Baby, I feel your pain: Development of toddlers’ empathic responses to a peer’s distress
Sara Nichols, Margarita Svetlova, Catie Henderson, Maryam Khatami, Elizabeth Posti & Celia Brownell
University of Pittsburgh

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

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 audiotape 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

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

Contact: Sara Nichols, srn1@pitt.edu
Psychology Department, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Fig 1. Behaviors Toward Crying Baby
Fig 2. Distress & Concern Toward Baby

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