



# “What Does She Need to Make Her Happy?”: Relations Between Parental Emotion Language and Toddlers’ Prosocial Responsiveness

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## BACKGROUND

Understanding others’ emotions is a necessary prerequisite for empathic and prosocial responding (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992; Ensor & Hughes, 2005)

Parents facilitate the development of toddlers’ emotion understanding by using mental state/emotion language

(Denham et al., 1994; Laible, 2004; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006, 2008) :

label emotions/mental states for children (emotion language production)

ask or prompt children to label and interpret emotions/mental states (emotion language elicitation)

- Predicts children’s empathy (Garner, 2003)



## Questions

How does parental emotion language relate to toddlers’ understanding of another’s goals and emotions and to early prosocial responsiveness?

What are the relative contributions of parental emotion language production vs. elicitation?

How do these contributions change between 18 and 30 months of age?

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS:

18-month-olds (N=30), 30-month-olds (N=30), and their parents (N=60)

### PROCEDURES:

#### I. Helping Tasks

assessed child’s prosocial responsiveness



- Child has to infer an adult’s need and provide the needed object (e.g., adult is cold & needs a blanket, or is sad & needs a comforting toy)

- 3 conditions (3 tasks in each), increasingly complex:

- 1) Action – object needed to complete E’s interrupted action
- 2) Emotion – object needed to alleviate E’s negative emotion
- 3) Altruism – child’s own object needed to alleviate E’s negative emotion



- Prosocial Behavior Score assigned for each task based on how soon the child helped

#### II. Parent-Child Book Reading Task

assessed parents’ emotion-related language

- Parents read two wordless books with child, featuring people and animals in emotion-inducing situations (e.g., a boy drops an ice cream cone and cries)

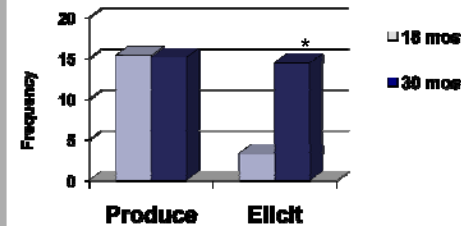
- Parental language scored for:

- Emotion language production (labeling or explaining emotions, e.g. “He’s sad”)
- Emotion language elicitation (asking the child to label or explain emotions, e.g., “How does he feel?”)



## RESULTS

### Age Differences: Parental Emotion Talk



### Parental Emotion Talk Relates to Children’s Helping: 18-month-olds

	Action-related helping	Emotion-related helping	Altruism-related helping
Parent emotion language: Production	.40 *	-.09	-.07
Parent emotion language: Elicitation	.10	.22†	.09

Child language controlled (CDI)

\*  $p < .05$   
†  $p < .10$

- ❖ For 18-month-olds, the only significant correlation was between parents’ emotion language production and children’s helping in the Action condition

### Parental Emotion Talk Relates to Children’s Helping: 30-month-olds

	Action-related helping	Emotion-related helping	Altruism-related helping
Parent emotion language: Production	.04	.19	.26
Parent emotion language: Elicitation	.39 *	.34 *	.42 *

Maternal talk unrelated to child CDI

- ❖ For 30-month-olds, prosocial behavior was correlated with parents’ emotion language elicitation, but not production, in all 3 conditions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Parents’ emotion language relates to toddlers’ prosocial responding

Parents adjust their emotion talk to children’s developmental level

18- and 30-month-olds respond differently to parent production and elicitation of emotion language

Parent production of emotion talk may be an effective strategy for drawing 18-month-olds’ attention to others’ emotions

- Labeling & explaining emotions may enhance very early social understanding & prosocial behavior

Parent elicitation of emotion talk is a more advanced strategy that 30-month-olds are receptive to

- Calling on older children to make inferences about others’ emotions & to produce own explanations may help them reason about causes of others’ emotions & how to change them

## References

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