ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

EMOTIONS

Emotional Intelligence in the First Five Years of Life

[1]Susanne A. Denham, PhD, [2]Katherine Zinsser, PhD, [3]Craig S. Bailey, PhD

[1]George Mason University, USA, [2]University Illinois Chicago, USA, [3]Yale School of Medicine, USA

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Introduction

The construct of emotional intelligence (EI) refers to a distinct group of mental abilities, in which individuals 1) perceive, appraise and express emotions; 2) use emotions to facilitate thinking; 3) understand the antecedents and consequences of emotions; and 4) regulate emotions in self and others.[1] These abilities dovetail well with what has been termed, in the developmental psychology literature, as “emotional competence” (EC).[2] Because of the developmental emphasis in the EC literature, this is the term we use here. Young children’s EC – expression of useful emotions, knowledge of emotions of self and others, and regulation of their own and others’ emotional expressiveness and experience when necessary – contributes to their social and pre-academic adjustment, both concurrently and across time.[3-5]

Subject

Because of the link with social and pre-academic success, there is considerable interest in the topic of early childhood EC; its relevance to policymakers and service-providers in childcare, early childhood education and mental health is becoming clear. There are three main components of EC, with specific attainments during the early childhood period:[2]

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Expression: Young children become able to use emotional communication to express clear nonverbal messages about social situations and relationships (e.g., stamping feet, giving a hug). They also develop empathic involvement in others' emotions (e.g., patting a classmate in pain). Further, they display complex social and self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, pride, shame and contempt, in appropriate contexts.[6,7]

Knowledge: Young children's abilities to accurately identify and label their own and others' emotions, especially the discrete emotions of happiness, sadness, anger and fear, are emerging. Particularly via the use of methods embedded within play, they can identify the causes and consequences of these emotions, and they show budding awareness of complex, individualized causes for emotions.[8]

Regulation: Young children begin to regulate emotions in productive ways – showing awareness of their feelings, monitoring them and modifying them when necessary, so that emotions aid, rather than impede, coping in varying situations. Although young children begin to understand which regulation strategies are most useful, they still often need adult assistance in these efforts.[6,7,9]

The interrelationships of these aspects of EC must be underscored. Emotion knowledge undoubtedly plays an important role in children's ability to regulate emotion; when a child knows, for example, that her playmate is delighted to heave her tricycle upright after a long struggle, she is no longer distressed herself, trying to discern what to do with an angry friend. Further, her emotion knowledge may assist her own adaptive, regulated emotion expression – if she understands what makes her (and others) sad, and with what intensity, she may be able to show sadness at falling off playground equipment in a way that elicits help without overwhelming her. Because of the intricate inter-workings of the components of EC, it is no surprise that preschool deficits in both emotion knowledge and under-regulated expression of anger predicted difficulties with teachers and peers in kindergarten.[5,8] For example, preschoolers with deficits in understanding emotions have been found to show aggression or peer problems, both concurrently and predictably.[8,9] Moreover, aspects of early childhood EC, separately and as an interrelated group, predict young children's early school success.[3-7,9]

Research Context

The context of research into EC varies throughout development. The study of infant emotion has relied predominantly on external signs of experienced emotions such as facial expressions,

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gestures and vocalizations. As children leave infancy, researchers use both naturalistic observations and direct assessment procedures in a variety of settings, to better capture children's expression and experience, understanding, and regulation of emotions. Procedures to assess children's EC sometimes use purposefully frustrating situations with and without adult scaffolding to understand children's regulation of emotions. Children's responses to direct questions, often within ecologically valid play procedures, show their understanding of self and others' feelings in differing situations, as well as causes and consequences of emotions. Observational and self-report methods are used to examine adults' socialization of children's EC.

Key Research Questions and Recent Findings

1. How is EC related to young children's successful negotiations of other important developmental tasks?

   a) EC is related to young children's success in relationships. Young children must learn to send and receive emotional messages using their knowledge about emotions and their abilities to regulate emotions, so that they may successfully negotiate interpersonal exchanges, form relationships and maintain curiosity about and enthusiasm for their world. When they do so, they have more satisfying, successful relationships with others, especially in the new peer arena.[4,7-9]

   b) EC is related to young children's early school success. Emotions are ubiquitous in the early childhood classroom; as young students learn alongside and in collaboration with teachers and peers, they must utilize their emotions to facilitate learning. Children's abilities to understand emotions of self and other, regulate emotion, and express healthy emotions, all work together to grease the cogs of a successful school experience.[3,5-7]

2. How do parents promote children's EC?

   By modeling various emotions, moderately expressive parents give children information about the nature of emotions– their expression, likely eliciting situations, and more personalized causes.[10,11] Living in a particular "affective climate" promotes children's experience, expression, and regulation of specific emotions.[10] Specifically, a positive affective climate promotes positive emotional outcomes in children.[12] Conversely, where families display more negative emotion, children fare worse with peers.[13] Parents' reactions

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to young children's emotions and their direct instruction about emotions are also important socialization tools that support the development of EC.[14]

3. What else can we do to promote children's EC?

   There are opportunities to promote young children's EC within childcare and early childhood education settings.[15] For example, the Preschool PATHS program teaches children about emotion expression, knowledge, and regulation.[16] Additional programs have been created specifically for use in Head Start classrooms to help young children use EC effectively.[17] Parent programming also exists.[18]

Research Gaps

Much basic research work is left to be done, particularly in examining how the components of EC work together. Research also needs to situate EC abilities within the "whole child," viewing how EC interacts with other domains of development, both concurrently and predictably.

Further, despite accumulated findings on parental socialization, and early childhood research that shows that teachers are engaging in emotion socialization behaviours, we know little about how teachers (or, for that matter, peers or siblings[10]) socialize children's EC.[19] There are, however, emerging findings that teachers' modeling, reactions, and teaching do contribute to children's developing EC.[20-23] Research is also needed to discern possible indirect contributors to EC, such as parental psychopathology, divorce, poverty and child care quality.[2] Moreover, our state of knowledge is ripe for increased exploration of applied topics, such as evidence-based programming. Finally, even more excellent assessment tools are needed in order to track EC promotion in young children.[24]

Conclusion

In sum, emotional competence is a developmentally-evolving construct that encompasses children's abilities to appropriately express, interpret and regulate their emotions, as well as to understand the emotions of others. Understanding the interrelationships between these facets of EC, as well as how EC is socialized, is crucial in understanding the emotional experience of children, and why some preschoolers have more highly developed EC than others. Extant findings suggest that 1) EC is related to young children's success in relationships; 2) EC is related to young children's early success in school; 3) parents model emotional expression and

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regulation and structure environments that promote attaining EC; and 4) parent socialization of emotion is not the only mechanism by which children's EC is socialized. Understanding and promoting EC in the home is emerging as vital, but research has needs more fully to explore how teachers and the school context contribute to children's EC.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Although researchers, early childhood educators and policy makers are increasingly understanding and valuing early childhood EC, gaps in such support still need to be bridged. To provide the optimal learning environment for every student, for example, teachers should be trained in programming and assessment tools that promote EC. Parents should likewise be supported in their roles as socializers of EC.

Educational standards continue to be essential. Policy initiatives also can encourage teacher awareness of EC and help them to encourage it, thereby fostering harmonious classroom environments and promoting the EC foundation that children can use across many contexts. Legislative initiatives can help establish programs, allocate funds to create technical assistance and training centers, and provide grants to support evidence-based EC programming and its evaluation.[24]

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