToM is central to children's ability to understand intentions and to differentiate accidental from deliberate harm. Seucan and Visu-Petra ynthesized research using story-based and vignette paradigms and showed that children with more advanced ToM were more likely to consider an actor's beliefs and motives when judging moral transgressions [15]. In morally relevant false-belief tasks (MoToM), belief reasoning is involved in moral evaluation; children recognize, for instance, that an agent who mistakenly causes harm should not be blamed as severely as one acting with malicious intent. Such results demonstrate that ToM uniquely predicts moral sensitivity after controlling for age, and support the idea that ToM is educationally relevant, i.e., contributes to moral understanding in early school years, and general cognitive ability, which highlights the distinct contribution of mental state reasoning to moral understanding.

2.1.3 ToM and punishment attribution

Beyond moral evaluation, ToM also informs punishment decisions, shaping how children assign blame and determine proportionate sanctions. According to Seucan and Visu-Petra's review, children with stronger ToM tend to link punishment to culpability rather than to the gravity of outcomes alone [15]. Two complementary mechanisms explain this process:

Informational function ToM provides access to morally relevant mental state information (intention, belief, negligence), enriching the informational basis of moral evaluation.Integrative function ToM allows children to balance intentions against outcomes when they conflict and to consider both transgressor and victim perspectives.

2.1.4 Longitudinal evidence in early development

Longitudinal findings further validate the developmental link between ToM and moral cognition. Seucan, Szekely-Copîndean, and Visu-Petra followed 3 to 5-year-olds over 15 months, assessing ToM, emotion understanding, and moral reasoning [11]. Early ToM predicted later improvements in moral judgment and punishment attribution even after controlling for inhibitory control and age. Emotion understanding contributed independently, partially mediating the link between ToM and moral evaluation. Developmental gains particularly in ToM and proportional punishment suggest that expanding mental state competence fosters more intention based moral reasoning and proportionate sanctions, marking ToM as a causal driver rather than a concurrent correlate of moral development.

2.1.5 Summary and transition

Across cross-sectional and longitudinal research, ToM consistently emerges as the cognitive mechanism that enables children to understand others' intentions and to produce intention-sensitive moral judgments. By integrating beliefs, motives, and outcomes, ToM allows children to move beyond outcome-based heuristics toward calibrated evaluations of fairness and responsibility [11,15]. Yet ToM's influence remains primarily cognitive, it explains how children think about morality but

not necessarily how these insights manifest in daily social interactions. The next section therefore turns to ToM and children's social behavior, examining how mental-state reasoning operates within peer contexts of aggression, victimization, and prosocial engagement.

2.2. Theory of Mind and Children's Social Behavior

2.2.1 ToM and social behavior: overall links and pathway assumptions

Across school settings, ToM can be treated as a social cognitive resource that helps children interpret others' intentions and beliefs during everyday exchanges. Conceptually, ToM is expected to promote social adaptation by making children's judgments more intention-sensitive (e.g., distinguishing accidental from deliberate harm), thereby reducing misattributions that fuel conflict and exclusion, and supporting prosocial responding when peers need help. At the same time, ToM is best viewed as a morally neutral tool—capable of supporting both cooperation and manipulation depending on context, whose effects depend on context and complementary skills (e.g., emotion regulation): well developed ToM may facilitate cooperation, whereas insufficient or biased ToM (e.g., outcome-oriented interpretations, misread beliefs) can contribute to misunderstanding and friction.

2.2.2 ToM and aggression, victimization and withdrawal

Evidence from a multi-behavioral longitudinal study of 4 to 7-year-olds using teacher reports revealed nuanced links between ToM and social outcomes (N = 193; three mainstream primary schools in Southeast England) shows behavior specific and gender moderated associations between ToM and teacher rated social behaviors [16]. There was no direct association between ToM and aggression. By contrast, victimization and solitary or withdrawal showed negative links with ToM, and prosocial behavior correlated positively with ToM for girls only. When interrelations among behaviors were modeled, a bidirectional link emerged specifically for boys: solitary behavior predicted ToM, and ToM predicted solitary behavior. Taken together, these patterns suggest that stronger ToM aligns more consistently with lower victimization, particularly among girls who may employ ToM for relational maintenance. (and fewer exclusion prone dynamics) than with reduced aggression per se; they also underscore the need to parse proactive vs reactive aggression and to use multi-informant data in future work.

