Recognizing and Labeling Emotions

At small-group time, while coloring and listening to a piece of music, Lily says, “It’s sad when no one plays with me.” Francine (the teacher) says, “This song makes you feel sad and makes you think of when kids don’t want to play with you?” Lily nods her head yes and says while moving her body, “I’m just showing you my sad moves so you will understand.” When listening to another song and drawing with a crayon in each hand, Lily says to Francine, “This is my happy look, like going to the museum or stuff like that.”

Definition

Emotional awareness is understanding that one has feelings as distinct from thoughts; being able to identify and name those feelings; and recognizing that others have feelings that may be the same as or different from one’s own. Developmental psychologist Susanne Denham (2006) explains that emotional competence has three main components, and being able to recognize and label emotions plays a direct or prior role in each:

- **Emotion expression** is the experience and display of emotional states. To explain its importance in early development, psychologists often take a functional view. That is, they ask, “What does the expression of an emotion do or accomplish for the child?” Emotions, when properly understood and expressed, can facilitate the child’s attainment of goals, both social and cognitive.

- **Emotion regulation** is the ability to identify and control one’s emotions. The first step in self-regulation is labeling emotions with greater specificity and clarity. For example, feeling “bad” can mean feeling angry, sad, bored, and so on. Without knowing which emotion one is feeling, one cannot take steps to deal with it.

- **Emotion knowledge** is understanding how emotions affect individual behavior and social relationships. School is hard for young children because peers, unlike adults, are not as adept at regulating emotions. So, opportunities for conflict and misunderstanding multiply when children move from home to school. As emotion knowledge increases, children gain control over the situations they create and respond to.

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Young children are gaining knowledge and skills in all three areas of emotional competence. They learn to send and receive emotional messages, use emotional knowledge and self-regulation to negotiate interpersonal exchanges and form relationships, and maintain positive emotional states that make them open to learning about their world. Emotionally competent young children “experience and begin to express a broad variety of emotions, without incapacitating intensity or duration; understand their own and others’ emotions; and deal with and regulate their emotions — whenever emotional experience is ‘too
much’ or ‘too little’ for themselves, or when its expression is ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ to fit with others’ expectations” (Denham, 2006, p. 86).

**Development**

Influences on development. Emotional development is influenced by many factors, which accounts for its complexity and variability, even in infants. According to professors Cybele Raver, Pamela Garner, and Radiah Smith-Donald (2007), research on innate temperamental differences shows that by the time young children enter school, they already have stable bio-behavioral profiles of emotional reactivity and regulation. Some are more vulnerable to negative emotions (anxiety, anger, inhibition) while others are more positive (sociable, adventurous, drawn to novelty).

Cognition (perception and knowledge) also regulates emotion, and emotion may in turn regulate cognition. For example, high levels of negative arousal make it difficult for a child to encode and retrieve information, while positive emotions can facilitate learning. Children who feel positively about school stay more engaged, persist in tasks, and perform better than those with negative emotional states (Raver et al., 2007).

Language development also contributes to emotional competence by helping children identify and label their feelings. Further, because teachers regularly rely on emotion-based language to create positive school environments and democratic classrooms, children who lack the necessary verbal skills may be at a social and academic disadvantage (Raver et al., 2007).

Finally, a significant body of research demonstrates that emotional competence is influenced by socialization forces such as modeling (the way children see others handle emotions), reactions to the child’s emotions by adults and peers, depictions of emotion in the media, and discussion and teaching about emotions at home, in school, and in the community and society as a whole.

**Development of emotion identification.** Although children experience emotions from birth, recognizing and labeling them corresponds to the emergence of language. Beginning in the second year, children use *inner state* language to describe their own and other’s feelings (Raver et al., 2007). They can make simple statements such as “I am sad” or “Want toy now!” The ability to identify one’s own and others’ emotions improves with age. Consider how articulate this preschooler is as he describes his feelings and the type of situation that provokes it:

At work time in the art area, Trevor is waiting to use the red paint pump and the child using it says, “Be patient.” Trevor says, “My grandma always says, ‘Hold your patience’ and it just makes me get stressed.” When Erik later hits Jabiari’s friend Mac, Jabiari says to him, “I don’t hit my friend.” Then he walks over to Mac and says, “Are you all right?” He puts his hand on Mac’s shoulder.

At outside time (just before dismissal), Penina is looking around and Wendy (the teacher) asks what she is thinking. Penina replies, “I’m thinking about my mommy and how I love her. Shes coming soon.”

Development of emotion regulation. Thus, mental images (such as the sequence of events or the outcome of certain actions) allows the immediate or “right now” of toddlerhood to give way to the deferred gratification — “soon,” “later,” “after” — of preschool. Being able to label feelings and imagine solutions helps young children regulate emotions. It may even have an impact on their brain development. Research on the effects of the stress hormone cortisol shows that repeated trauma can hinder neural growth, while being able to release these feelings — for example, by labeling them and letting them go — can help children cope with intense experiences and emotions (Perry, 1994). Of course, the more intense the emotion, the more difficult it is for children to use their emerging ability to control it. Nevertheless, repeated experience in resolving problems, and “emptying out” the stressful feelings and harmful biological reactions associated with them, can support both cognitive growth and emotional self-regulation.

Research shows that approximately 20 percent of preschoolers may be at risk for moderate to clinically significant social and emotional difficulties, while those from low-income families at greater risk (Raver et al., 2007). Fortunately, studies suggest there is considerable plasticity in the neurological systems involved in emotion regulation and emotion knowledge, especially in the preschool years, which means early intervention can be effective. Psychologists caution, however, that interventions should focus on more general school readiness, such as preliteracy skills, rather than explicitly trying to “teach” about emotions. Children who feel competent and in control of events (see Chapter 5, “Developing a Sense of Competence”) may in turn develop the cognitive skills and motivation to better regulate their emotional states.

In sum, helping young children learn to identify and label their emotions is an important foundation of emotional health. Children who can understand and regulate their own emotions, and know how to deal with the emotions of others, do better academically and socially. They are more engaged at school, better able to sustain attention and persist at tasks, and have positive dispositions...
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Not only does their increasing vocabulary help preschoolers differentiate emotional states, but their ability to form mental representations allows them to imagine and act on solutions to emotion-based problems. For example, three- and four-year-olds can picture the sand timer running out and envision themselves then getting a turn to play with a desired toy. A child distressed by the absence of a parent can find comfort in imagining his or her return, particularly if the child is beginning to sequence time:

As a young child learns to label their feelings and internally process how they might solve problem situations, they are better able to regulate their emotions and delay gratification.

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Emotional development and social relationships. Children with better emotion knowledge are also more likely to form friendships and get help and support from adults in negotiating social relationships. Conversely, children who have trouble with emotion regulation may also be less competent at acquiring emotion knowledge from peers or adults. They may overtly express negative emotions, especially anger. Contrast the responses of these two preschoolers to anger-evoking situations:

At outside time, when Erik hits him, Jabiari says, “Hands on your own body. I don’t like that.” When Erik later hits Jabiari’s friend Mac, Jabiari says to him, “O dott hit my friend.” Then he walks over to Mac and says, “Are you all right?” He puts his hand on Mac’s shoulder.

At work time, Luis and Perry are playing alongside one another with magnet tiles. When his magnet tile ‘rocket’ falls apart, Luis points at Perry (two feet away) and says, “He broke it. I’m not playing anymore.”

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