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# Infant Behavior and Development

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/inbede](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/inbede)

Short communication

## Distressed yet empathically sensitive: Preschoolers' responses to infant crying



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Preschoolers  
 Responses to infant crying  
 Empathic concern  
 Personal distress  
 Cognitive process  
 Prosocial helping

### ABSTRACT

Using a simulated long bout of progressively intense infant crying, this study demonstrated that preschoolers responded with infant-oriented empathic concern and helping actions despite evidence of self-focused distress. Preschoolers' helping actions were predicted by the interaction between empathic concern and cognitive inquiry.

Children become increasingly competent in showing other-oriented empathic responses to social others' distress in the second year of life (Geangu, 2009; Hoffman, 2000, 2008; Spinrad & Stifter, 2006); self-focused distress responses, however, remain evident, particularly when distress stimuli are highly intense (Roth-Hanania, Davidov, & Zahn-Waxler, 2011). Personal distress has been described as a qualitatively distinct element from empathic concern in the process of responding to another's plight (Davis, 1983). In contrast to empathic concern, which involves affective responses organized around the well-being of the observed person (e.g., sympathy, compassion, tenderness, etc.), personal distress involves heightened arousal and negative emotions (e.g., alarm, aversion, helplessness, etc.) centering on the welfare of the self. When responding to a crying infant, goals motivated by empathic concern primarily revolve around relieving the infant's distress by meeting the infant's needs, as seen in sensitive and supportive parenting (Dix, Gershoff, Meunier, & Miller, 2004). Aims espoused by personal distress, on the other hand, generally comprise ameliorating one's own arousal (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987) to an extent that avoidance or aggression may likely arise as a means for arousal reduction (Frodi & Lamb, 1980).

Developmentally, reflexive or contagious crying in response to other infants' crying in the first year of life has been postulated as a primitive antecedent of empathic arousal, in which distress is experienced with no clear differentiation between the self and others (Sagi & Hoffman, 1976). With cognitive advancement in the knowledge of self-other distinction, toddlers become progressively capable for modeling the states of others while maintaining an intact boundary (Geangu, Benga, Stahl, & Striano, 2011), which eventually ushers in preschoolers' proficiency in modulating contagious arousal into a genuine form of empathic concern (Hoffman, 2000, 2008). Thus, the emergence of veridical empathic concern for others seemingly stems from initially preliminary forms of personal distress upon witnessing others' distress (Hoffman, 2000, 2008; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). For this reason, simply assuming the two processes as functionally orthogonal and opposing to each other may unduly limit our understanding of their connections and quickly dismiss an integrative view, which is potentially important to inform possible regulatory mechanisms underlying empathic responding. Moreover, both processes involve affective arousal in response to others' distress and may reflect one's general patterns of response propensity in similar ways (Batson et al., 1987; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). Indeed, positive relations between empathy and distress have been reported (e.g., Batson et al., 1987; Davis, 1983), and the two processes

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were found to be more closely linked than commonly thought in adults' responses to infant crying (Lin & McFatter, 2012). The questions arise as to whether young children exhibit behaviors reflecting the paradoxical existence of empathic concern and personal distress when responding to a crying infant and whether the two qualitatively distinct processes are merely inversely related to each other. The information of how children organize distinct elements in empathic responding is relevant beyond toddlerhood as pro-social helping manifests and becomes sophisticated during preschool years (Dunfield & Kuhlmeier, 2013; Hoffman, 2008).

Using a simulated long bout of progressively intense infant crying, this study examined various elements in preschool aged children's responses to the infant's distress. Based on the reviewed literature, we expected to observe that personal distress and empathic concern would not necessarily show negative association and preschoolers would exhibit concern for the crying infant and helping actions despite manifestation of behaviors indicative of self-focused distress.

Typically developing preschoolers ( $N = 37$ , 17 females, mean age = 3.80 years,  $SD = 0.91$ ) in the company of their caregivers were observed in a laboratory ( $2.4 \text{ m} \times 4.0 \text{ m}$ ) equipped like a nursery with a bassinet, an infant bottle, a rocking chair, toys, and child size table and chairs. A female confederate came in holding a weighted lifelike infant manikin (19" long) presenting herself as the mother of the infant. After building a rapport with the caregiver and the child, the confederate stated that she needed to go for something in her car. The confederate then placed the infant manikin in the bassinet while asking the child to watch her baby for her before she left the room. Increasingly intense crying sound of a four-month-old male infant, lasting approximately four minutes, was played from the operation room through a JBL 4301 wireless speaker hidden beneath the bassinet mattress pad, with peak amplitudes of approximately 82 dB (relative to  $20 \mu\text{N}/\text{m}^2$ ) at 1 m from the source. Caregivers were instructed to allow children to spontaneously respond to the infant without prompting, yet prompt responses to comfort the infant (e.g., suggesting the child to pick up the infant) if the child did not show any responses for two minutes. The amount of prompting varied; some caregivers did not prompt responses at all because their children showed spontaneous responses throughout the entire session. The observation ended with the return of the confederate when four minutes elapsed. However, the session would end earlier if the child realized that the infant was not real. Therefore, the lengths of observation session varied across children.