2.2.3 ToM and prosocial behavior

Within the same early childhood sample, prosocial behavior showed a positive association with ToM for girls, consistent with the idea that ToM facilitates perspective-taking and intention-sensitive helping [15,16]. Although the effect was not uniform across sexes, these findings position ToM as a plausible cognitive scaffold for prosocial engagement in classroom interactions.

2.2.4 Middle childhood and adolescence: peer relationships and social status

Beyond early childhood, theory and evidence converge on a reciprocal view: as peer ecologies become more complex, young people both require and cultivate more advanced ToM to manage friendship quality, group norms, conflict resolution, and status processes (e.g., acceptance, centrality, and network navigation) [6]. Richer peer interaction, in turn, feeds back to strengthen ToM over time. Framed this way, ToM supports inclusion and cooperation but can also if underdeveloped or misapplied contribute to misinterpretations that harm relationships. This bidirectional account motivates longitudinal, multiwave designs and classroom practices that elicit authentic perspective taking in real peer dilemmas.

In sum, ToM shows differential links with behavior: it is more reliably tied to lower victimization or withdrawal (and, for girls, higher prosociality) than to reduced aggression. However, correlations between ToM and behavior are not sufficient to explain social adaptation.

2.3. Theory of Mind, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior

2.3.1 Overall effects: impact of ToM on prosocial behavior

A recent meta-analysis reports a moderate positive association between ToM and prosocial behavior and a stronger association for empathy and PsB (r = .36, 95% CI [.30, .41]) [17]. ToM and PsB links were broadly robust across age, PsB measures, and culture, although cultural norms mayshape the expression of helping behaviors (only borderline moderation by ToM task), whereas empathy and PsB links were moderated by age, PsB measurement, and cultural background.

2.3.2 Mechanism: the mediating role of empathy and emotion understanding

Meta-analytic results show that both ToM and empathy relate positively to prosocial behavior, consistent with a pathway in which ToM facilitates accurate mental-state construal and perspective-taking, which in turn supports empathic responding that motivates helping [17]. Longitudinal evidence complements this picture: in a study following children from age 5 to 7, ToM at 5 years uniquely predicted later prosocial behavior (controlling for age, verbal ability, and prior prosociality), while emotion understanding (EU) at 7 years showed a concurrent positive link with prosociality for girls [16]. It was interpreted as consistent with EU at 7 drawing on earlier ToM skills, suggesting a temporal sequencing from mental state understanding to emotion based responding that can undergird prosocial action [16].

2.3.3 Gender-differentiated pathways: longitudinal evidence

Kuhnert et al. found that ToM at 5 years predicted prosocial behavior at 7 years for the whole sample (boys and girls alike), indicating a gender general longitudinal effect of ToM [16]. However, gender differences emerged for the emotion pathway possibly reflecting differential socialization practices encouraging empathy in girls: at 7 years, girls' prosocial behavior was positively associated with EU, whereas boys' prosocial behavior was not [16]. This pattern suggests gender differentiated routes to prosociality. ToM confers a broad cognitive advantage over time, while EU and empathy contribute more strongly to girls' concurrent prosocial acts in middle childhood. Meta-analytic moderation by gender was not a focal moderator in Qiu et al. 's abstracted results, so current gender specific conclusions rest primarily on the longitudinal evidence [16,17].

2.3.4 Methodological considerations: measures, task types, cultural samples

Measurement matters, as the strength of associations varies depending on how ToM and prosociality are operationalized. Qiu et al. note that the association of ToM and PsB was broadly robust across age and culture, with only borderline moderation by the type of ToM task; for empathy and PsB, however, age, how PsB was measured, and cultural background significantly moderated effects [17]. This implies that operationalizations (e.g., advanced ToM vs. composite ToM batteries; teacher-reported vs. self-reported prosociality) and sample context systematically shape effect sizes. Design also matters, as longitudinal approaches can better reveal casual pathways between ToM and prosociality than cross-sectional designs. Kuhnert et al. employed observed prosocial behavior in triadic peer interactions and repeated ToM and EU assessments at 5 and 7 years, enabling stronger temporal inferences than cross sectional designs and revealing gender specific concurrent links for EU at age 7 [16].

