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Infants use imitation but not comforting or social synchrony to evaluate those in social interactions

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Abstract

In order to understand social relationships, humans must recognize cues of affiliation. When infants see interactions between abstract, animated characters, they use imitation, helping, comforting, and exerted effort to predict who will approach whom. Moreover, infants attend to and reach for characters who imitate other characters and those who help others. The present research builds on these findings and asks whether infants reach for human-animated puppets with distinct and variable human voices who imitate, are imitated by, comfort, are comforted by, or move synchronously with a person. At 12 months, infants reached more often for puppets who imitate a human sound, and also for those who were not targets of imitation. In contrast, infants did not reach more for puppets who comforted or synchronized their motions with a human actor. By 12 months, therefore, infants show differentiated responses to different acts of social engagement by those whose social interactions they observe as third parties.