



"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
 - ♦ Are responses to another infant emotion-specific?
- 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 ($N = 19$)

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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
 - ♦ Audiotaped crying
- 30 sec.

"Happy baby"

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

Procedure

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

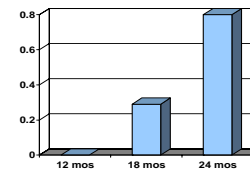
Measures

- 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

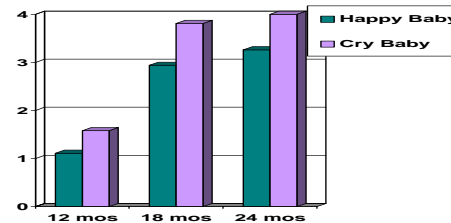
Caregiver distress



Proportion of children who attempted to comfort parent

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

Infant emotion



Summary score of indices of concerned interest

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

Individual Differences

| | Concern for Infant (correlation, age partialled) |
|-------------------|---|
| Comfort Caregiver | .59 ($p < .05$) |

| | Concern for Infant (0-7) (sum concerned interest) | Comfort Caregiver (y/n) (prop who comforted) |
|---------------|--|---|
| Older Sibs | 3.7 ($p < .10$) | .6 ($p < .06$) |
| No/Young 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

Caplan, M., & Hay, D. F. (1989). Preschoolers' responses to peers' distress and beliefs about bystander intervention. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 30, 231-242.
Zahn-Waxler, C., et al. (1992). Development of concern for others. *Developmental Psychology*, 28(1), 126-136.