Association of Child Emotion Understanding and Emotion-Related Behavior During a Delay of Gratification Task

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Introduction

Emotion Understanding: Refers to one's accurate ability to interpret and present the expressions of emotions (Strand, Downs & Barbosa-Leiker, 2016).

Emotion Regulation: Emotion regulation is the process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions based on their appropriateness to the particular context (Thompson, 1994).

Emotion Understanding and Emotion Regulation: Children with emotional understanding and emotion regulation skills obtain:

- the ability to manage their emotions under most or all circumstances
- reduced likelihood of presenting externalized and destructive behavioral disorders
- increased success in social and interpersonal relations and
- a tendency to excel in academic achievements (Dunsmore, Booker and Olleldick, 2013, Howe et al., 2003). The general process and understanding-regulation connections are depicted below. However, there is a diversity of opinion about theory and methods. We sought to expand the literature, particularly with new insights into child behavior during a delay task.

Abner Emotions Interview

Children were asked to discuss times they experienced happy, calm, excited, mad, sad and scared feelings. Each child chose the order of the feelings completed, using pictures of Abner’s emotions faces to facilitate understanding. Below are the Abner cards for 3 of the 6 feelings.

Emotion Understanding: The stories for each of the six feelings on the Abner Emotion Interview were rated using seven, four-point Likert scales. Higher scores indicate greater understanding. Ratings were summed across all emotions, indicating a total for emotion understanding. The scales included:

- degree to which the story fit the emotion
- descriptive detail for the story
- ease at which the child could tell a story (i.e., responsiveness)
- Inter-rater reliability was assessed for 25 % of the cases and was excellent (i.e., >90% exact agreement).

Cookie Task

The parent and their child completed the Cookie Task together (Silk et al. 2006). The parents completed a questionnaire while the child waited for their prize bag that was placed on the table. No further directions were provided, except that parents would be signaled to give the prizes after 7 minutes. The child’s affect and behaviors were then coded in 15 second intervals.

Emotion Regulation: Previously students assessed nonverbal expressions of joy, sadness, and anger, based on Silk’s method (2006). We used a qualitative inductive method to develop new ratings. Informed by attachment and emotion literatures, Presence/absence of the following behaviors were rated: hyperactivity/high arousal, avoidance, false positive affect and noncompliance. The percent of intervals in which the behavior occurred was utilized in analyses. Inter-rater reliability was completed on 12 cases and was excellent.

Methods

Participants

The research began with a longitudinal study that assessed the importance of child-parent attachment with the preschooler’s emotional functioning. Participants were recruited from preschool programs serving low-income families in rural Appalachia. All the families were given compensation for their participation.

- A total of 35 families
- 32 mothers and 3 fathers
- 35 children between the ages of 5-7 years old (mean 6 years)
- 18 children were female

Results

- Children with higher emotion understanding tended to show less anger, sadness and avoidance, at least at a trend level.
- Children with higher emotion understanding showed less noncompliance (p<.01).

Discussion

- These results have important implications for understanding the function of children’s disruptive behavior.
- Children who do not understand their emotions don’t have a capacity to do much to regulate them besides avoidance and noncompliance.
- Dysregulated or problem behavior may be occurring because the children don’t know what else they can or should do.
- Future studies may benefit from discriminating between false positive affect and genuine joy children express. This is a unique contribution from the attachment literature (Crittenden, 2004).
- Future research tasks include examining parenting behavior, including how parents assist their children in understanding and regulating negative emotions.
- Many of our families could have benefitted from interventions to help parents “coach” their children to understand and regulate their emotions in more adaptive ways.
- Children also could have been helped by preventative school-based programs focused on enhancing emotional development.

Selected References


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