“Cry, Baby, Cry”: Do Toddlers Respond to Infants’ Distress?
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BACKGROUND
- Empathic concern emerges early in the second year
  - 13-15 month-olds respond to mother’s distress by patting or hugging (Zahn-Waxler et al, 1992)
- But when witnessing other children’s distress, toddlers become aggressive or distressed themselves rather than empathic (Caplan & Hay, 1989)
  - Most studies of toddlers’ empathy to peers are naturalistic, with few controls

STUDY GOALS
- Investigate toddlers’ empathic responses in lab, controlling for type and duration of distress episode
  - Age differences over 2nd year
  - Individual differences
- Investigate responses to adult distress vs. another infant’s distress
  - Compare responses to distressed infant vs. happy infant
  - Are responses to another infant emotion-specific?

PARTICIPANTS
- 12-month-olds (N = 19)
- 18-month-olds (N = 16)
- 24-month-olds (N = 19)

TASKS & MEASURES

Caregiver distress
- Caregiver simulated distress to hurt finger for 30 sec. (from Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992)

“Baby” distress
- Realistic-looking baby doll
  - Swaddled
  - On high cart, out of reach
  - Audiorecorded crying
- Proportion of children who attempted to comfort parent

Procedure
- Infants received all conditions
  - Interspersed with other tasks
  - Caregiver distress first
  - Distressed/Happy Baby counterbalanced

Measures
- Caregiver: Attempts to comfort (Y/N)
- Baby: Expressions of concerned interest (0 - 7)
  - Stop play
  - Look at baby
  - Point to baby
  - Label, talk about baby
  - Approach baby
  - Ask to see baby
  - Offer toy to baby

RESULTS

Age differences
- 24-month-olds > 12- or 18-month-olds (p < .05)

Infant emotion
- 18- & 24-month-olds > 12 month olds (p < .001)
- Crying > Happy (p < .001)

Individual Differences
- Concern for Infant (correlation, age partialled)
  - Comfort Caregiver .59
  - Concern for Infant (0-7): (sum concerned interest)
  - Comfort Caregiver (y/n): (prop who comforted)
  - Older Sibs 3.7 .6
  - No/ Yngr Sibs 1.9 0

RESULTS SUMMARY
- 24-month-olds were more likely to comfort a distressed caregiver than were 12- or 18-month-olds
- 18- & 24-month-olds responded more often to another infant’s emotion than did 12 month olds
- All infants responded more to the crying than the happy baby
- Toddlers who were more responsive to caregiver distress were also more responsive to another infant’s emotion
- Toddlers with older siblings were more responsive both to caregiver distress and to another infant’s emotions

CONCLUSIONS
- Children’s responsiveness to both adults’ and other children’s emotions increases over the second year of life
- Even very young toddlers distinguish between another infant’s positive and negative affect & respond differently
- Individual differences in toddlers’ responsiveness to emotion emerge early, are consistent across emotion contexts, and may be due, in part, to social experiences with emotion-rich social exchanges, like those with older siblings

REFERENCES