“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 & Buffalo, 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 (Garnier, 2003)

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 Related to Children’s Helping: 18-month-olds

Parent Emotion language:
- Production
  - Action-related helping: .40
  - Emotion-related helping: -.09
  - Altruism-related helping: -.07
- Elicitation
  - Action-related helping: .10
  - Emotion-related helping: .22
  - Altruism-related helping: .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 Related to Children’s Helping: 30-month-olds

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

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?

References


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