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Toddlers' Language Skills Predict Less Anger by Preschool

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Longitudinal Relations Among Language Skills, Anger Expression, and Regulatory Strategies in Early Childhood

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Toddlers with more developed language skills are better able to manage frustration and less likely to express anger by the time they're in preschool. That's the conclusion of a new longitudinal study from researchers at the Pennsylvania State University that appears in the journal *Child Development*.

"This is the first longitudinal evidence of early language abilities predicting later aspects of anger regulation," according to Pamela M. Cole, liberal arts research professor of psychology and human development and family studies at Pennsylvania State University, who was the principal investigator of the study.

Angry outbursts like temper tantrums are common among toddlers, but by the time children enter school, they're expected to have more self-control. To help them acquire this skill, they're taught to use language skills like "using your words." This study sought to determine whether developing language skills relates to developing anger control. Does developing language ability reduce anger between ages 2 and 4?

Researchers looked at 120 predominantly White children from families above poverty but below middle income from the time they were 18 months to 48 months. Through home and lab visits, they measured children's language and their ability to cope with tasks that might elicit frustration.

In one lab-based task, children were asked to wait 8 minutes before opening a gift while their moms finished "work" (a series of questions about how the child usually coped with waiting). Children's anger and regulatory strategies were observed during the 8-minute wait. Among the strategies the children used were seeking support ("Mom, are you done yet?" or "I wonder what it is?") and distracting themselves from the gift (making up a story or counting aloud).

Children who had better language skills as toddlers and whose language developed more quickly expressed less anger at age 4 than their peers whose toddler language skills weren't as good. Children whose language

developed more quickly were more likely to calmly seek their mother's support while waiting when they were 3, which in turn predicted less anger at 4. Children whose language developed more quickly also were better able to occupy themselves when they were 4, which in turn helped them tolerate the wait. "Better language skills may help children verbalize rather than use emotions to convey needs and use their imaginations to occupy themselves while enduring a frustrating wait," according to Cole.

The study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 84, Issue 3, Longitudinal Relations Among Language Skills, Anger Expression, and Regulatory Strategies in Early Childhood by Roben, CKP, Cole, PM, and Armstrong, LM (the Pennsylvania State University). Copyright 2012 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.