

# Understanding the Emotional Development of School-aged Children: A Critical Review

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**Abstract.** This article explores the features of emotional development of school-aged children and discusses the significance to understand the characters and influential factors of their development in emotional competences. First, this paper explores three aspects of emotional development in school-aged children: emotional awareness, emotional expression, and emotional regulation, and emphasizes the significance of these three emotional development competences for children's mental health, academic success, and social development. In addition, three factors influencing emotional development: sociocultural background, family background, and gender are discussed. Understanding the development of school-aged children can help parents, educators, and other caregivers in comprehending the behavior of school-aged children and provide them theoretical guidance for making educational decisions. Besides, this paper highlights gaps in the literature on emotions in school-aged children, such as the insufficient research on school-age children and the lack of clear standards for the design of emotional development measurement tools. This paper gives advice for researchers interested in the emotional growth of children.

**Keywords:** Emotional development; School-aged children.

## 1. Introduction

When entering schools, children will encounter great changes in environment and will face challenges in managing relationships with peers and teachers as well as in learning tasks. Working as the signal of children's adjustment of school life, children's emotions revealing in verbal or body languages are prominent to teachers and parents. Moreover, fostering children's emotion development can not only help them enjoy school better, but also have a profound effect on their future life. Children who are more likely to express themselves and understand others' emotions always show greater empathy and better social skills and academic performance as well. Piaget's theory of developmental psychology states that the age of 7-12 is an essential stage in the development of reasoning and systematic thinking when children slowly move away from the self-centered stage and gradually care about others' opinions in decision-making [1]. It is also a time that children begin to develop their social circles and build stronger friendships. Therefore, understanding the emotional development features of students at this critical stage is crucial for children's future thriving.

Previous research may have focused more on infancy and early child's emotional development, thus neglecting the importance of emotional development in the school age. Because the emphasis of children's lives has shifted from home to school, learning and living in a school environment can have a crucial implication on a children's physical and mental health and future development. That's why this article mainly focuses on school-age children and the importance of their emotional development.

To elaborate on this thesis, this article contains three main parts. The first part deals with three crucial components of emotional development in school-aged children, that is, emotion recognition, emotion expression, and emotion regulation, and how these three components play a part in children's emotional development. The second part addresses the importance of focusing on the emotions among children in school age, which is illustrated in three areas: social competence, well-being, and academic performance. The third part introduces three influencing factors on school-aged children's

emotional development, including culture, socioeconomic status, and gender, and discusses why these factors are essential to be considered while understanding children's emotional development.

## **2. Emotional Development of School-aged Children**

Middle childhood, ages 6 to 12, is an essential period for children to develop social, emotional, and physical skills and form confidence in multiple areas such as interrelationships and schoolwork. These school-aged children are experiencing significant physiological and mental challenges as their body grows quickly and the living context gets more complicated. Therefore, emotional development, which includes emotion recognition, emotion expression, and emotion regulation, is intertwined with cognitive and social development, playing a pivotal role in school-aged children's academic learning, prosocial skills, and subjective well-being.

### **2.1 School-aged Children Competence in Emotion Recognition**

Emotion recognition refers to an ability to identify both self and others' emotions according to the observation of visual and auditory nonverbal cues, including facial expressions, gestures, and languages [2]. Considering that emotional development is affected by external and internal factors, its development pace may vary from child to child. However, it is widely accepted that there are six basic emotions young children can perceive and describe: happy, sad, angry, fearful, surprising, and disgusting. School-aged children whose socio-cognitive structures are getting mature are supposed to be able to distinguish more complex emotions that are aggregates of two or more emotions, such as hate and embarrassment [3]. Emotional development is rooted in the larger sociocultural context and is also influenced by subcultures such as family cultures, which means that each individual has a unique style of expressing emotions and ways of perceiving emotions. As the cognitive and social competence of school-aged children develops, these young children can gradually perceive individual differences in emotional expression with their knowledge of specific contexts [4].

### **2.2 School-aged Children's Competence in Emotional Expression**

Emotion expression is an ability growing in conjunction with cognitive and language ability. According to cognitive appraisal theory, the emotion experience starts with thinking, acknowledging the fundamental role of cognitive ability in emotional development. Besides, emotion can be expressed in different manners. Except for the physiological and behavioral response, it mainly needs more general arousal and valence, which could be achieved with language [3]. Considering that language makes higher-level emotion experience possible, as children's language ability develops, their ability to distinguish self and others increases accordingly as well as their ability to understand and express complex emotions [5]. Focusing on the emotional expressions of school-aged children in relation to their cognitive and language development is essential for their self-regulation and social development. Beyond that, emotional expression has a strong relationship with the child's personal characteristics and the cultural context in which he or she lives. Understanding a child's emotional expression in isolation from the child's own characteristics can lead to misunderstanding of the child's behavior.

