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Infants' Sensitivity to Emotions in Body Gestures

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Emotion processing is crucial to interact effectively in a social environment. Emotions displayed through facial expressions and body movements convey the feelings of those around us and can serve to alert others about possible dangers or other important information about the environment. It is important to develop the ability to process emotion at an early age in order to accurately read emotions of others and respond accordingly as adults.

Research on emotion processing in infancy has mainly focused on emotions conveyed through faces or facial gestures. However, adults also utilize emotions conveyed by body gestures in interpersonal interactions; almost nothing is known about infants' perception of emotions from bodies.

As adults, we rely upon various gestures to read other's emotions. In many circumstances, the face may be obscured and/or people might be at a distance; under these circumstances, we rely solely on bodies for emotion information. The importance of body gestures and movement for emotion processing is the main focus of this study.

Infants' discrimination between different stimuli can be detected using a procedure in which two videos are placed side by side in front of an infant; time spent looking to each stimuli is then recorded to determine if infants differentially view one of the videos. In this study, videos of actors are used portraying two emotions: happy and neutral. The actor's faces are covered so that emotion can only be displayed through body motion. This study consists of two 15-second trials in which 7-month-old infants are exposed to two videos portraying the happy and neutral emotions simultaneously. Overall, data run to date from the 12 infants suggest a preference for the happy emotion versus the neutral emotion (M = 61.96%, SD = 16.25). The preference for the happy video rather than the neutral video, is evidence that infants can tell the difference between these two categories of emotions.

To make sure the infants' performance is based on the different emotions portrayed by the actors rather than due to some other variable, such as amount of movement, 9 infants have been tested with inverted videos. Inversion of faces and bodies affects emotion processing in adults and infants. The 9 infants' preference for the happy emotion is not significant (M = 55.68%, SD = 10.24). Thus, discrimination when tested with upright videos but not when tested with inverted videos is evidence that the infants' performance is based on emotion information.

This study is important because just a small number of studies have examined the processing of emotions from body gestures. This study could also lead to future exploration of which emotions are more easily differentiated and how infants react to different emotions conveyed through body movements.