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'Look at me' toddlers eager to collaborate and learn

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Parents should think twice before brushing off their child's calls to "look at me!" A Concordia study published in the journal *Child Development* is the first to show that toddlers' expectations of how their parent will respond to their needs and bids for attention relate to how eager they are to collaborate and learn.

Collaboration in toddlers has been linked to the acquisition of social rules and norms later in childhood.

Understanding what contributes to more collaboration can help improve conscience development in children.

Marie-Pierre Gosselin, a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology at Concordia University and lead author of the study explains that "toddlers whose parents have consistently responded positively to their attention-seeking expect interactions to be fulfilling. As a result, they're eager to collaborate with their parents' attempts to socialize them."

While scientists and caregivers alike have long theorized that toddlers have certain expectations of their parent's behavior, no one had provided a reliable measure of those expectations. By observing the quality of toddlers' attention-seeking, Gosselin and co-author David R. Forman, currently at the State University of New York at Geneseo, were able to quantify toddlers' expectations.

In the first part of the study, parent and child were put in the same room and the parent was asked to fill out a long survey with questions that required attention and focus. This usually provoked attention-seeking behaviors in the child. Some toddlers pointed at and shared objects with their parent, laughed and smiled while talking to the parent, and used phrases like, "excuse me mommy." This constituted high-quality behaviour in the researchers' eyes. Low-quality attention-seeking behaviour was shown by toddlers who cried, screamed, or even took the parent's pen and threw it across the room.

Gosselin says that they expected to find that parents who had been attentive, sensitive and responsive to their child in a variety of contexts would have children who showed more positive, high-quality attention-seeking behaviours than children of less responsive parents because these behaviors reflected the child's expectations of a parent's response.

In the second part of the study, the child had to watch his or her parent perform a series of actions (such as, how to retrieve a ball using three specific movements) and then try to imitate them. Gosselin found that toddlers who showed positive attention-seeking behaviours collaborated more with the parent in this task than those who showed more negative attention-seeking behaviours when the parent was busy.

According to Gosselin, the study shows that it is important to encourage positive or high-quality attention-seeking in toddlers because it predicts their motivation to collaborate and participate in skill building activities.

"For parents it's important to know that it's not the amount of attention seeking but really the quality of attention seeking that their toddler displays that matters for their development," says Gosselin.

Gosselin is now in the process of analyzing data on what happens when the parent is busy on the phone. She says that with the spread of cell

phones it is important to see what kind of attention-seeking behaviors children resort to in this situation, how parents respond, and what are the implications for their development. She also plans to look into how toddlers seek attention from teachers and day-care workers.

More information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22288442

Provided by Concordia University

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