### **2.3 School-aged Children's Competence in Emotional Regulation**

Emotion regulation is the ability to monitor and regulate emotions and determine how one experiences and expresses emotions based on the situation, which can either take place in the stage of identifying and differentiating emotions or the process of expressing emotions. Internal factors such as neurophysiology, cognition, and subjective evaluation, behavioral factors such as facial and behavioral actions, and societal factors such as cultural values, social environment, and personal aspirations all play a part in the complicated procedure of regulating emotions [4]. As these young children get more interactions with various people under different social contexts and understand better about social rules, they are able to recognize and respond to various emotions and alter their

behaviors based on the requirements in certain social contexts to achieve their goals, such as building friendships. In the meanwhile, their cognition development and growing literacy competence work together to contributing to manipulating complex emotions.

### **3. The Significance of School-aged Children's Emotional Development**

According to the sociocultural theory, children's cognitive development is sociocultural and gradually generated through interactions with parents and peers. That is why it is often heard that the most important thing in children's childhood is playing, either with parents or other children. Besides, social skills and skills in expressing and manipulating emotions are crucial to children's success in the school environment. School-aged children's emotional competences are essential in various aspects, like social competence, children's well-being, and academic performance.

#### **3.1 Emotional Development and Social Competence**

Lindsey [6] stated that the higher children's ability to express happy emotions, the better their social competence, and children who express higher levels of happiness are more popular at school, and teachers also perceive them to have a stronger ability to get along with other people; however, expressions of angry emotion are on the opposite way, children who express angry more often, the less popular they will be. Children in kindergarten or the first few years of elementary school are basically in a play-based teaching environment, so in the game environment, it is difficult for children who always show passive emotions to fit into the game. Additionally, functionalists suggest that showing anger serves as a refusal cue to keep others away from oneself [7]. In other words, children's excessive frequency of rage might be a sign of their poor adjustment to school life. Therefore, children's emotional development in their initial school environment can be enough to influence their prosocial skills and friendship development.

#### **3.2 Emotional Development and Well-being**

Emotional experience is an important part of adaptive functioning and plays a key role in school-aged children's mental and physical health. Ungar et al. [8] conducted a school-wide program about student resilience, which is the core capacity of emotion regulation to help children cope with the negative effects of adversity, indicating that the improvement of resilience competence greatly improves students' self-efficacy and subjective well-being. In addition to studies on resilience, the theoretical framework of emotional intelligence, which contains four elements—evaluating and expressing one's own emotions, evaluating and recognizing others' emotions, regulating one's own emotions, and manipulating emotions to aid performance—is well throughout the study of emotional development. Emotional intelligence, according to Carmeli et al. [9], has a positive relationship with aspects of psychological well-being including self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and self-acceptance.

#### **3.3 Emotional Development and Academic Performance**

Emotions play a crucial role in academic success, both directly and indirectly. According to neurological studies, the amygdala, which processes emotions, develops earlier than the prefrontal cortex, the tissue used to develop higher-order cognitive abilities. The time difference indicates that emotions may have a greater impact on subsequently developed cognitive development [10]. In addition, Jayawickreme et al. [11] proposed an "engine model of well-being," which points out that emotions are important variables in the process of decision-making and behavior, emphasizing the essential role of emotion in encouraging students' engagement and constructing meaning for learning. Children who know how to positively regulate emotions through cognitive, behavioral, and social strategies are less likely to develop inappropriate behaviors and thus are better able to engage in classroom activities that contribute to learning. Moreover, as mentioned above, children who know how to regulate their emotions are better able to cope with stress in school and daily life, and to build a positive social network. Both of them, good resilience competence and social skills, have an indirect

impact on how students perceive school life. Students who are comfortable with academic stress and have friendly relationships tend to enjoy school more, are less likely to skip classes, drop out of school, and are thus more likely to succeed academically.

#### **4. Influencing Factors of School-aged Children's Emotional Development**

Children's emotional development is jointly influenced by internal and external factors. Different subcultures and larger cultural values have different patterns of emotional expression. Therefore, understanding children's emotional development must take cultural factors into account to avoid making arbitrary judgments about children's emotional expressions that can lead to misinterpretations that are harmful. In addition, children's emotional development is closely related to the socioeconomic conditions of their families. Whether a child grows up in a safe and warm environment to some extent determines children's emotional development. Other than these external elements, a child's emotional development can also be influenced by individual factors such as gender. Considering all aspects together is a prerequisite for understanding children's emotional development.

##### **4.1 Culture Differences in School-aged Children's Emotional Development**

Race and ethnic diversity are the factors that affect children's social-emotional growth. In the experiment on playing quality among 9 months and 2 years old children, Hispanic, Asian, and African American children scored much lower than white children on test results; but after adjusting for family demographics and parenting styles, Hispanic, Asian, and African American children's test scores had a noticeable boost [12]. The researcher also indicates that the effects of demographic composition and environment on different racial minorities are evident and that this is mostly caused by social and economic inequalities [12]. Given the differences between Eastern and Western cultural ideologies, in addition to the fact that emotional development is greatly influenced by the external environment and rooted in social and cultural contexts, people have different ways of expressing and interpreting emotions. Therefore, children from Asian countries and American countries, with different cultural backgrounds have different emotional development trajectories and patterns. For example, Japanese and Chinese children had more neutral expressions when confronted with unsatisfactory gifts compared to more negative expressions of American children [13].

