



# Development of Empathy toward Peers in the Second Year of Life



Margarita Svetlova, Sara Nichols, Celia A. Brownell, Hilarie Stern, Stephanie Sivers, & Emily Yarrison  
University of Pittsburgh



## BACKGROUND

- By 18-24 months, toddlers begin to respond to peers as social partners and to share goals (Brownell et al, 2006)
- However, they don't respond reliably to peers' distress, esp. in natural settings, often becoming aggressive or distressed themselves rather than empathic (Caplan & Hay, 1989)
- In a laboratory study, 18-month-olds attended to a crying "baby" (realistic doll) held by an adult, and 10% of them attempted to comfort the baby when asked by the adult to do so (Spinrad & Stifter, 2006)

## QUESTIONS

- When do children begin to respond empathically to peer distress without being asked?
- How does empathic responding to peer distress change with age?
- Are toddlers' responses to peer distress based on ordinary interest? Or do they discriminate a peer's negative and positive affect, and respond empathically only to negative affect?

## METHODS

### Participants

- 12-month-olds ( $N = 21$ )
- 18-month-olds ( $N = 17$ )
- 24-month-olds ( $N = 19$ )

### Procedure

#### "Baby" distress

- Realistic-looking baby doll
  - Swaddled, out of child's reach
  - Audiotaped crying
- 30 sec.

#### "Happy baby"

- Same as above
- Audiotaped happy sounds (babble, coo)



All children received all conditions

- Interspersed with other tasks
- Experimenter not present, parent busy with questionnaires
- Distressed/Happy Baby counterbalanced

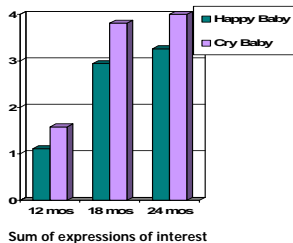
### Measures

Expressions of concerned interest (0 – 6)

- Stop play
- Look at baby
- Point to baby
- Label, talk about baby
- Approach baby
- Offer toy to baby



## Overall responsiveness



## RESULTS

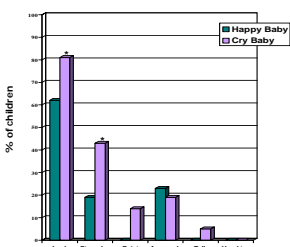
- All infants responded more to the crying than happy baby
- 18- & 24-month-olds responded more often to another infant's emotion than did 12-month-olds
- 12-month-olds looked and pointed at the crying baby more often than the happy baby
- 18-month-olds pointed at, talked about and offered a toy to the crying baby more often than the happy baby
- 24-month-olds stopped their play for the crying baby more often & pointed at and talked about the crying baby more often than the happy baby

## CONCLUSIONS

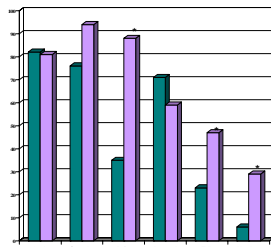
- Empathy and prosocial responses to peers' emotions emerge during the second year of life
- Over the second year the range of toddlers' responses grows significantly, with increased verbal and prosocial behavior toward a distressed peer
- Even very young toddlers respond differently to another infant's positive/negative affect

## Individual behaviors by age

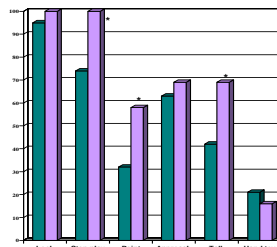
### 12 mos



### 18 mos



### 24 mos



\* Wilcoxon,  $p < .05$

## References

- Brownell, Ramani & Zerwas (2006). Becoming a social partner with peers: cooperation and social understanding in one- and two-year-olds. *Child Development*, 77, 803-821
- Caplan & Hay (1989). Preschoolers' responses to peers' distress and beliefs about bystander intervention. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 30, 231-242.
- Spinrad & Stifter (2006). Toddlers' empathy-related responding to distress: predictions from negative emotionality and maternal behavior in infancy. *Infancy*, 10 (2), 97-121

For more information: Margarita Svetlova, Psychology Department, U. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260 <mas53@pitt.edu>