Toddlers’ Facial Expressions: From Fear and Anger to Sadness

When toddlers encounter fearful or frustrating circumstances, they often require help from their mothers to reduce their distress and calm their emotions. Past research has demonstrated that the child’s facial expression of sadness effectively evokes these supportive responses.

We know that young infants and older children are able to change from one facial expression to another as they attempt to elicit more positive interpersonal interactions. We know less, however, about such abilities in toddlers. Moreover, while previous studies have shown patterns of change from anger to sadness expressions, we don’t know whether children show a similar pattern of change from fear to sadness expressions.

Thus, we designed this study to determine if toddlers changed their facial expressions from fear and anger to sadness when looking to their mothers during fearful or frustrating situations.

We observed 71 twenty-four-month-old toddlers during two fearful and two frustrating activities in our laboratory with their mothers in the room. We videotaped each activity and later observed the toddlers’ facial expressions across the entire activity as well as when they specifically looked to their mothers.

We found that across one fearful activity and one frustrating activity, toddlers expressed fear and anger, respectively, more frequently and intensely than sadness, as we expected. During the two activities in which fear and anger occurred more frequently than sadness, we found that toddlers looked to their mothers with sadness more often than either of the other emotions.

These results support our hypothesis that toddlers display sadness expressions while looking to their mothers during fearful or frustrating activities. They also show that toddlers can change their expressions from anger and fear to sadness when they need help from their mothers in reducing their distress or calming their emotions.

This study provides further evidence for the specific function of sadness expressions in eliciting maternal support. It also adds to the growing evidence that young children and their mothers continually interact and influence each other during times of even minor distress.

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