



Society for Research in Child Development

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Infants Learn from Observing Others' Emotional Behavior

Infants use indirect emotional information—emotional reactions that are directed at other people—to guide their own behavior.

That's the finding from a new study by researchers at the University of Washington. The study is published in the March-April 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers carried out two studies on 18-month-old infants. In both studies, infants watched an adult performing actions on objects. Then they watched as another adult, called an "emoter," expressed either anger or was neutral to the first adult in response to her actions. Infants were then given an opportunity to play with the object; during this time, the emoter was neutral.

The researchers found that infants' actions were influenced by their memory of the emoter's prior emotional display toward the adult who had carried out the action. In particular, infants were loath to copy the first adult's actions when the emoter had been angry at her for producing these actions. Even more striking, infants' actions varied depending on whether they were in the emoter's visual field when they had access to the objects. If the previously angry emoter left the room or had her back turned, infants eagerly copied the first adult's actions.

"This research extends what is known about infants' emotional understanding," according to Betty M. Repacholi, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Washington and the study's lead author. "Here we show that by 18 months, infants understand how actions on objects can impact another person's emotions and can predict how their own actions might influence that person's future emotions."

The study adds to the growing body of evidence that by the time they are toddlers, children have some of the basic social-cognitive skills that provide the foundation for their later understanding of other people's psychological states. This ability to understand other people is essential for successful peer relationships and other positive social behaviors.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 2, *Emotional Eavesdropping: Infants Selectively Respond to Indirect Emotional Signals* by Repacholi, BM, and Meltzoff, AN (University of Washington). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.