How would this commercial make you feel? If you’re like most people, it is apt to evoke two distinct, though related, emotional reactions (Batson, 1987; Eisenberg et al., 1988; Gruen & Mendelsohn, 1986). The first, personal distress, is an egoistic emotion characterized by feelings of alarm, discomfort, and uneasiness. Simply put, seeing a starving child upsets us and makes us feel uncomfortable. The second emotional reaction, sympathy, is an other-directed emotion characterized by feelings of concern, compassion, and tenderness. Here we feel warmth and genuine affection for a person who so clearly needs our help.

1. The Developmental Course of Personal Distress and Sympathy

Feelings of personal distress develop earlier in life than do feelings of sympathy (Hoffman, 1981). In fact, even newborns become distressed when they encounter another infant who is upset or suffering. Simner (1971, Experiment 1) had three-day-old infants listen to one of three sounds. Some infants heard the sound of another infant crying, some heard the sound of a comparable synthetic noise, and some heard no noise at all. Simner then measured the likelihood that the infants themselves would begin to cry. As shown in Figure 12.3, infants were nearly three times more likely to cry when hearing the sound of another infant’s cry than when hearing a comparable synthetic noise or no noise at all. Subsequent research has found that this tendency occurs during the first day of life and that it does not occur when infants hear their own tape-recorded cry (G. B. Martin & Clark, 1982; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976). Taken together, these findings suggest that humans possess an innate capacity to feel distressed when others are distressed.

Unlike the capacity for personal distress, which seems to be present at birth, sympathy develops as people mature. In one study, researchers had mothers keep track of their infant’s reactions to other people’s distress over a one-year period (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). Among the reactions they chronicled were feelings of personal distress, sympathy, and behavioral efforts to intervene on the behalf of the victim or alleviate the victim’s suffering. For example, if another child fell off the merry-go-round and cried in pain, the mothers noted whether their

![FIGURE 12.3]
Infants Cry More When They Hear Another Infant Cry

Newborns were more apt to cry when hearing the sound of another infant’s cry than when hearing synthetic noise or no noise at all. These findings suggest that the capacity to feel another person’s distress develops very early in life and may even be innate.

Source: Simner (1971).