Emotional Development in Childhood

Carolyn Saarni, PhD

Sonoma State University, USA
September 2011

Introduction and Subject

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective taken toward emotional development in childhood is a combination of functionalist theory and dynamical systems theory[1]: A child's encounters with an environment can be seen as dynamic transactions that involve multiple emotion-related components (e.g., expressive behaviour, physiological patterning, action tendencies, goals and motives, social and physical contexts, appraisals and experiential feeling) that change over time as the child matures and in response to changing environmental interactions. Emotional development reflects social experience, including the cultural context. Elsewhere I have argued that emotional development should be considered from a bio-ecological framework that regards human beings as dynamic systems embedded within a community context.[2] Table 1 summarizes noteworthy descriptive markers of emotional development in relation to social interaction.

Table 1. Noteworthy Markers of Emotional Development in Relation to Social Interaction

Age Period	Regulation/Coping	Expressive Behavior	Relationship Building

Infancy: 0 - 12 mos.	Self-soothing and learning to modulate reactivity. Regulation of attention in service of coordinated action. Reliance on caregivers for supportive "scaffolding" during stressful circumstances.	Behavior synchrony with others in some expressive channels. Increasing discrimination of others' expressions. Increasing expressive responsiveness to stimuli under contingent control. Increasing coordination of expressive behaviors with emotion-eliciting circumstances.	Social games and turn-taking (e.g., "peek-a-boo"). Social referencing. Socially instrumental signal use (e.g., "fake" crying to get attention).
Toddlerhood: 12 mos.-2½ years	Emergence of self-awareness and consciousness of own emotional response. Irritability due to constraints and limits imposed on expanding autonomy and exploration needs.	Self-evaluation and self-consciousness evident in expressive behavior accompanying shame, pride, coyness. Increasing verbal comprehension and production of words for expressive behavior and affective states.	Anticipation of different feelings toward different people. Increasing discrimination of others' emotions and their meaningfulness. Early forms of empathy and prosocial action.
Preschool: 2-5 years	Symbolic access facilitates emotion regulation, but symbols can also provoke distress. Communication with others extends child's evaluation of and awareness of own feelings and of emotion-eliciting events.	Adoption of pretend expressive behavior in play and teasing. Pragmatic awareness that "false" facial expressions can mislead another about one's feelings.	Communication with others elaborates child's understanding of social transactions and expectations for comportment. Sympathetic and prosocial behavior toward peers. Increasing insight into others' emotions.

Early Elementary School: 5-7 years	Self-conscious emotions (e.g., embarrassment) are targeted for regulation. Seeking support from caregivers still prominent coping strategy, but increasing reliance on situational problem-solving evident.	Adoption of "cool emotional front" with peers.	Increasing coordination of social skills with one's own and others' emotions. Early understanding of consensually agreed upon emotion "scripts."
Middle Childhood: 7-10 years	Problem-solving preferred coping strategy if control is at least moderate. Distancing strategies used if control is appraised as minimal.	Appreciation of norms for expressive behavior, whether genuine or dissembled. Use of expressive behavior to modulate relationship dynamics (e.g., smiling while reproaching a friend).	Awareness of multiple emotions toward the same person. Use of multiple time frames and unique personal information about another as aids in the development of close friendships.
Preadolescence: 10-13 years	Increasing accuracy in appraisal of realistic control in stressful circumstances. Capable of generating multiple solutions and differentiated strategies for dealing with stress.	Distinction made between genuine emotional expression with close friends and managed displays with others.	Increasing social sensitivity and awareness of emotion "scripts" in conjunction with social roles.
Adolescence: 13+ years	Awareness of one's own emotion cycles (e.g., guilt about feeling angry) facilitates insightful coping. Increasing integration of moral character and personal philosophy in dealing with stress and subsequent decisions.	Skillful adoption of self-presentation strategies for impression management.	Awareness of mutual and reciprocal communication of emotions as affecting quality of relationship.

Note. From Saarni (2000, pp. 74-75). Copyright 2000 by Jossey-Bass. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Recent Research Results

The Development of Emotional Competence

A productive way to look at emotional functioning is the degree to which it serves the adaptive and self-efficacious goals of the individual. The construct emotional competence[3] has been proposed as a set of affect-oriented behavioural, cognitive and regulatory skills that emerge over time as a person develops in a social context. Individual factors, such as cognitive development and temperament, do indeed influence the development of emotional competencies; however, the skills of emotional competence are also influenced by past social experience and learning, including an individual's relationship history, as well as the system of beliefs and values in which the person lives. Thus, we actively create our emotional experience, through the combined influence of our cognitive developmental structures and our social exposure to emotion discourse. Through this process, we learn what it means to feel something and to do something about it. Table 2 lists the 8 skills of emotional competence.

Table 2. Skills of Emotional Competence

1. Awareness of one's emotional state, including the possibility that one is experiencing multiple emotions, and at even more mature levels, awareness that one might also not be consciously aware of one's feelings due to unconscious dynamics or selective inattention.

2. Skills in discerning and understanding others' emotions, based on situational and expressive cues that have some degree of consensus as to their emotional meaning.

3. Skill in using the vocabulary of emotion and expression in terms commonly available in one's subculture and at more mature levels to acquire cultural scripts that link emotion with social roles.

4. Capacity for empathic and sympathetic involvement in others' emotional experiences.

5. Skill in realizing that inner emotional state need not correspond to outer expression, both in oneself and in others, and at more mature levels the ability to understand that one's emotional-expressive behavior may impact on another and take this into account in one's self-presentation strategies.

6. Capacity for adaptive coping with aversive or distressing emotions by using self-regulatory strategies that ameliorate the intensity or temporal duration of such emotional states (e.g., "stress hardiness").