2.3.5 Synthesis: toward the integrative model and educational implications

ToM reliably (though modestly) predicts PsB, while empathy or EU show stronger concurrent associations and likely bridge social cognitive understanding to prosocial action [17]. Interventions that build ToM (e.g., perspective-taking in ambiguous-intent contexts) should be evaluated longitudinally to assess sustained behavioral change, And explicitly cultivate empathy or EU (e.g., emotion labeling, victim perspective work) should enhance intention-sensitive prosocial responding, with attention to gender-specific pathways in middle childhood.

2.4. Empathy, Language, and Prosocial Development

2.4.1 Scope and focus

This section examines how language ability functions as a developmental bridge between ToM and empathy in predicting children' s prosocial behavior. While ToM provides the cognitive capacity to represent others' beliefs and intentions, empathy and emotion awareness provide the affective motivation for helping. Language links these domains by enabling children to label, communicate, and negotiate mental and emotional states, thus supporting the transition from understanding others' minds to caring about others' feelings [18,19].

2.4.2 Empirical landscape

Empirical research has demonstrated both direct and indirect pathways from language to prosocial behavior. Longobardi et al. examined a total of 240 children from three primary schools in the urban area of Rome [18]. They were 127 boys and 113 girls attending Grades 3 (n = 83), 4 (n = 71) and 5 (n = 86) grades. This study found that higher expressive and receptive language skills were associated with greater empathy and, in turn, higher teacher rated prosociality. Structural equation modeling revealed that empathy partially mediated the language – prosocial link, suggesting that linguistic competence facilitates emotional understanding by enabling nuanced emotional labeling and socially adaptive responding. In parallel, studies using Chinese preschool samples indicate that children with stronger ToM and verbal abilities exhibit higher moral sensitivity and empathy, which together predict more frequent prosocial behaviors such as sharing and comforting [19]. Together, these findings indicate that language operates not merely as a communicative tool but as a developmental mechanism integrating cognitive, emotional, and moral growth.

2.4.3 Mechanism: language as a cognitive emotional bridge

Language supports prosocial development through two complementary mechanisms:

Cognitive pathway: Language enriches mental-state vocabulary (e.g., 'think,' 'believe,' 'want'), which enhances ToM reasoning and perspective-taking [12]. Emotional pathway: Language enables children to express and regulate emotions, fostering empathy and reducing social misunderstandings [14].

Through these intertwined pathways, linguistic competence helps integrate ToM with empathy, fostering coordinated social behavior. Essentially, children who can verbalize feelings and intentions are more capable of transforming internal understanding into external prosocial action.

2.4.4 Cultural and gender differences

Cultural and gender factors modulate these language, empathy and prosocial links. Longobardi et al. observed that girls showed stronger empathy mediated effects of language on prosocial behavior, possibly reflecting greater social orientation and verbal expression [18]. In Chinese social environment, Du et al. found that collectivist norms emphasizing harmony might enhance the emotional and moral functions of language, therefore children are encouraged to express understanding and concern in socially appropriate ways [19]. These patterns suggest that while the cognitive foundations of ToM and language are universal, the expression and social value of empathy vary across cultural and gendered contexts.

2.4.5 Summary and transition

Overall, Language functions as a communicative bridge that facilitates the translation of cognitive insights into emotionally attuned social actions. By facilitating both perspective-taking and empathic expression, linguistic competence allows ToM and empathy to interact dynamically in guiding moral and cooperative behavior [18,19]. These findings reinforce the view that ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning function as interdependent systems, a principle that carries significant implications for educational interventions.

2.5. Educational Implications of Integrating ToM, Emotion Awareness, and Moral Reasoning

2.5.1 Scope and focus

This discussion section translates the integrative framework of ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning into practical insights for educational contexts. The framework emphasizes that children's prosocial development relies on the dynamic coordination of cognitive, emotional, and moral processes, rather than on any single domain in isolation. Schools provide an ideal environment for developing these interdependent skills, with teachers facilitating perspective-taking, emotional communication, and moral reflection through structured social learning activities. In line with work that connects moral emotions and moral cognition to prosocial outcomes in educational contexts, researchers focus on actionable implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and peer-focused interventions [10].

