Development of Empathy toward Peers in the Second Year of Life

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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)

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

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

REFERENCES

Spinrad & Stifter (2006). Toddlers’ empathy-related responding to distress: predictions from negative emotionality and maternal behavior in infancy. Infantcy, 10 (2), 97-121

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