TEACHING A BABY THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTIONS
A Father’s Experience

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The melody of language—including the tone, inflection, and pitch of our speech—teaches babies how to interpret daily events and interactions. For example, mothers will use a higher pitch voice to express surprise when her baby does not show surprise during play than when the baby has learned that the situation is surprising (Reissland, Shepherd, & Cowie, 2002). They will also talk in a higher pitch when they interact with their baby in play compared with an ordinary situation (Reissland & Snow, 1996), and they will express information with varying pitch depending on whether they are teaching their infant about positive or negative events in the environment (e.g. Fernald, 1992).

Less is known about how the melody of language and the words we use teach children about emotions. In recent years, research on emotional learning has focused on parental socialization of children’s feelings. Socialization takes place in day-to-day interactions between parents and their children, such as when a parent must handle a toddler’s temper tantrum. Gottman and DeClaire (1997) report one example in which a father manages to quiet his 2-year-old’s temper tantrum. The father, rather than getting annoyed at his daughter’s public display of anger, expresses empathetic understanding of her frustration over a lost toy. In this case, his empathetic response helped the child cope with her negative emotions. The present study will illustrate how parents and caregivers teach children about emotions through the use of language over time.

According to Zeidner, Matthews, Roberts, and McCann (2003), parents and caregivers support early language development by reinforcing what children say and by modelling how to speak. Subsequent learning is influenced by emotional discourse (the way in which parents and others talk about emotions) with parents and others. Even though discussing emotions is important for emotional development, Cohen (2003) argues, however, that communication and especially social and emotional development begins at birth, long before children utter their first words. Hence infants start to learn about emotions before their parents can reinforce what infants say. Language development also occurs in a social context as the words a child hears are related to the child’s experience (Bloom, 1998). Word learning is intimately connected to a child’s emotional experience and it is through the emotions that the child learns the language to talk about their emotional experiences.

abstract

This article describes how parents foster emotional development in their children through the words they speak during daily conversations. The author presents a case study of a father and his infant daughter and the developmental progression of talk. In the first 6 months of life, talk revolved around the infant’s feelings, and later in the first year talk turned more to objects. The second year of life, after the child learned a few words, revealed a dramatic change in emotion socialization with conversation that both builds the child’s vocabulary related to emotions and facilitates her cognitive understanding of emotions.
In this article I demonstrate via a case study that emotional development is closely linked to communication about emotions during parent-child interactions. The study participants are a White, educated, middle-class American father and his half-German daughter, and while the results may not generalize to other cultures or social classes, the study provides a qualitative look into how babies learn about emotion by interacting with their parents. In order to illustrate the change over time, I give examples of tape recordings of a father talking to his daughter Toto about emotions in context and how the use of these words changes as his daughter grows from 1 month to the toddler period when she is using three-word sentences (approximately 2 years old).

Through a careful search of the recordings, I identify conversations that describe the emotions of happiness, sadness, anger, and fear.

Socialization of Emotion During a Baby’s First 4 Months

Parents communicate with their babies from birth, and they indicate within the first few months which emotions are desirable and which are not.

Happiness and Anger

For example, here the father tells his 1-month-old daughter that a smile is something he appreciates. Whispering, he says: “A smile, are you going to give me a smile, a social smile? Smile.” The baby does not react, and the father says: “Oh, no smiles? The baby then reacts, and her father approves, saying: “Okay, I am much encouraged, I am much encouraged.” In contrast, the father discourages crying and expresses dismay: “Oh, oh, what’s this, eh? Nobody is going to believe you when you tell them you cry when someone puts your shirt on. We’ll just stay clear of a cry-baby.”

He also validates his daughter’s emotion expressions, as in the following example a few days later, in which he anticipates his daughter’s protest: “I think I’ll try putting this shirt back on you. This is the one where you cry every time I put it on. I don’t know why, do you? You don’t know why either. Hmm, okay, so now for the big moment... (Softly) Heh?” When Toto starts crying, he tries to lighten the mood. Interrupting her, he says: “You’re contesting it in court, are you?” As her cries get more intense, he says: “Ohhh!! But I thought I was the boss!” He then acknowledges her protest: “You really don’t like that.” While she continues crying and he continues dressing her, he tries to stop her crying by saying: “Hey, come on now! Where does that crying come from?”

