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ABSTRACT

The ability to empathize, or experience the emotions of another individual, has frequently been suggested as an important factor in the child's moral development and expression of prosocial behaviors. The present investigation sought to explore the relationship between the young child's empathy (as assessed by the Feshbach and Roe measure) and the parents' self-reported empathy, affection, and emphasis on another individual's feelings in discipline and nondiscipline situations. A total of 54 preschool and kindergarten children, 26 boys and 28 girls from two-parent families in a small middle class community in northeastern Kansas, took part in the study. All but two of the children were Caucasian. The age range for the entire sample was 47-77 months, with a mean of 62.54 months. Over 75% of both the mothers (mean age = 32.00 years) and fathers (mean age = 33.35 years) had had at least two years of college education. No relationship between boys' empathy scores and the parent measures was found. Heightened empathy in 4- to 6-year-old girls was found to be associated with a particular, sex-stereotyped pattern of mother-father empathy in which mothers reported high empathy and fathers reported low empathy. Many of the factors believed to enhance the development of empathy were reported to be more prevalent in the mother's interaction with the child than in the father's. (Author/RH)

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Empathy in Young Children: Relationship  
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and Emphasis on the Feelings of Others

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## Abstract

The ability to empathize, or experience the emotions of another individual, has frequently been suggested as an important factor in the child's moral development and expression of prosocial behaviors. The present investigation sought to explore the relationship between (1) the young child's empathy (as assessed by the Feshbach and Roe [1968] measure) and (2) the parents' self-reported empathy, affection, and emphasis on another individual's feelings in discipline and nondiscipline situations. Heightened empathy in 4- to 6-year-old girls was found to be associated with a particular (i.e., sex-stereotyped) pattern of mother-father empathy. Many of the factors believed to enhance the development of empathy were reported to be more prevalent in the mother's interaction with the child than the father's.

Empathy in Young Children: Relationship  
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During the past several years, there has been a growing interest in the concept of empathy (Deutsch & Madle, 1975) and its role in the development and expression of prosocial behaviors in children (Feshbach, 1978; Hoffman, 1976; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). Empirical research on the relationship between empathy and altruism has yielded a consistent pattern of results. The inclination to empathize with another individual, whether assessed as an individual difference variable (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), aroused situationally (Barnett, King, & Howard, 1979; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978), or enhanced through systematic training (Staub, 1971; Feshbach, Note 1), has been found to be associated with heightened prosocial behaviors and/or the suppression of antisocial behaviors.

Although empathy has been found to play an important role in the expression of prosocial behaviors, recent studies (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Feshbach, 1975) suggest that the antecedents of empathy may not be identical to other indices of moral development because of its unique affective component. In her review of research on empathy in children, Feshbach (1978) suggests that "those aspects of the socialization process that relate to the experience, expression, and restraint of feeling are highly relevant to the development and manifestation of empathy (p. 10)."

One purpose of the present study was to explore the antecedents of empathy by focusing on those aspects of the parent-child relationship

which appear relevant to the expression of affect and which may serve to make the feelings of other individuals salient to the child. Four dimensions of the parent-child relationship were investigated; the following is a brief discussion of each dimension and the rationale for its inclusion in the study.

Parents' empathy. There exists a considerable amount of evidence, both from laboratory and naturalistic observations, that modeling and identification processes are major determinants of the acquisition, expression, and development of altruistic behaviors in children (see reviews by Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977; Rushton, 1976). Therefore, it was anticipated that heightened empathy in children may be associated with the availability of parental models who express empathy and compassion towards others.

