From Feelings to Actions: Emotion Understanding and Prosocial Behavior in Toddlers

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**Background**

- Early helping behavior relates to emotion-word comprehension and concern for a victim of harm (Newton et al. 2014; Vaish et al. 2009).
- Toddlers can interpret emotions before they can articulate them (Chiarella & Poulin-Dubois 2013, Vallotton 2008).
- Does a non-verbal assessment of emotion understanding relate to prosocial behavior?

**Participants**

- 16 mos (n=45; $M_{age}=15.64$, SD=.88 )
- 22 mos (n=13; $M_{age}=22.31$, SD=2.36 )

**Procedure**

- 2 conditions (Happy, Sad)
- 4 video vignettes per condition conveying emotional situations
  - Trial 1 = Nonsocial (playing alone with ball/hurting finger)
  - Trials 2 – 4 = Social (hug/hit, share/steal, help/hinder)
- Looking time (LT) coded to happy/sad face on either side of computer after each vignette
- Instrumental helping task (coded 1 – 5 based on when child helped)

**Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Differences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older toddlers helped more quickly than younger toddlers (p=.052)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younger toddlers looked more to sad face in both conditions (p=.001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older toddlers looked at both faces equally in both conditions</td>
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</tbody>
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**Conclusions**

- Nonverbal emotion understanding relates to faster instrumental helping by the end of the second year
  - Older toddlers only & nonsocial vignettes only: social vignettes too complex?
- Younger toddlers’ sad face LT preference consistent with negativity bias in infants (Vaish et al. 2008)
- Future research: different types of prosocial behavior (e.g. comforting, sharing); further development of measures to assess early emotion understanding nonverbally

**Relations between Emotion Understanding & Helping**

- Only for Nonsocial vignette
- Older toddlers who looked at faces congruent with happy/sad vignette helped more quickly (r=.79, p=.001)
- Younger toddlers who looked at faces congruent with happy/sad vignette helped more slowly (r=-.33, p=.060)

**References**


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