Later, the father suggests that she must have learned to cry when being dressed and he speculates: “If everything’s imitation... now I don’t cry like that, (I wonder) where have you learnt that from?” Once Toto stops crying, her father makes conversation concerning the subject: “Where have you learnt that from?” He then points out to Toto: “You have your own bed; you have our bed, a constant food source. Yeah, nobody’ll believe you if you cry. When they say: ‘What’re you crying about? You’ll say, ‘Well I have two beds, a constant food source...’ Hmm?... ‘colorful clothes...’ Hmm?... ‘two goofy doting parents...’ And everybody will say: ‘What?! And you’re complaining?!’ Yeah, nobody’ll believe you.”

Praising and Reinforcing Desirable Emotions

In addition to being taught that likes are associated with smiles and dislikes with cries, Toto is also taught more complex social rules in the first few months, namely about polite behavior. In the following conversation, during which Toto is 12 weeks old, her father talks about a party they attended:
Father [F]: “5:30 p.m. Post-mortem on a party.”
Toto [T]: “Eh.”
F: “What was your reaction? What was your reaction? Did you like the food?”
T: “Ah! Aha ah.”
F: “Yeah, that milk huh? It wasn’t so bad, huh? And the guests—did you like the guests?”
T: “Eh.”
F: “Yeah, they’re very nice.”
T: “Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh.”
F: “Yeah; and did you enjoy yourself?”
T: “Aha! Aaaah! Aaaah!”
F: “Yeah you had a good time. Well that’s nice.”
T: “Ah ha!”
F: “Well that’s really nice.”
T: “Heheh! Aha! Hehh!”
F: “Did you think so as well? Yeah, I think so. Hmm? Yes.”
T: “Hah! Aaaah! Ah!”
F: “You didn’t cry at all and you were very polite!”
A few days later, she is praised by her father for not only coping with separation, but also for seeming to enjoy it:
F: “So. You had an active morning?”
T: “Ah aaaaaah!”
F: “Oh! Yes. Did you enjoy this morning? Hmm? Do you realize that this morning you were separated from us for the first time?”
T: “Ooh ah!”
F: “Yes! So you enjoyed it? Yeah.”
T: “Ooh, eh.”
F: “Yeah, and it was the first time you were separated away from us. The midwife had you. For 15 minutes!”
T: “Wehh! Aahaaa. Ahaa!”
T: “Haah. Aah.”
F: “We had the impression that you didn’t miss us at all! Did you know that? Yeah. You were enjoying yourself, mm?”
T: “Aah!”
F: “Yeah.”
The father’s praise is effective. After 4 months, Toto no longer cries as much when being dressed as the following excerpt shows:
F: “Do you have any idea how this works? Hmm? Perhaps, if we unbutton this first . . . This is more difficult than meets the eye! Yah, this—the zipper, made in Britain, is like the toilet chains on British toilets. Hmm? It takes a lot of local knowledge of just how much to pull and what sort of twist to give, to get the thing to flush. It doesn’t want to zip!”
T: “Ha haa!”
F: “Oh you’re delighted are you? Let’s try this one again. I’m going to have to give up!”
T: “Hic-ups.”
F: “Yeah! And you’re tickled pink! I’m going to have to give up!”

**Month 5: Talking About Fear and Using Humor**

Around Toto’s 5th month, her father introduces fear into her vocabulary by asking his daughter:
F: “What did you think of the clinic? Hm? Yeah. It was really nothing huh?”
T: “Ah.”
F: “Yes. It was really nothing; nothing to worry about.”
T: “Eh, eh!”
F: “You’re ready for your next injection are you?”
T: “Ha.”
F: “Just give the date and the place. You’ll show up, hmm? Nothing to fear!”
At 5 months, Toto’s father also humors her crying behavior, as in the following example.
F: “Yeah. We’re testing the vocal chords.”
T: “Waaaaaaahhhhh!!!!!”
F: “One, two.”
T: “Waaaaaaaahhh! Waaaha-ahhhhh!”
F: “Testing one, two, three, four. Can you read me? Vocal chord testing time!”
T: “Waaaaaaah!”
F: “Yeah. Yeah. I think they can hear you outside as well as inside. Yeah. I think they can hear you. No problem there. Hmm. You don’t need a loudspeaker, I don’t think.”
T: “Waaaaaaahhh!”
F: “Yeah. Yeah, if there’s anything that, you know, bothers you or something and you want some service, mm? I think your vocal chords will be loud enough to get the message to the end of the house, mm? We don’t need an alarm bell or a service bell—a buzzer. No. I think the passage of air past the old epiglottis, combined with a few sort of throat and tongue movements, mm? Yeah. The signal is loud and clear. Mm. I think so. Yeah.”
Later in the month, the father’s interaction with Toto contains the same theme:
F: “Yes. So you’ve stopped crying a bit now, mm? You’ve stopped crying. Yeah. Why were you crying in the first place?”
T: “Ha!”
F: “Why, that was the reason! Yeah, you were trying to stretch your lungs. To see how many decibels you could record. Yeah, it’s a pity we don’t have a decibel index on the tape recorder. Would that be nice? Would it? Then we could compare you with our neighbours, mm? And we could record you and play it up at the maximum volume.”
T: “Heh.”
F: “Mm, and retaliate.”
Bedtime is still difficult at this age, and crying usually accompanies it. The father again uses humor when trying to put his daughter to bed at night and when trying to wake her up in the morning.