Parents' affection. Although it is difficult to draw unequivocal conclusions on the independent impact of the parents' nurturance on the child's prosocial behavior, several investigations (Hoffman, 1975a; Mussen, Harris, Rutherford, & Keasey, 1979; Yarrow, Scott, & Waxler, 1973) have suggested that children who receive a considerable amount of affection at home are more likely to offer help to needy others than children who receive little affection. Parental affection, by satisfying the child's own emotional needs, may be particularly important in the development of empathy by enabling the child to be receptive to the emotional needs of others. Congruent with this notion, Eisenberg-Berg and Mussen (1978) found that mothers of highly empathic adolescent sons (as assessed by the Mehrabian and Epstein [1972] measure) were reported as being more affectionate than were mothers of less empathic sons. The authors suggested that the failure to find a similar relationship for adolescent daughters was due to a ceiling effect on the daughters' empathy scores.

Parents' discipline. Hoffman (1970; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967) has identified four discipline approaches which parents utilize, in varying degrees, in responding to their child's transgressions: (a) Power assertion--involves techniques whereby the parent seeks to control the child by capitalizing on his/her power or authority over the child. Power assertion includes physical punishment, deprivation of material objects or privileges, direct application of force, or the threat of any of these; (b) Love withdrawal--involves techniques whereby the parent gives direct but non-physical expression to his/her anger or disapproval of the child by withdrawal of love contingent upon the performance of a transgression. Love withdrawal includes ignoring the child, refusing to speak or listen to the child, or expressing a dislike for the child; (c) Induction regarding parents--involves appeals which emphasize the consequences of the child's actions for the parent. Included are such approaches as telling the child that his/her actions have hurt or disappointed the parent; and (d) Induction regarding others (e.g., peers)--involves appeals which emphasize the impact of the child's actions for the other person's feelings. This approach typically involves encouraging the child to view the consequences of the transgression from the other's perspective.

The predominant use of power assertion or love withdrawal techniques has been found to be either unrelated or negatively related to various pro-social indices (Hoffman, 1960, 1963, 1970; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967), presumably by focusing the child's attention on the punishment, per se, and on his/her subordinate role in the parent-child relationship. In contrast, induction--and especially other-oriented induction--has consistently been found to be associated with indices of advanced moral development (Dlugokinski & Firestone, 1974; Hoffman, 1970, 1975a; Hoffman &

Saltzstein, 1967). Hoffman (1975b) suggests that the predominant use of inductive discipline techniques is most effective in that it induces internal motives to avoid guilt and elicits the child's capacity for empathy. Thus, it appeared reasonable that the consistent use of the other-oriented inductive technique would be associated with the child's heightened inclination to empathize with others.

Parents' emphasis on other individuals' feelings. As with the other-oriented inductive discipline approach, parental emphasis on the feelings of other individuals in nondiscipline situations was expected to enhance the child's tendency to empathize, in comparison with interactions relatively devoid of such emphases.

A second purpose of the present research was to explore factors in the parent-child relationship which may contribute to sex differences in the development and expression of empathy. In a recent literature review, Hoffman (1977) concluded that when empathy is viewed as the experiencing of vicarious affective arousal, girls tend to be more empathic than boys, although in individual studies the difference frequently fails to reach statistical significance. In studies involving subjects of high school age (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978) or older (Craig & Lowery, 1969), the sex difference in empathy becomes even more pronounced. Although Hoffman suggests that the females' heightened empathy "may be a reflection of their socialization for expressiveness (1977, p. 720)," little is known of the extent to which the potential antecedents of empathy are differentially expressed in the parents' interactions with sons and daughters. Because of its apparent sex-linked nature, it was predicted that many of the factors believed to enhance the development of empathy would be more prevalent

in the mother's interaction with the child than the father's. Similarly, daughters were expected to be the target of such empathy-relevant socialization practices to a greater extent than sons.

### Method

#### Subjects

A total of 54 children, 26 boys and 28 girls, from two-parent families in a small middle-class community in northeastern Kansas took part in the study. All but two of the children were Caucasian. Approximately one half of the boys and one half of the girls were enrolled in a university-affiliated preschool program; the remainder of the sample was enrolled in kindergarten classes in a local public school. The age range for the entire sample was 47-77 months, with a mean of 62.54 months. Over 75% of both the mothers ( $M$  age = 32.00 years) and fathers ( $M$  age = 33.35 years) had at least two years of college education.