##### **4.2 SES Differences in School-aged Children's Emotional Development**

The socioeconomic status (SES) of different children's families is another important factor that affects children's mental health and emotional development. Different socioeconomic status corresponds to different economic capabilities, disparities in education level and environment, and the level of medical and health care available also varies widely. Research shows that being born in a low socioeconomic family can affect children's mental health and emotional development. Children born in low SES families have a 25%-39% higher prevalence of emotional and psychological disorders than children from higher SES families [14]. Families with low-income and unprivileged social status have difficulty providing their children with sufficient emotional support, professional cognitive training, and a productive learning environment. The effects of delayed interventions can be reflected later in a child's educational career.

##### **4.3 Gender Differences in School-aged Children's Emotional Development**

Gender difference is also a possible cause of differences in children's emotional development. Boys and girls have some personality differences in the "stereotypes". When discussing the variations in personality between boys and girls, statements like "girls are quieter and calmer," "boys are more prone to be lively and mischievous," etc. are commonly used. Though these comments are too generalized, gender difference do affect children's development in certain manners. Research shows that there is a gap between boys and girls in the association of emotional expression and social competence [6]. Diener and Kim [15] also discovered that boys are more likely to get angry when

face with parental criticism and are more prone to commit violent related behaviors than girls at the same age, which indicates that boys' emotional management abilities are relatively lagging behind compared to those of girls at the same age.

## 5. Suggestions for Future Research, Schools, and Parents

Research on emotional evolution has focused more on children in early childhood and adolescence and less on school-age children. However, 7 to 12 years old is when children systematically learn and develop literacy and cognitive competence, which, as mentioned above, has a positive relationship with children's emotional development. Moreover, developing emotional skills in school-aged children is critical to helping students navigate adolescence smoothly, improve academic performance, and achieve long-term well-being. Therefore, more studies are required to better understand the processes and influences of emotional development in order to help parents and teachers understand and cultivate children's emotional competencies. Researchers can generalize the emotional developmental stages and characteristics of school-age children more systematically and comprehensively from the perspective of developmental psychology to provide a theoretical foundation for the design of effective interventions to foster children's emotional development. Furthermore, further research is needed on the measurement tools for children's emotional development. Because children's emotional development is strongly influenced by cultural factors, there is no absolutely applicable and generalizable instrument for measuring emotional development. However, based on the fact that the factors influencing children's emotional development are the same across cultures, we can develop uniform criteria for designing measurement instruments. The development of standards would be important for the sustainability of research in this area and would also provide a good basis for the comparison of emotional development research across cultures.

Considering that school is the primary scene in the lives of school-aged children, it is important to understand how to nurture children's emotional development in the school setting. The development of emotional competence in current schools mainly consists of two main components: creating external conditions and teaching skills. A safe and loving environment is a prerequisite for students to feel comfortable revealing their personalities, expressing themselves, and building social relationships. Given the close relationship between emotional and social development, social-emotional development is often adopted as an integrated concept in teaching. The development of students' emotional development is more likely to be achieved through woven into the cultivation of social skills. Compared to social skills, there are relatively few instructional approaches or interventions designed with emotional development as a focus. Thus, more intervention and pedagogies about emotional development are needed to support the school children's all-around development.

Parents, as the primary source of emotional support for children, should share the obligation to educate with schools and teachers. Although the socio-economic status of the family plays an important role in the emotional development of the child, it is not decisive. The lack of material conditions can be compensated by other deeds, such as effective companionship, good parent-child relationships, and others. Therefore, parents should work with teachers to observe their children's emotional development and proactively provide the emotional scaffolding to help children better express and manage their emotions.

## 6. Summary

This article first reviews the emotional developmental characteristics of school-aged children: children at this age can identify more types of emotions, express emotions in richer ways and languages, and engage in socially normative emotion management behaviors. Then, it summarizes the importance of emotional development for social competence, school performance, and well-being, stating that these three elements are interrelated and play a vital role in the physical and mental health

and long-term development of young children. In the third section of this article, some factors that influence emotional development, including culture, SES, and gender are discussed. Children's emotional development has cultural and individual differences, and it is impossible to properly evaluate children's emotional development apart from the factors mentioned above. The last part points out the problems in the current research on emotional development: first, the focus of emotional development research is mainly on infants and adolescents, and there is not enough research on school-age children; second, the research on emotional development is dependent on social competence development, and no independent understanding of this competence has been developed; third, there is no clear standard for the design of measurement instruments for emotional development, which hinders the adoption of emotional development research among different countries and is not conducive to the long-term development of this research. In addition, the final section of the article identifies current efforts in schools to address children's emotional development, including creating a supportive learning environment and teaching social skills. It also points out that schools can design activities that focus on emotional development, such as expanding students' emotional vocabulary. It also demonstrates the important role of parents in the emotional development of school-age children and points out that effective companionship is more important than material support.

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