Behavioral responses were coded into (1) infant-oriented behaviors (responses on behalf of the infant's well-being), (2) personal distress (self-focused distress reaction), and (3) disengagement (behaviors suggesting indifference or unwillingness to respond) (Table 1). Infant-oriented behaviors included four subcategories: (a) concerned expression, (b) cognitive inquiry, (c) approaching the infant, and (c) helping actions, each of them coded as either spontaneous (responses initiated by the child) or prompted (responses following caregiver prompting). Co-occurrence of behavioral categories in time was possible. Behaviors were tallied both for rate (number of occurrence per minute) and duration (percentage of time spent in the entire observation session). There were two primary coders, each responsible for 50% of the infants, and two reliability coders, one for each of the primary coders and responsible for 20% of the primary coder's videos. Spearman rank inter-observer correlation coefficients ( $\rho$ ) between the primary coders and the reliability coders were 0.89 and 0.99, respectively.

As shown in Table 2, preschoolers exhibited significantly greater rates and longer durations of infant-oriented behaviors (spontaneous and prompted combined) than personal distress,  $t(36) = 10.17$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ , and  $t(36) = 3.94$ ,  $p < 0.0002$ , respectively. Rates of infant-oriented behaviors were greater than disengagement,  $t(36) = 5.92$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ . Among infant-oriented behaviors, preschoolers spent the greatest amount of time in concerned expressions, compared to cognitive inquiry,  $t(36) = 2.90$ ,  $p = 0.006$ , approaching the infant,  $t(36) = 8.31$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ , and helping actions,  $t(36) = 6.91$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ . Durations of spontaneous infant-oriented responses were longer than prompted responses,  $t(36) = 2.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . There was no gender difference in the frequency or duration of either spontaneous or prompted infant-oriented behaviors.

Notably, personal distress was not related to preschoolers' disengaging from the crying of infant. Instead, personal distress was positively related to elements of spontaneous infant-oriented behaviors,  $r = 0.34$ ,  $p = 0.04$ . Specifically, personal distress was positively correlated with spontaneous concerned expression, spontaneous cognitive inquiry, and spontaneous approaching the infant,  $r = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ;  $r = 0.48$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ; and  $r = 0.41$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , respectively for frequency; and  $r = 0.49$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ;  $r = 0.37$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ;  $r = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , respectively for duration. Personal distress, however, was not related to helping actions.

The time preschoolers spent in spontaneous helping actions was examined for its relations to the affective and cognitive elements of infant-oriented behavior and their interaction. The results indicated a significant effect of interaction between spontaneous concerned expression and cognitive inquiry on the prediction of spontaneous helping actions,  $b = 0.50$ ,  $S.E. = 0.23$ ,  $t = 2.14$ ,  $p = 0.04$  (Table 3). Fig. 1 summarizes this interaction, showing the prediction of helping actions from three levels of concerned

**Table 1**  
Coding Scheme for the Three Major Behavioral Categories and the Subcategories of the Infant-Oriented Behavior.

Behavioral Category	Description	Example
Infant-Oriented	Responses with a clear focus on the well-being of the infant	
Concerned Expression	Responses showing sympathy and/or sadness for the crying infant	Concerned looking, downturned mouth
Cognitive Inquiry	Behaviors reflecting the child's questioning and reasoning about the infant's distress	Reasoning about the cause of crying, asking what to do to alleviate the infant's distress
Approaching Infant	Physically moving toward the infant	Moving to the bassinet
Helping Actions	Behaviors that focus on relieving distress of the infant	Patting the infant, offering comfort
Personal Distress	Self-focused distress reactions in response to infant crying	crying, nervous laughing, seeking comfort
Disengagement	Responses reflecting the child's lack of attention, interest, or willingness to interacting with the infant	Irrelevant speech, looking away from the infant, covering ears with neutral expression

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