

Emotion Understanding, Expression, and Regulation in Early Childhood

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Abstract. As one of the most fundamental abilities to gain in early childhood, emotion development is correlated to the interaction with one's surroundings. Based on the review of previous studies, this paper explored children's social-emotional development through emotional understanding, emotional expressiveness, emotional regulation, and the influence of family dynamics on individual development. Besides the researches on typically developing children's emotion regulation, this paper also analyzed the difficulties of emotion regulation on individuals with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC). This paper indicated that parent-child talking and the use of picture book had been assessed to positively influence children's emotional development. In the future, more studies can be conducted to deeply explore interactive mechanisms of society, family and peer experiences to understand the independent and mutual effects of each factors on developments of young children's social knowledge, focusing on the dynamic and interactive process between the three and helping parents establish a high-quality parent-child emotional response state and promote children's emotion socialization.

Keywords: Social-emotion Development, Early Childhood Development, Emotion Regulation Strategy.

1. Introduction

Emotion could facilitate starting, maintaining, and adjusting relationships. Emotion awareness can help kids respond to and interact with their social surroundings. The development of young children's emotional awareness can predict children's social ability development to a certain extent. Several studies indicate that the emotional intelligence of children and adolescents correlates to their prosocial behaviour and social competence and demonstrate that high awareness of one's own and peers' emotions is related to the level of empathy [1]. Children's facial identifying ability was positively related to their social behavior. Children with low expression recognition levels are likelier to have emotional and behavioral problems. For example, some children suddenly and vigorously pat others when playing happily because they do not know how to express their happiness. In general, advanced emotion awareness results in a more favorable outcome.

Therefore, helping children recognize and express emotions can reduce the possibility of behaviour problems in adolescence and adulthood. This article examines the existing articles about emotional development in early childhood.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Development of Emotion Awareness in Early Childhood

Emotion awareness is the ability to recognize children's emotions and those of others. Children's emotional ability develops with age. At nine months of age, children can initially recognize the facial expressions of others. At 2-3 years of age, along with developing speech ability, children can name some facial expressions and use emotional vocabulary to express. At 3-5 years old, children can understand other people's emotions based on their situation. The study also found that 3-year-old children's emotional understanding ability affects their 5-year-old theory of mind ability by affecting their 4-year-old language ability. More than 75% of 4-6 years-old children can understand emotional words such as happiness, sadness, anger and fear and decide their emotional responses based on

understanding others' beliefs. By age 6, children preliminary acquire the rule of emotional expressions and can repress or exaggerate their facial expression in certain situations. At the age of 7, children can correctly identify complex emotions such as surprise and disgust.

Children first develop awareness and comprehension of happiness among all simple or complex emotions. This may relate to the living environments of young children. After the babies are born, caregivers look at them with happy faces so that they are the first to develop the emotional type of "happiness". Among the negative emotion's awareness, children can quickly identify anger and sadness. The awareness of "angry" facial expressions is relatively high for 3-year-old children, and sadness's cognition ability gradually increases in early childhood. Fear, surprise, and disgust are more difficult for young children to identify. Among them, the cognition of fear did not change significantly throughout early childhood. Still, the cognition of surprise increased with age, and children aged 5-6 were significantly better than children aged 3-4, while cognition of disgust was correlated with children's growth. There were significant age differences in the real-world emotional cognition task, with 6-year-olds showing significant gains.

2.2. Components of Emotion Development in Early Childhood

Emotion development refers to one's ability to express and regulate emotions appropriately based on identifying and understanding their own and others' emotions, as well as caring for others' emotions and helping others to regulate their emotions. Emotion understanding, expression, and regulation comprise three dimensions in this study.

2.2.1. Emotion Understanding

It includes children's cognition of emotional expression and their understanding of the emotional situations, such as recognition, identification and designation, expression, mixed emotion and emotional language.

2.2.2. Emotion Expression

It is the ability to accurately describe the emotions of oneself or others in a specific situation.

2.2.3. Emotion Regulation

It is the ability to respond to different emotions, including regulating both external and internal emotions. The core process of emotional regulation is attention regulation [2].

2.3. Influence of Family Factor on Children's Social-emotional Development

2.3.1. Parents' Talking Affects Children's Emotion Development

Many studies have found that individual difference is significant in children's emotional cognition development, which is attributed to children's early life environment (especially the family environment). Parents may influence a child's emotional development in many different ways. For example, in interacting with their children, the parent's role is essential in helping children acquire emotion cognition and practical emotion regulation skills.

Previous studies have demonstrated that parents' talking, including frequent emotional expression about their positive or negative feelings, could stimulate their child's corresponding comprehension of emotion, self-regulation skills, and empathy towards others [3]. For example, more recent evidence states that during parent-child discussions, mothers' emphasis on positive emotions like happiness and pleasure can lead to a child's positive outcomes such as a happy mood and improved social skills [4].