#### Procedure

Children's empathy. The Feshbach and Roe (1968) measure of empathy was administered individually to the children at their schools by a male psychology student. This measure consists of four pairs of slide sequences in which young children the same sex as the subject are shown in situations designed to elicit four different emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. A brief narration describing the events in the slides accompanies each sequence. After viewing a complete slide sequence, the child is asked "How do you feel?" or "Tell me how you feel" and the responses are tape-recorded for later analysis.

The children's responses were scored on a 3-point scale: 0 = incorrect response, 1 = generally correct emotion on the positive-negative affective

dimension; 2 = correct, specific emotion. The total empathy score was the sum for all four emotions (range: 0-16). Two independent raters agreed on 97.5% of their judgments and the disagreements were settled by a third rater.

Parent interview. Each child's parents were interviewed individually in their home by two female psychology students approximately one month after the collection of the child's empathy data. The interviewers were, of course, unaware of the child's empathy score. The parents were informed that the interview was related to their child's participation in the study at school and they agreed to be debriefed at the conclusion of the 45 minute session.

The parent interview was administered in four sections: (1) Biographical data--the information requested included the parent's age, occupation, educational background, and an estimate of the total number of hours spent with the child during an average week. (2) Discipline technique--the parents were confronted with three hypothetical transgression situations (adapted from Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967) in which their child had acted in an inconsiderate and/or selfish manner toward a playmate. For each situation the parent estimated the probable usage (from never [1] to extremely likely [5]) of each alternative on a list of 8 potential disciplinary actions. For each hypothetical situation two power assertion (PA), love withdrawal (LW), induction regarding parents (IP), and induction regarding others (IO) alternatives were listed. A summary score for each alternative (range: 6-30) was later computed for each parent. (3) Affection and emphasis on feelings--each parent was asked to rate how frequently (from never [1] to several times a day [5]) he/she (a) engaged in affectionate interaction with the child, and (b) engaged in interactions which focused on the

feelings of another individual in nondiscipline situations. Three items (adapted from Hoffman, 1975a) were included on each scale and summary scores (range: 3-15) were later computed for each parent. (4) Parent's empathy-- each parent completed the Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) measure of empathy. Finally, upon completion of the individual interviews, the parents were brought together and debriefed.

### Results

Empathy in children and parents. The girls' and boys' scores on the Feshbach and Roe (1968) measure of empathy were not found to differ significantly from one another ( $M_s = 7.43$  and  $7.00$ , respectively,  $t < 1$ ); as expected, mothers' scores on the Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) empathy scale ( $M = 41.92$ ) were significantly higher than those of the fathers ( $M = 13.72$ ),  $t(106) = 6.91$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>1</sup>

The girls' empathy scores were found to be positively associated with mothers' empathy scores ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but negatively associated with fathers' empathy scores ( $r = -.41$ ,  $p < .05$ ), fathers' affection ( $r = -.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and fathers' emphasis on others' feelings in nondiscipline situations ( $r = -.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A subsequent analysis was performed to determine whether the combination of a mother scoring relatively high on the empathy scale and a father scoring relatively low on the empathy scale was uniquely associated with a daughter scoring relatively high on the child's empathy measure. In order to accomplish this, separate median splits on the mothers' and fathers' empathy scores were used to classify each parent as "high" or "low"; based upon each parent's classification, couples were subsequently assigned to one of the four empathy combination groups.<sup>2</sup> A one-way analysis of variance on the four empathy groups was found to be significant,  $F(3,24) = 3.30$ ,  $p < .05$ .<sup>3</sup> A Newman-Keuls test revealed that the empathy scores

for daughters in the Mother High Empathy (MHE)/Father Low Empathy (FLE) group ( $M = 12.29$ ) were significantly higher than those in the MHE/FHE ( $M = 6.00$ ), MLE/FHE ( $M = 5.14$ ), or MLE/FLE ( $M = 6.29$ ) groups; the latter three groups did not differ significantly from one another. No statistically significant correlations were found between the boys' empathy scores and any measure obtained from either parent.