2.5.2 Integrative framework for socio-emotional and moral learning

The framework assumes three interacting strands:

Cognitive strand (ToM). Children learn to infer and compare perspectives, intentions, and beliefs. Perspective-taking reduces misattribution of hostile intent and scaffolds fair interpretation of peer behaviour by promoting situational analysis and emotional empathy.

Affective strand (emotion awareness). Children identify and label emotions in self and others, regulate arousal, and cultivate empathic concern—capacities that motivate prosocial actions such as helping and comforting others.

Normative strand (moral reasoning). Children evaluate actions by integrating motives and outcomes, deliberate about fairness, and consider proportionate responses to wrongdoing.

Educationally, the strands are reciprocal: accurate perspective-taking (ToM) makes emotional attunement more targeted; emotional literacy renders perspective-taking motivationally relevant; and moral conversation organises both into actionable norms (e.g., restitution, inclusive choices). This reciprocal design echoes the view that moral emotions and moral cognition jointly underpin prosocial behaviour in schools [10].

2.5.3 Educational practices and classroom applications

Applying this framework to education, researchers suggest three levels of intervention, such as classroom activities, teacher practices, and peer-focused interventions.

Perspective-taking and emotional literacy in classroom activities.

Cooperative learning games, classroom stories and peer discussion can be integrated with ToM and emotion awareness training to help children become more socially understanding and caring. Role-playing moral dilemmas or 'emotion talk' sessions encourages children to interpret others' intentions, express feelings, and take others' views into consideration. These designs reflect Selfe's call for linking moral emotions (e.g., guilt, empathic concern) to reasoned judgment, promoting prosocial dispositions in educational settings [10].

2.5.4 Teacher training and mental state talk.

Teachers play a pivotal role in modeling socio-cognitive language by using reflective dialogue and open-ended questions. Training programs should emphasize 'mental state talk,' where educators regularly use and encourage language describing thoughts, feelings, and motives (e.g., 'Why do you think she felt hurt?'). At the same time, dialogic moral reasoning can not be missed. Teachers facilitate open, non-punitive discussion after conflicts, guiding students to weigh intentions and outcomes and to device proportionate repairs (apology, restitution, inclusion) to reach a solution. These approaches operationalise Selfe's recommendation that educators should be explicitly trained to model and expect the interplay of moral emotions and moral reasoning to build prosocial climates [10].

2.5.5 Peer-focused interventions: practice in authentic social exchanges

Cooperative learning with role rotation. Rotating roles (explainer, summariser, harmoniser) distributes perspective-taking and emotion-monitoring responsibilities, so ToM and emotion skills are practised in authentic social tasks.

Restorative micro-conferences. Brief, structured peer dialogues after minor harm events walk students through: what happened → what each intended/felt → who was affected → what repair fits.

Peer norms for inclusion. Class-generated norms (e.g., 'invite, check-in, repair') make prosocial responses visible and expected, facilitating inclusive values throughout the broader school community.

2.5.6 Cultural and contextual implications

Cultural norms affect how ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning appear in educational settings. In collectivist cultures such as China, social harmony, respect for authority, and relational interdependence shape children's moral understanding and emotional expression. Educational interventions must therefore be culturally adaptive, for example by integrating collaborative storytelling and empathy workshops that balance individual empathy with communal responsibility. For instance, cooperative learning and group reflection activities can both match collective values while promoting perspective-taking and compassion.

Gender socialization moderates these developmental processes by influencing how boys and girls are socialized to express empathy and moral reasoning. Research indicates that girls may display stronger empathy-mediated loops between ToM and prosocial behavior, possibly because they are more verbally expressive and as a result socialized to play nurturing roles [18]. Being aware of these differences can help teachers adapt their approaches. For example, girls may benefit from more opportunities for emotional discussion and moral reasoning without the stigma of being seen as 'weak'.

Thus, effective application of this framework requires sensitivity to cultural, social, and gendered factors. Prosocial education must be flexible enough to respect local values while promoting universal principles of empathy, fairness, and mutual understanding [18].

