

Study shows how toddlers adjust to adult anger

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Even 15-month-olds can recognize ways to avoid arousing the wrath of a grown-up

(HealthDay)—Toddlers can both sense adult anger and alter their behavior in response to it, new research reveals.

"Babies are like [sponges](#)," said study co-author Andrew Meltzoff, co-director of the University of Washington Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, in Seattle. "They learn not only from their own direct social experiences but from watching the social interactions between two other people."

He said he was most surprised at how emotionally "sophisticated" the [babies](#) were at such a young age.

"This study shows that even 15-month-olds have their emotional antennae up and are scanning the social environment to understand and predict other people's emotional reactions," he said. "Young children have a kind of emotional radar that is quite striking."

Meltzoff's team conducted an experiment in which 150 [toddlers](#), all aged 15 months, sat on their parents' laps and watched an experimenter show them how to use several toys that made different sounds.

During this demonstration, another person came in the room, sat down and began complaining about the experimenter's actions with the toys.

Then the children had an opportunity to play with the toys. When the complaining person was out of the room or had her back turned, the children quickly picked up the toys and copied the experimenter's actions.

If the complainer watched the child with a neutral expression or looked at a magazine, however, the toddlers usually waited an average of four seconds before they picked up any of the toys. They were also less likely to do the same actions they had seen the experimenter do.

"Interestingly, the infants treat this previously angry person as anger prone—someone who might get angry at them even though she shows no signs of being angry right now," Meltzoff said. "They remember the emotional history of a person."

The findings were published in the October/November issue of the journal *Cognitive Development*.

The researchers also compared the children's impulsivity based on questionnaires from the parents. Children with higher ratings of impulsivity, based on the parents' answers, were more likely to do what

the experimenter had done even if the complainer was watching them.

"We found great variation among the toddlers," Meltzoff said. "Some had excellent self-control, and some were a little more impulsive and could not control themselves."

It was the toddlers who had more advanced self-control who surprised Meltzoff the most, he said. The more impulsive ones, meanwhile, "just plow forward seemingly unable to control their desire to imitate the interesting action," even if doing so risks making the complainer upset, he said.

This finding is particularly important because of what is known about children's long-term development if they have difficulties with self-regulation early on, said Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, a professor of human development at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"For example, self-control predicts school readiness, academic achievement and social competence, among other things," she said. It's exciting, she added, that even 15-month-olds have already learned to combine emotional cues with visual or other perceptual cues of an adult they don't know and then use that to guide their behavior.

"This study suggests that parents need to consider how their toddlers are learning from what is occurring in the social world around them," she said. "It also suggests that toddlers who seem to be impulsive may need more assistance learning how to inhibit behaviors than observation alone."

One weakness of the study was that the researchers did not gather information about what conflict the children may have been exposed to, whether in the home, from media or elsewhere.

Meltzoff said it's natural for parents to experience and show a variety of emotions in front of their children, but if a parent constantly shows anger, then a child may learn that people are generally angry and perhaps that the world in general is an angry, hostile place.

"Children who grow up surrounded by perpetual anger may develop a tendency to predict that everyone around them will react in an angry and hostile fashion," Meltzoff said. "If kids predict or interpret other people's behavior as being hostile, then they tend to heighten their own aggressive behaviors," prompting an unhealthy vicious cycle, he said.

His team is planning a follow-up study to see whether the children's [behavior](#) at 15 months of age predicts their self-control when they are school-aged.

The study was funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

More information: Visit the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#) for more on toddler social development.

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