Sex differences in parents' reported interaction patterns. In order to determine whether mothers and fathers differed in their self-reported interaction patterns with sons and daughters in nondiscipline situations, the responses from each relevant section of the interview were analyzed with 2 (Sex of Parent)  $\times$  2 (Sex of Child) analyses of variance. Mothers (a) reported spending approximately twice as many hours with their child per week ( $M = 51.43$ ) as did fathers ( $M = 25.52$ ),  $F(1,104) = 62.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , (b) reported engaging in significantly more affectionate interaction with their child ( $M = 13.98$ ) than did fathers ( $M = 12.87$ ),  $F(1,104) = 12.97$ ,  $p < .01$ , and (c) reported emphasizing other individuals' feelings in non-discipline situations ( $M = 11.44$ ) to a greater extent than did fathers ( $M = 10.57$ ),  $F(1,104) = 4.82$ ,  $p < .05$ . No main or interaction effects involving the sex of child were found on these variables.

The parents' responses on the hypothetical discipline situations were analyzed in a 2 (Sex of Parent)  $\times$  2 (Sex of Child)  $\times$  4 (Discipline Technique) analysis of variance with the final variable as a repeated measure. Post hoc analyses of significant effects were conducted with the Newman-Keuls test. A main effect of Discipline Technique was found,  $F(3,312) = 537.85$ ,  $p < .001$ . The parents' probable usage of the four disciplinary actions were all significantly different from one another and were ordered

as follows: IO ( $M = 26.07$ ), IP ( $M = 20.26$ ), PA ( $M = 13.57$ ), and LW ( $M = 10.57$ ). A significant interaction of Discipline Technique and Sex of Parent was also found,  $F(3,312) = 8.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . Mothers' reported likelihood of using IO ( $M = 26.65$ ) was significantly higher than that of fathers ( $M = 25.48$ ); on the other hand, fathers reported likelihood of using PA ( $M = 14.72$ ) was significantly higher than that of mothers ( $M = 12.02$ ). Mothers and fathers did not differ significantly in their estimated usage of IP or LW. Moreover, no main or interaction effects involving sex of child were found.

#### Discussion

Heightened empathy in 4- to 6-year-old girls was found to be associated, not with an individual parent's level of empathy, but with a particular (i.e., sex-stereotyped) pattern of mother-father empathy. This finding suggests that homes in which mother is markedly more empathic than father may serve to identify empathy as distinctly gender-appropriate for females, thereby accentuating its internalization in young girls. The lack of relationship between the sons' empathy scores and the various parent indices is presently uninterpretable.

Although no main or interaction effects involving the sex of child were found on any of the remaining parent socialization indices, mothers and fathers were found to differ on many empathy-relevant dimensions. Specifically, mothers reported spending more time with their children, being more affectionate with their children, and emphasizing other individuals' feelings in discipline and nondiscipline situations to a greater extent than did fathers. The child's growing awareness of this sex-linked socialization pattern may contribute to the finding that older females

tend to be more empathic than their male counterparts (Craig & Lowery, 1969; Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978).

Reference Note

1. Feshbach, N.D. Empathy training: A field study in affective education.  
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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Mothers' and fathers' empathy scores were found to be unrelated for both sons ( $r = .12$ ) and daughters ( $r = -.02$ ), both  $p > .5$ .

<sup>2</sup>Coincidentally, the couples were found to be equally distributed across the four empathy combinations with seven couples in each category.

<sup>3</sup>A similar analysis performed for the parents of sons revealed no significant difference across the four mother/father empathy combinations.