2.5.7 Summary and future directions

An educational approach that coordinates ToM (cognitive understanding), emotion awareness (affective motivation), and moral reasoning (normative guidance) provides a coherent route to enhancing prosocial behaviour at school. The practical strategies above classroom activities, teacher practices, and peer-focused interventions are aligned with the perspective that moral emotions and moral cognition should be taught together to maintain prosocial dispositions [10]. Future work in schools can extend these three components beyond the activities immediately surrounding a classroom by developing longitudinal programs aimed at tracking the coordinated gains made across the three strands and whether these generalize to more stable, sustained prosocial school climates.

3. Discussion

The existing literature presents a consistent pattern: empirical evidence from both exploratory and longitudinal studies indicate that ToM and emotion understanding jointly predict children's moral evaluations and punishment attributions [11,15]. Specifically, when judging violations, children with more advanced ToM show greater sensitivity to intent, and emotional understanding enhances their empathetic responses and makes moral judgments more in line with the context. The longitudinal research results further reveal that the improvement of ToM precedes that of moral reasoning, indicating that the cognitive understanding of mental states lays the foundation for the moral integration of emotions and values. This evidence highlights the prosocial development is best explained by interconnected mechanisms rather than isolated traits.

Although the current synthesis focuses on how socio-cognitive and emotional competencies promote prosocial behavior, it is also significant to recognize the opposite side of this developmental system. Limitations in ToM, emotion awareness, or moral reasoning can lead to aggressive or antisocial behavior. When children misunderstand others' intentions or fail to control emotions, the resulting frustration and impulsiveness may lead to conflict. Evidence shows that lower ToM and emotion understanding are associated with higher aggression and social withdrawal [20]. Given that aggression and prosociality are opposite manifestations of the same developmental system, the functional significance of integrating cognitive, emotional, and moral competencies.

From a theoretical perspective, this synthesis expands the literature in two aspects. Firstly, it demonstrates that ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning operate not hierarchical but interact with each other: growth in one domain promotes improvements in the others. Second, the review places these relationships within real world contexts such as classrooms, where moral reasoning and emotion abilities are practiced through social interaction and peer collaboration. The integration of cognitive and emotional processes represents a dynamic developmental system that supports moral understanding and prosocial behavior.

Future research should expand this framework through three directions.

Longitudinal developmental studies are needed to trace interaction pathways among ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning over time, determining sensitive developmental periods when targeted interventions may be most effective.

Cross-cultural survey can test the universality of these mechanisms and exam how social and cultural norms, such as collectivist emphases on social harmony versus individualist emphases on autonomy, shape the balance between cognitive perspective-taking, empathic concern, and moral reasoning.

Designs based on experiments and interventions should evaluate comprehensive training programs to enhance mental state reasoning, emotional literacy, and moral reflection in educational settings. These intervention measures can determine whether the results of cross-disciplinary coordination can have a broader and more lasting impact on prosocial behavior.

Overall, this study supports a prosocial development integration model, in which understanding thoughts, managing emotions, and reasoning about moral norms are combined to guide children's ethical and cooperative behavior. Advancing research will not only clarify the developmental framework of prosocial behavior but also inform educational practices aimed at early empathy, fairness, and moral responsibility from early childhood. Ultimately, promoting children's ability to think, feel, and reason with others provides a foundation for building a more compassionate and socially cohesive society.

4. Conclusion

This review has synthesized evidence on how ToM, emotion awareness, and moral reasoning interact to support the development of prosocial behavior in childhood. Collectively, these domains constitute a multidimensional socio-cognitive and affective system that enables children to understand, interpret, and respond constructively to others' experiences. This article emphasizes that prosocial behavior is not the result of a single capacity, but rather the product of the dynamic interaction among cognitive, emotional and moral processes. ToM provides the cognitive basis for recognizing and reasoning about others' beliefs and intentions; emotion awareness facilitates the recognition, regulation, and communication of affective states; and moral reasoning integrates both cognitive and emotional information into principled judgments and actions. However, the current research is still scattered, mostly focusing on a single factor or specific cultural context. Educationally, this paper proposes to build an integrated framework of social emotional and moral education, and cultivate students' ability of perspective taking, emotional reading and moral reflection in classroom teaching, teacher training and peer interaction activities. Together, these processes develop the child's

abilities for empathy, fairness, and cooperation which are the crucial components of prosocial functioning in both interpersonal and educational contexts.

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