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Infants express non-verbal sympathy for others in distress

June 12 2013

Infants as young as ten months old express sympathy for others in distress in non-verbal ways, according to research published June 12 in the open access journal *PLOS ONE* by Yasuhiro Kanakogi and colleagues from Kyoto University and Toyohashi University of Technology, Japan.

Infants at this age are known to assign goals and intentions to geometric figures; hence the researchers used a series of animated sequences to test infants' responses to aggression. In their experiments, researchers showed infants an aggressive 'social interaction' between a blue ball that attacked and violently crushed a yellow cube and found that the babies preferentially reached for the victim rather than the aggressor. Infants' behavior remained consistent when the roles of the shapes were reversed and when a neutral, non-aggressive shape was introduced in the video, suggesting that their preference for the victim was not out of fear of the aggressive shape.

Based on these observations, the authors conclude, "Ten-month olds not only evaluate the roles of victims and aggressors in interactions but also show rudimentary sympathy toward others in distress based on that evaluation. This simple preference may function as a foundation for full-fledged sympathetic behavior later on."

More information: Kanakogi Y, Okumura Y, Inoue Y, Kitazaki M, Itakura S (2013) Rudimentary Sympathy in Preverbal Infants: Preference for Others in Distress. *PLOS ONE* 8(6): e65292.

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doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0065292

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https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-06-infants-non-verbal-sympathy-distress.html

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