Besides the majority of studies focusing on clinical samples (family member has already been diagnosed with one type of psychological or mental health disorder), studies also show that parents with sub-clinical psychopathology symptoms negatively affect children's social-emotional development following two steps. First, parents' psychopathology symptoms would cause destructive parental emotional socialization behaviours. Second, poor emotional socialization gradually leads to maladaptive child social-emotional development.

For instance, some psychopathology symptoms like depressed mood and anxiety contribute to children's internalizing problems (e.g., withdrawn behaviour) and externalizing problems ((e.g., aggression). Parents on certain levels of depression show less affection than parents without symptoms during parent–child interaction and are less emotionally participating with children. They show less sensitivity towards child's emotions and are more likely to respond with an ignoring or indifferent attitude when their children show negative emotions (e.g., ignoring, belittling).

Contrary to parents' less affection functioning in children, positive emotional expressiveness of parents is one of the most important predictors of children's typical emotional development, which could lead to a high measure of both self-regulation and social competence [5].

2.3.2. Parents' Emotional Response Affects Children's Emotion Development

First, parents' emotional response effects children's emotional regulation, which is decisive in children's emotional ability and social adaptation. Parental supportive response positively predicted the emotional regulation of preschoolers and adolescents, while non-supportive response correlated with negative emotional regulation. Positive emotional responses provide children with a sense of security, making them more likely to seek support from their environment to ease negative emotions and perform better self-adjustment. On the contrary, parents' negative emotional responses will lead to children's suppression of self-expression and ignoring their feeling of themselves, which eventually cause mental health issues [6].

Second, parental emotional response affects children's emotional understanding. The parental supportive response can positively predict 3-to 4-year-old children's emotional naming, scene recognition, triggers, and language. It also predicts emotional expression rules and mixed emotions understanding of 5-year-old children. However, the study also found that parents' unsupported responses positively affected children's emotional understanding to some extent. The reason may be that a parent's moderate negative response allows the child to feel and perceive different types of emotions, thus developing a more advanced level of emotional understanding, in particular, more complex and higher-level emotional development, such as mixed emotional cognition and understanding of emotional expression rules.

Third, parents' emotional response affects children's emotional expression. Parents' positive responses may help their children maximize positive emotions and minimize the harm of negative emotions. In addition, parents' positive responses can help children distinguish the same emotions in multiple situations in which they may engage. For example, parents often respond naturally to children's mild anger because of falling over. On the contrary, if children show intense anger during siblings' play, the parents' responses will differ. This differentiated response can help children understand the emotions attached to different situations [7].

2.3.3. Emotional Vocabulary Understanding Influenced by Family Atmosphere

Parents' emotional expressions affect children's understanding and application of emotional vocabulary [8]. Children use [Happy] related words more than [Anger\Fear] related words because they use happy or unhappy words to express their emotions. In addition, children's understanding and use of emotional words are mainly acquired from the emotional expression of their parents and those around them. Parents tend to express more positive emotions in front of children, and avoid expressing negative emotions such as anger. Therefore, children have less exposure to negative emotional words. Moreover, since children are usually protected by their parents, they have less emotional experience or experience of being frightened. Thus, the experience and the use of [Fear] related words may also be relatively rare.

2.4. Developing Difficulties in Children with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC)

Children begin to make social inferences about human faces in the first several years. For typically developing children, emotional understanding includes judging other people's thoughts and emotions based on their facial expressions, voices, behaviours and other information. Compared with typically developing children, individuals with ASC show delays in emotion discrimination, expression

development, and great difficulty in emotional interaction. They do not easily understand the facial expressions of others or cannot express their emotions appropriately. They do not react adequately to others' sadness or happiness, and seem preoccupied with their activities. These actions are presented through tests assessing emotion recognition based on facial expressions, speech, body language, and life-like tasks. Participants are asked to integrate clues from multiple perspectives [9]. The lack of emotional ability is correlated to the approach they use. Compared with typically developing children preferring eyes, children with ASD clearly prefer mouths [10].

The concept that ASC individuals show different facial processing and pay less attention to facial expressions has also been illustrated in other articles [11]. ASC children are slower to process information and have more difficulty shifting attention than typically developing children. This inflexibility contributes to the strategy that individuals with autism understand others' emotional states by acquiring information from the lower face.

According to different intervention training modes, the widely accepted interventions for ASD children's emotional understanding ability can be divided into a computer program, cartoon, cognitive behavioural, and single emotion expression understanding training.

