



# Baby, I feel your pain: Development of toddlers' empathic responses to a peer's distress

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## BACKGROUND

- Early reactions to others' distress may arise from emotion contagion (Hoffman, 1975)
- More mature empathy emerges and develops over the second year of life (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner & Chapman, 1992)
- Toddlers respond unreliably to peers' distress (Caplan & Hay, 1989; Lamb & Zakhireh, 1997; Spinrad & Stifter, 2006)
- Empathy requires internal state understanding, which develops over the second year of life (Brownell, Ramani & Zerwas, 2006)
- Developmental course of toddlers' responses to a peer's distress is unknown

## HYPOTHESIS

Responses to a peer's distress will develop from *contagious distress* to *interest* to *empathic concern* over the second year

## PARTICIPANTS

12-, 18-, and 24-month-olds  
N=71 in total

## PROCEDURE

### Response to Crying Baby

#### Realistic-looking baby doll

- On high cart, out of toddler's reach
- Baby toys available on cart within toddler's reach

#### E brings Baby into room where toddler was playing

- Turns on hidden audiotope of crying baby
- E leaves room for 1 minute



### Coding

#### Behaviors

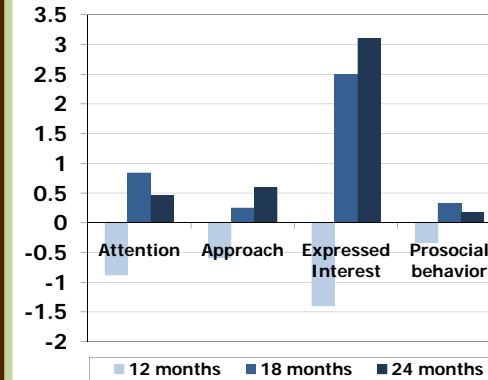
- Four composites (z-scores):
  1. Passive Attention (look, stop play)
  2. Approach (approach, proximity)
  3. Expressed Interest (point, label, call attention, label emotion expression)
  4. Prosocial (hand toys)

#### Ratings: Distress & Concern

- Personal Distress (e.g., crying, fear/wariness, freezing)
- Empathic Concern (e.g., concerned facial or vocal expression)
- Scoring: 0 (none) - 3 (pronounced, prolonged)

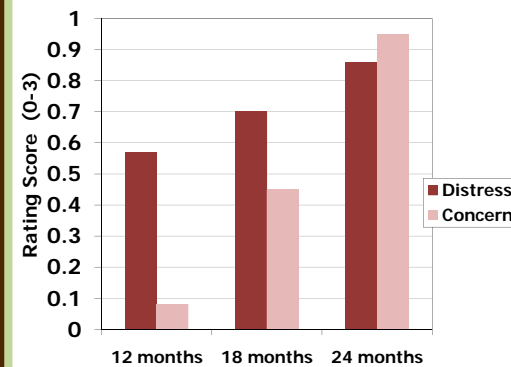
## RESULTS

Fig 1. Behaviors Toward Crying Baby



Attention: 12 mos < 18 mos = 24 mos  
Approach: 12 mos < 18 mos = 24 mos  
Interest: 12 mos < 18 mos < 24 mos  
Prosocial: 12 mos < 18 mos = 24 mos

Fig 2. Distress & Concern Toward Baby



Distress: 12 mos = 18 mos = 24 mos  
Concern: 12 mos < 18 mos < 24 mos  
 (75% of 18-mo-olds had 0 concern)

## CONCLUSIONS

- 12-month-olds show relatively little interest or concern when they hear a crying infant
  - May become somewhat distressed themselves
- 18-month-olds begin to show interest in crying infant
  - 18- and 24-month-olds did not differ for Attention, Approach, or Prosocial behavior
  - Relatively low concern at 18 months
- 24-month-olds expressed interest *and* concern
  - Pointed or called attention
  - Rated as significantly more concerned than either 12- or 18-month olds

*Over the second year, toddlers move from contagion, to interest, and finally empathic concern for a peer in distress.*

## References

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