F: "So it's the evening."
T: "Wuh ah!"
F: "10 to 9."
T: "Ha!"
F: "We're hypothesizing that you're tired and you want to go to bed. All you want is a little nappy [diaper] change, just a little nappy change, and then you go straight to bed. Pleased as punch, yeah."
T: "Uwuh.
F: "Yes, that's how we've interpreted your cries and grunts over the last half hour."
T: "Ah!"
F: "You're saying please put me to bed after you've changed my nappy. I'm a bit tired, I feel like going to sleep. Okay. Here comes the moment, hm? I am picking you up. I am carrying you over to the cot, I give you a little kiss, another little kiss, and I lower you down into the bed. I pull the quilt over you. You can't believe what's happening to you. You think there must be some mistake."
T: "Waaaaaaah!"
F: "You're moving your legs, you are trying to escape!"
T: "A, A, Hoo."
F: "Night-night. Night-night, Toto."
T: "Ah!"

F: "Night-night. Okay?"
T: "Ah. Ah-ah! Ah! Ah!"
F: "Okay. I suppose I must have misunderstood you. Shall we go downstairs? I'll turn this off, mm? You win."

However, the next morning:
F: "Toto! Wake up!"
T: Cries.
F: "Toto! You're 100 days old today, mm? A 100 days old. It's your 100th birthday. Yeah! It's your 100th birthday. Today is the 9th of August, Toto waking up at the adolescent hour of 9:50 on her 100th birthday. Rather, she is being woken up on her 100th birthday. And she doesn't like it."
T: Cries.
F: "Be a lion! A monkey. Come on now, do your little call!"
T: "Ha."
F: "Come on."
T: "Awuh!"
F: "That's it. What a loud call!"
T: "Aaargh! Waaah! Waah! Aaaarggh! Aaah! Ah!"
F: "Yeah! What a roar!"
T: "AAAAAHHH!"
F: "What a roar!"
T: "AAAAAAAH! Aaaah!"
F: (laughing) "Yeah. Fantastic!"
T: "Aoooh! Waaaaah!"
F: "Fantastic! For your 100th birthday!"
T: "Ahem. ahem."
F: "Oh! It makes you have a sore throat, that roar, doesn't it? What a roar!"
T: “Waaaaah!”
F: “This roar is now a grunt! It’s becoming a grunt isn’t it?”
T: “Ah, ah!”
F: “Yeah. Yeah. Call of the wild! The call of the wild. Oh! You really put your vocal chords to the test!”
T: “Waaaaah! Waaaaaargh! Waaah!”
F: “Oh—okay, okay, okay, yes enough of this.”

The Second Half of Year 1: Learning to Talk About Objects

Until Toto is 6 months old, her father talks about emotions a great deal, identifying them and relating them to positive or negative events. However, during the second half of the 1st year and well into the 2nd, the tape recordings reveal that the father only occasionally talks about emotions. He has become more concerned with her sleeping patterns and what words she might express. The father thus teaches Toto a vocabulary, such as when she is 1 year old and they are reading the picture book *Babar the Elephant*.

F: “Babar, okay? Travelling up in their balloon and look way down there, that’s the planet earth. What do you see?”
T: “Wow, wow.”
F: “There’s a wow, wow and what’s this?”
T: “Brum, brum.”
F: “What else do you call that? Do you have another word maybe, a bit more adult like?”
T: “Ho ho!”
F: “Yeah, if you don’t mind we can shift from verbal icons to symbols, Toto. Wouldn’t you call that a car?”
T: “Wow, wow.”

Another example of learning occurs when Toto is 20 months old and is playing with blocks:

F: “Get me the yellow one. Can you get Daddy the yellow block?”
T: “Daa.”
F: “That’s green, that’s blue, that’s yellow.”
T: “Blue.”
F: “That’s blue, yeah. Okay, can you give Daddy the red one? Where’s the red one?”
T: “Daa.”
F: “That’s yellow, which one is red?”
The father also talks about remembered events, such as:
F: “Where were you yesterday? Did you go to a farm house?”
T: “Yeah.”
F: “Did you see a cow?”
T: “Yes.”
F: “Did you see any pigs?”
T: “Yeah.”
F: “Did you see any kitty cats?”
T: “An doggy.”
F: “And doggies as well? What did the doggy do?”
T: “Ai ai.”