Simon used "the Transporters" to conduct intervention training for ASD children, which not only can effectively improve ASD children's ability to identify both basic emotions and complex emotions but also develops behaviour related to their emotions. Bauminger conducted a 1-month cognitive-behavioural intervention for autism aged 8 to 17. The results showed that children with autism progressed through positive social interaction, problem-solving strategies, and complex emotional understanding. Ryan conducted a 4-week group cooperation and homework combined with single emotion expression and comprehension training, which had a remarkable effect that the follow-up observation results show an improvement in children's emotion recognition ability.

Therefore, the intervention functioning on ASD children's emotional understanding ability should include simple and complex emotions. The intervention of complex emotions is significant for developing ASD children's empathy ability. Baron. C proposed that the intervention training of key emotions plays a fundamental role in improving the social skills of ASD children.

2.5. Emotional Regulation Strategies

2.5.1. Picture Books Facilitate Children's Emotion Recognition and Expression

Emotional-themed picture books guide children to express their emotions by observing the characters in the story and being empathetic toward the characters. Studies state that books can help children improve their cognition of facial expressions and body language, representing people's emotions. Picture book brings children into the emotions it creates in an exciting and illustrated way, effectively helping them express and resolve negative emotions [12]. Parents can resolve children's emotional issues better when they read together, including helping children to name different emotions such as anger and disguise. When children encounter emotional problems, they can express their emotions clearly in words instead of crying or hitting. When reading emotion-themed picture books, children may generate the same feeling as the characters, knowing that other people also have such feelings, and such feelings can be accepted and recognized.

Some studies take the kindergarten class as the target class, mainly intervening from the four emotional types of anger, sadness, fear, and jealousy common in children's lives, and choose corresponding emotional theme picture books for each emotion. Through the questionnaire method before and after the experiment and observation and analysis to jointly verify the effectiveness of emotional education activities based on inspirational theme picture books. The experiment found that children's emotional recognition and understanding, emotional expression and emotional regulation dimensions have been significantly improved. The study also found that the children in the experimental class used more positive regulation strategies of language expression and alternative activities to solve daily conflicts and conflicts instead of the negative regulation strategies of venting emotions and aggressive behaviour that often appeared in the past [13].

3. Implication

Parents should have more reading time with their children. Through parent-child reading, young children would develop a natural sense of dependence and pleasure toward their parents. For example, when parents and young children read a fairy tale together, children can detect their parents' tone, mood, facial expressions, etc. Reading activity is conducive to bonding the intimate interaction between parents and children, and facilitates children's cognition of love, a fundamental ability to develop in early childhood.

Empirical study has shown that frequent parent-child emotional talk is essential to the emotional development of young children [14]. This kind of conversation allows children to learn more expressive words. Children's ability to comprehend and apply emotional vocabulary has an important influence on emotional understanding and expression. Emotional vocabulary benefits children with their ability to have emotional awareness. Therefore, teachers and parents should pay more attention to children's understanding and application of emotional vocabulary and create a vibrant, supportive environment for children to promote their ability to use those expressions. Three practical ways to cultivate self-positive emotional cognition in daily routines: are making good use of morning conversations (or morning meetings), illustrating the proper verbal emotion expression, and teaching children emotion regulation strategies. The correct cognition of self-emotions in kindergarten children is conducive to better adaptation in primary school life.

Besides, kindergarten teachers could also apply facial expression images to assess children's emotion recognition ability and conduct coping skills for children with insufficient abilities to reduce potential behaviour problems in the class.

Several limitations have been seen through the observations in kindergartens. Kindergarten daily routine consists of four parts: outside exercise, class, life and indoor plays. Each child must ensure 2 hours of exercise, 1 hour of play, and about 3 hours of daily activities. With the tight daily schedules, some teachers have little flexible time to handle emergent events. Through interviews with teachers, it was found that teachers couldn't handle the emergency properly when children adopt misbehavior to express their negative emotions. Teachers' lack of time and theoretical basis to understand children's emotions underneath their misbehaviour leads to further in-depth problems. Therefore, educators need extra time and professional training to increase their ability to solve children's emotional issues beyond the surface, to enhance children's emotional understanding, expression and regulation.

To understand children's social-emotional development more precisely, an important research direction for future research is to study children in both home and school environments and examine the relative contribution of family and peer experiences to social knowledge development.

4. Conclusion

Emotional development is one of the essential ability's children acquire in the early stage, which is closely related to the interaction between individuals and their surroundings. Based on previous studies, this paper analyzes children's social-emotion development and the impact of family dynamics on individual development from three aspects: emotional regulation, understanding and expression. The effects of coping strategies of picture books and parental reading time are also analyzed. To gain a more precise comprehension of children's emotional development, further studies could explore the interaction mechanism of society, family and peer experience, focusing on the dynamic interaction process among these three, thus helping parents establish a high-quality parent-child emotional reaction state and promoting the development of children's emotional socialization.

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