

Hooked on a Feeling

Babies take their cues on appropriate emotional behavior from caregivers

While babies may be pre-verbal for many months, they are not pre-emotional. Even very young babies are able to sense and respond to emotions of their parents and other caregivers. They are able to read sounds and facial cues as early as the first few weeks of life.

In a recent study, researchers set out to determine when babies begin to remember those emotional cues from past interactions and to use that information to make conclusions about how to respond appropriately in new interactions. In other words, when is a baby able to remember an emotional response to one incident and apply it to the next? When, for example, does

mommy's frown and shaking head take on sufficient significance to prevent a baby from pulling the cat's tail again?

In a series of trials, 11- and 14-month-olds were exposed to objects they wanted to touch, and then given positive or negative expressive displays from adults. Researchers determined that with repetition, the babies learned to integrate the adults' emotions and to refrain from touching the objects that elicited disgust. They also learned that the objects associated with positive expressions from adults were fair game to touch. The younger babies could remember the cues for a short time while the older babies showed

stronger emotional memory over a longer period of time.

Why these months are critical

Between the ages of 9 and 15 months, babies and their environment are changing rapidly. Brain development near the end of the first year of life causes a sharp improvement in infants' capacity to code, store, and retrieve memories. Also, during these months locomotion (crawling and walking) and socialization change dramatically, with parents becoming more direct in their emotional communication about environmental events. For example, as babies become more mobile, parents begin to

give warnings such as "Don't touch!" and "Hot!" Also as children become older, parents begin encouraging them to interact in socially appropriate ways, such as saying "Give grandma a kiss hello," or, in the presence of a crying playmate, "Brendon is sad, give him a hug." These social interactions prod and guide the development of a child's emotional intelligence and, eventually, empathy.

The study also showed how rapidly babies are developing and changing during these months. While the 11-month-olds could retain and act on the adults' emotion cues, the babies could only hold onto this information for brief periods

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over the same day. On the other hand, the 14-month-olds could integrate the positive or negative emotional cues more specifically to the objects the testers exposed them to, holding onto the information over a period of days. In just three months, the babies went from temporarily taking in general emotional information to actually understanding and remembering.

Accentuate the positive

Not only did the study show that the babies showed improvement in being able to retain the emotional cues from one incident to another (especially as they became toddlers), but it suggests that adults' positive emotional displays encourage more positive emotional displays from the babies as well. On the other hand, the impact of displays of negative emotions was inconclusive in this study.

What has been determined is that patience and repetition are needed for infants to learn how to behave socially. Early emotional communication may impact how an infant later develops emotions such as pride and embarrassment, as well as his overall sense of self. ■

Source: *Child Development* 75 (2004): 595-613.

Did you know?

Infants understand only a few simple words by the time they are 11 months old, but can understand more than 100 words by the time they are 14 months old. Source: *Child Development* 75 (2004): 610.

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