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Toddlers' mapping of emotion words to facial expressions and body postures in a looking-while-listening task

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Abstract

Traditional research on children's emotion word comprehension has relied on explicit-response tasks and focused primarily on facial expressions, potentially underestimating early abilities. Using a looking-while-listening paradigm, this study examined whether 18- to 30-month-old children (N=100) could map emotion words to combined facial and bodily expressions. On each trial, children heard an emotion word while viewing a pair of emotional expressions that were either across valence (e.g., happy vs. sad) or within valence (e.g., sad vs. angry). Children aged 24-30 months preferentially looked at the matched expression on both trial types, while children aged 18-24 months old performed at chance levels. These findings suggest that the ability to map emotion words to facial and bodily emotional expressions emerges in early age two.