F: “You did ‘ai ai’ (stroke) to the doggy?”

Research has shown, and as the above examples illustrate, as the child is perceived by the parent to understand more, language becomes simplified. Development proceeds in a U-curve, so that at a very early age, parents’ communication with the baby is quite complex, but then becomes simpler as the baby grows older. Sherrod, Friedman, Crawley, Drake, & Devieux (1977) reported that maternal utterances to younger prelinguistic children are more complex as measured by the mean length of the utterance used (MLU) than those to older prelinguistic children. This difference in complexity of speech used with infants might be based on the ability of younger prelinguistic—in comparison with older prelinguistic—children’s ability to process language input. Thus, differences in the complexity of child-directed speech might be driven by infants’ reactions to verbal input. However, in one study (Reissland, Shepherd, & Stephenson, 1999), differences of maternal child-directed speech were unrelated to the frequency of infant vocalizations, and rather seemed to depend on maternal perception of the infant’s maturity. In that study, although premature and term infants vocalized approximately the same amount, mothers of the premature infants asked more complex questions. This change in perception of what the baby understands seems to lead to a change in emphasis in socialization.

Year 2: Learning to Talk About Emotions

Once Toto speaks a few words, emotion socialization changes dramatically. Toto can answer questions about emotions, and she can also signal her happiness by a laugh, which she now knows is the appropriate response. Hence Toto at 22 months answers with an emotional reaction when her father asks her what she is going to do at the babysitter’s house.

F: “We have to go to Marget’s this morning don’t we? What’s Toto going to do at Marget’s?”
T: “Laow.”
F: “Laugh? Oh that’s nice. I’d really be happy if you were to laugh a bit.” One month later, her father asks:
F: “Did she say she was happy to see you? Yeah?”
T: “Yeah.”
F: “Well, I thought she would be.”

At this age, Toto also learns to understand that others, especially her mother, worry about her when she does certain things and that she can control the emotional reactions of others by refraining from doing them. The father reinforces this knowledge by asking her questions.

F: “What’s that? Oh is that your lip cream?”
T: “Top.”
F: “Where is the top?”
T: “Mouth.”
F: “Yeah, it’s not supposed to go in the mouth is it? That’s what Mummy said didn’t she?”
T: "No. No."
F: "Yeah exactly, Mummy said no, no."
T: "Have in."
F: "You have it. I know you wanted to have it, but you're not supposed to play with it that way."
T: "Flow."
F: "Yeah, oh. Yeah. Oh, that's nice. That's a clever little thing."
T: "Bow."
F: "Yeah, what did Mummy say?"
T: "No."
F: "Exactly, and why did mummy say no?"
T: "A play."
F: "Yeah, you play. Mummy was worried wasn't she? You shouldn't be putting it into your mouth, uh? Is that what Mummy said? Let's see if we can find the lid, it must be in your handbag. Here it is."
T: "Mouth?"
F: "Not in your mouth. Mummy gets very, very upset."
T: "Mouth? In a mouth?"
F: "In the mouth? No I don't think so."
T: "Mouth?"
F: "No."

On another occasion the father asks:
F: "You don't want Mummy to worry about you?"
T: "No."

Another time the father reinforces the same message:
F: "Exactly, but Mummy says no, no."
T: "In nur mouth."
F: "Not in the mouth."
T: "Yeah."
F: "Then Mummy gets very, very upset doesn't she? Very worried."

**Conclusion**

The communication between the father and infant described in this article demonstrates how parents foster emotional development through the words they speak with their children. In the context of daily conversations, babies learn which emotions are desirable or undesirable and ultimately how to control their expression of emotions. This study further demonstrates how, for the first 6 months of life, parents spend a great deal of time communicating with their infants about these emotions. However, during the second half of the 1st year and well into the 2nd year, parental dialogue consisted of simpler language and emphasized learning vocabulary and behavioral rules. This developmental progression from talk revolving around the infant’s feelings to talk that increases not only the child’s vocabulary but also her cognitive skills, suggests that in infancy children first learn about emotions during interactions in which feeling the emotion is emphasized. Later, they learn the vocabulary to talk about these emotions and how to manage them effectively. Parents and other caregivers support their children’s healthy emotional development through the sensitive use of language during daily interactions and activities.

**REFERENCES**


