



“Hush, Baby”: Relations between Toddlers’ Emotion Understanding & Responses to Other Children’s Emotions

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BACKGROUND

- Children begin to understand & use adults’ emotions between 9 and 15 months of age
- However, it is not clear when they begin to understand and use their peers’ emotions
- Children begin to show empathic responses to adults in distress by 14 - 18 months of age
- However, they do not systematically display empathy towards peers until later, despite earlier interest in peers

HYPOTHESES

- Understanding of other children’s emotions and empathic responding to another child’s distress develop in parallel over the second year of life
- Children who are more advanced in one of these skills may be more advanced in the other

PARTICIPANTS

Social referencing:	Empathy:
12 mos (N= 19)	12 mos (N= 19)
18 mos (N=17)	18 mos (N= 16)
24 mos (N=17)	24 mos (N= 19)

PROCEDURES

Peer Social Referencing

Emotion presentation (20 sec video)

- 6-yr-old child; 2 neutral toys
- Trial 1:* Neutral affect toward one toy
- Trial 2:* Positive or Negative affect toward one toy
 - Toys and sides counterbalanced

Play period (30 secs)

- After each trial

Measures

- Target Touch: Touch to target toy (duration)
- Peer Emotion Responsiveness Score: Touch to target toy following emotion – Touch to target toy following neutral affect (duration difference)



PROCEDURES

Empathic Response to Baby

- Realistic-looking baby doll
 - On high cart, out of toddler’s reach
 - Audiotaped crying or neutral sounds
 - 30 secs
- Condition 1:* Distress
- Condition 2:* Neutral
 - Order counterbalanced



Measures

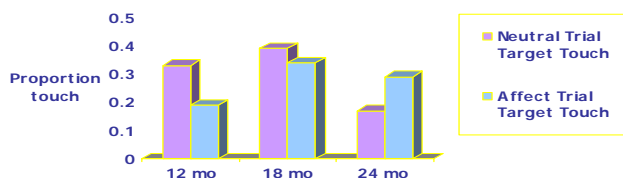
- Number Empathic Responses (stop play, look, point, talk/label baby, approach, ask to see baby, offer toy to baby)
- Baby Emotion Responsiveness Score: Empathic responses to crying baby – Empathic responses to neutral baby (frequency difference)

CONCLUSIONS

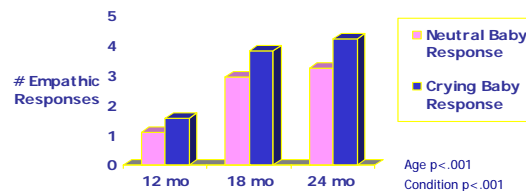
- Children’s interest in and responsiveness to other children’s emotions increases over the second year of life
- Toddlers respond increasingly to an infant’s vocally conveyed emotions, and distinguish between neutral and distressed affect
- By the 2nd birthday, toddlers play more with a toy toward which an older peer displayed affect than with a toy toward which a peer showed only neutral attention
- Toddlers who are responsive to other children’s emotions in one context (i.e. social referencing), are also more likely to respond to peers’ emotions in another (i.e., displaying empathy)
- At every age, children who are more responsive to a crying baby than a neutral baby are also more responsive to a toy toward which an older child has displayed negative affect compared to a neutral-affect toy
- Future research should address possible contributors to this individual difference in emotional responsiveness to peers as well as possible sequelae

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Did children respond more to the toy that the peer emoted toward than the neutral toy?



Did children respond more to the crying baby than the neutral baby?



Were children who were more responsive to a crying baby also more responsive to a peers’ affect about a toy?

	Baby Emotion Responsiveness	Baby Emotion Responsiveness (age controlled)
Positive Peer Emotion Responsiveness (N=18)	.11	.13
Negative Peer Emotion responsiveness (N=15)	.62*	.51#

* = $p < .05$
= $p < .10$