7. Awareness that the structure or nature of relationships is in part defined by both the degree of emotional immediacy or genuineness of expressive display and by the degree of reciprocity or symmetry within the relationship; e.g., mature intimacy is in part defined by mutual or reciprocal sharing of genuine emotions, whereas a parent-child relationship may have asymmetric sharing of genuine emotions.

8. Capacity for emotional self-efficacy: The individual views her- or himself as feeling, overall, the way he or she wants to feel. That is, emotional self-efficacy means that one accepts one's emotional experience, whether unique and eccentric or culturally conventional, and this acceptance is in alignment with the individual's beliefs about what constitutes desirable emotional "balance." In essence, one is living in accord with one's personal theory of emotion when one demonstrates emotional self-efficacy that is integrated with one's moral sense.

Note. From Saarni (2000, pp. 77-78). Copyright 2000 by Jossey-Bass. Reprinted by permission of the author.

The attachment relationship with caregivers is the initial context in which a child's emotional life unfolds. If the caregivers typically meet the infant's needs, the infant comes to internalize the notion that the world is a safe place and that others are trustworthy and responsive. The infant is then secure in his or her attachment to the caregiver. The caregiver-child relationship establishes the foundation for the development of emotional skills, and sets the stage for future social relationships. A secure attachment leaves the child free to explore the world and engage with peers. Affirmation that the world is responsive, predictable and reliable aids in the child's developing ability to self-regulate. In a study of preschoolers, Denham and her colleagues[4] found a positive association between security of attachment to mothers and security of attachment to teachers. Furthermore, security of attachment to both mother and teacher related positively to emotion understanding and regulated anger.

In contrast, a child who experiences the world as unpredictable, unresponsive and/or hostile must expend a tremendous amount of energy self-managing emotional arousal. Insecure attachment is associated with emotional and social incompetence, particularly in the areas of emotion understanding and regulated anger.[4] Furthermore, perceptions of an indifferent or unfriendly social world influence subsequent emotional responses and interpersonal behaviour. For example, a child who experiences maltreatment may develop primary emotional responses such as anxiety or fear.[5] Ever vigilant for signs of threat, the child may display aggressive or submissive behaviours as a means of self-protection, and such behaviours may place the child at risk for future status as a bully or victim. Cognitive-affective structures associated with maltreatment may promote emotional constriction or peculiar emotional responsiveness, interfering with a child's ability to engage successfully with peers.[6]

The development of emotional competence skills is a developmental process such that a particular skill manifests differently at different ages. With young children, emotion knowledge is more concrete, with heightened focus on observable factors. Young children's emotion expression and emotion regulation are less well-developed, requiring more support and reinforcement from the social environment. Elementary school children advance in their ability to offer self-reports of emotions, and to use words to explain emotion-related situations. As children mature, their inferences about what others are feeling integrate not only situational information, but also information regarding prior experiences and history. Older children are also more able to understand and express complex emotions such as pride, shame or embarrassment. By adolescence, issues of identity, moral character and the combined effects of aspiration and opportunity are more explicitly acknowledged as significant by youth.

The skills of emotional competence do not develop in isolation from each other and their progression is intimately tied to cognitive development. For example, insight into others' emotions grows in interaction with

expanding awareness of one's own emotional experience, with one's ability to empathize and with the capacity to understand causes of emotions and their behavioural consequences. Furthermore, as children learn about how and why people act as they do, they grow in their ability to infer what is going on for themselves emotionally.

Positive Development and Emotional Competence

Competent children and youth do not experience lives free of problems, but they are equipped with both individual and environmental assets that help them cope with a variety of life events. The skills of emotional competence are one set of resources that young people bring to life's diverse challenges. As with development in other domains, mastery of early skills related to emotional development, such as affective regulation, impacts a child's ability to navigate future developmental challenges.

Conclusions

Strengths in the area of emotional competence may help children and adolescents cope effectively in particular circumstances, while also promoting characteristics associated with positive developmental outcomes, including feelings of self-efficacy, prosocial behaviour and supportive relationships with family and peers. Furthermore, emotional competence serves as a protective factor that diminishes the impact of a range of risk factors. Research has isolated individual attributes that may exert a protective influence, several of which reflect core elements of emotional competence, including skills related to reading interpersonal cues, solving problems, executing goal-oriented behaviour in interpersonal situations, and considering behavioural options from both an instrumental and an affective standpoint.[7]

References

1. Saarni, C., Campos, J., Camras, L., & Witherington, D. (2008). Principles of emotion and emotional competence. In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Child and adolescent development: An advanced course* (pp. 361-405). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

2. Saarni, C. (2008). The interface of emotional development with social context. In M. Lewis, J. Haviland-Jones & L. Feldman Barrett (Eds.), *The Handbook of Emotions* (3rd ed., pp. 332-347). New York: Guilford Press.

3. Saarni, C. (1999). *The development of emotional competence*. New York: Guilford Press.

4. Denham, S., Blair, K., DeMulder, E., Levitas, J., Sawyer, K., Auerbach-Major, S., et al. (2003). Preschool emotional competence: Pathway to social competence. *Child Development*, 74, 238-256.

5. Pollak, S. D., Cicchetti, D., Hornung, K., Reed, A. (2000). Recognizing emotion in faces: Developmental effects of child abuse and neglect. *Developmental Psychology*, 36, 679-688.

6. Pollack, S. D. (2008). Mechanisms linking early experience and the emergence of emotions: Illustrations from the study of maltreated children. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17, 370-375.

7. Shields, A., Dickstein, S., Seifer, R., Guisti, L., Magee K.D., & Spritz, B. (2001). Emotional competence and early school adjustment: A study of preschoolers at risk. *Early Education and Development*, 12, 73-96.