

# Helping toddlers understand emotion key to development

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Toddlers taught to understand emotion by their parents showed less behavioral problems later on, finds a study by Michigan State University researcher Holly Brophy-Herb. Credit: Michigan State University

The simple parenting strategy of helping toddlers understand emotion may reduce behavioral problems later on, finds a federally funded study

led by a Michigan State University researcher.

The study, published in the September issue of the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, could ultimately help those most in need. Toddlers with higher risk, specifically those with more [behavioral problems](#) and from the most disadvantaged families, benefited most from being taught about emotion by their mothers.

"Our findings offer promise for a practical, cost-effective parenting strategy to support at-risk toddlers' social and [emotional](#) development and reduce behavioral problems," said Holly Brophy-Herb, MSU professor of child development and lead investigator on the study.

The research, part of a larger study funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, involved 89 toddlers (ages 18 months to about 2 years) from low-income families enrolled in Early Head Start programs. Mothers were asked to look at a wordless picture book with their toddlers. The book included many emotional undertones as illustrations depicted a girl who lost and found a pet.

Brophy-Herb and her fellow researchers focused on mothers' "emotion bridging" with the child. That involves mothers not only labeling the emotion (e.g., sad) but also putting it into context (e.g., She's sad because she lost her bird) and tying it back to the child's life (e.g., Remember when you lost your bear and you were sad?).

During a follow-up visit with the families, about seven months later, the researchers found fewer behavioral problems in the higher-risk children. Brophy-Herb said this might be because emotion bridging acts as a tool through which toddlers can begin to learn about their emotions and gradually learn simple words to express emotions, needs and wishes, instead of acting out physically.

Helping [young children](#) understand emotion should be an ongoing, long-term strategy, Brophy-Herb said. Parents can talk to their children about emotion just about anytime - on a short car trip home, for example, or even standing in line at the grocery store. "Over time, these mini-conversations translate into a rich body of experiences for the child."

Emotion bridging could be especially beneficial for families struggling with multiple stressors including economically disadvantaged families. Very young children in poor families are at greater risk for hearing fewer overall and words within a more limited range compared to children in middle- and upper-income families. As the MSU-led study indicates, mothers who were disadvantaged were engaging in high-quality language experiences with their [toddlers](#).

At minimum, the study says, information on emotion bridging could be made available in pediatric primary care settings as part of bigger efforts to increase and diversify language between parents and young children.

Provided by Michigan State University

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