Emotion language, emotion understanding, and parent-child conversation

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How do young children comprehend emotional experience?

- Conceptual advances in belief-desire psychology, understanding situational elicitors of emotion, prototypical emotional expressions, self-referential thought, etc.

- Social experiences such as joint attention (social referencing), emotional responsiveness in parent-infant interaction, attachment security

- Social communication in which language (a) lexicalizes emotion, (b) offers explicit access others' feelings through verbal reference, and (c) explains causes and consequences of emotions through conversation

Prior research has shown . . .

- Preschoolers whose mothers speak more elaboratively about emotions in conversation are more advanced in emotion understanding

- Young children from sociodemographically challenged families experience a less rich language environment compared to middle-income children

- Preschools who are securely attached are more advanced in emotion understanding

- Attachment security interacts with conversational quality in predicting children's emotion understanding

Questions guiding this research:

In a sociodemographically challenged sample . . .

- What are the predictors of variations in the quality and content of maternal conversations about emotion?

  content (what mothers say) - quality (how they say it)

- How are these variations associated with children's emotion language?

  production of emotion words / labeling of emotion states

- How do these conversational features predict young children's emotion understanding?

Family Emotional Climate, Attachment Security, and Young Children's Emotion Understanding

42 mothers and children (22 girls) enrolled in Early Head Start

At Time 1 (children 2 1/2 years old):

Attachment Q-sort

Assessments of maternal emotional risks, demographics

At Time 2 (children 3 1/2 years old):

Mother-child conversations about emotion (happy, angry, and sad)

Emotion understanding (Denham affective perspective-taking task

Child expressive and receptive vocabulary

Mother-child emotion conversations were coded for . . .

Maternal contributions:

- Content: factor score primarily loading with frequency of references to positive and negative emotions

- Quality: factor score primarily loading with ratings of maternal elaboration, validation, and imposition (negative)

Child contributions:

- Emotion words: frequency of positive and negative emotion words

- Emotion labels: frequency that child offered a label for an emotional state in the absence of a maternal prompt

Predicting the quality of maternal conversation about emotion . . .

	B	SEB	ß
Attachment security	1.24	0.60	0.31*
Maternal demographic characteristics	0.55	0.19	0.41**
Maternal emotional risks	0.07	0.11	0.09

R^2=0.30   *p<.05, **p<.01

Mothers were more likely to be elaborative, validating (with less imposition) in emotion conversations when (a) they were in secure attachment relationships and (b) they were older, had higher income, and were better educated. Maternal emotional risks was not a significant predictor.

Predicting the content of maternal conversation about emotion . . .

	B	SEB	ß
Attachment security	0.16	0.62	0.04
Maternal demographic characteristics	-0.17	0.20	-0.13
Maternal emotional risks	-0.37	0.12	-0.49**

R^2=0.23   *p<.05, **p<.01

Mothers were more likely to offer fewer references to emotion in conversation with children when they experienced a greater number of emotional risks. Attachment security and maternal demographic characteristics were not significant predictors.

Predicting child emotion words . . .

	B	SEB	ß
Step 1			
Maternal conversational quality	0.12	0.20	0.08
Maternal conversational content	0.85	0.19	0.56**
Child language competence	0.37	0.15	0.32*
Step 2			
Maternal conversational quality	-0.01	0.21	-0.00
Maternal conversational content	0.80	0.19	0.53**
Child language competence	0.38	0.15	0.32*
Attachment security	1.48	0.82	0.24+

R^2=0.40 for Step 1; R^2=0.45 for Step 2, R^2change=.05, (p<.10)   +p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Children used more emotion words when their mothers also do so (conversational content), they were linguistically proficient, and they were in secure attachment relationships.

Predicting child emotion labels . . .

	B	SEB	ß
Step 1			
Maternal conversational quality	0.03	0.02	0.31*
Maternal conversational content	0.05	0.02	0.43**
Child language competence	0.00	0.01	0.02
Step 2			
Maternal conversational quality	0.02	0.02	0.18
Maternal conversational content	0.04	0.01	0.39**
Child language competence	0.00	0.01	0.02
Attachment security	0.51	0.06	0.34*

R^2=0.31 for Step 1; R^2=0.41 for Step 2, R^2change=.10,(p<.05)
   +p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Children used more spontaneous emotional labels when their mothers used more emotion words, and when they were in secure attachment relationships. The influence of maternal conversational quality dropped out when attachment security was added to the regression.

Predicting child emotion understanding . .

	B	SEB	ß
Step 1			
Child emotion labels	23.75	8.61	0.40**
Step 2			
Child emotion labels	23.30	8.08	0.39**
Child language competence	1.74	0.69	0.35*
Step 3			
Child emotion labels	24.30	9.98	0.41*
Child language competence	1.74	0.72	0.35*
Maternal conversational quality	-0.11	1.00	-0.02
Maternal conversational content	-0.15	1.05	-0.02

R^2=0.16 for Step 1; R^2=0.28 for Step 2, R^2change=.16 (p<.001); R^2=0.28 for Step 3, R^2change=.16 (*ns*)   +p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Children with high scores for emotion understanding were linguistically proficient and spontaneously labeled emotional states in conversations with their mothers

Final thoughts . . .

- Maternal conversation about emotion, in this sociodemo-graphically challenged sample, is influenced by maternal stresses *and* by the security of attachment

- Maternal conversational content (emotion words) has a stronger influence on child emotion language (words and labels) than maternal conversational quality in this sample

- Children in a secure attachment are better at labeling feelings (and perhaps using emotion words), consistent with other research on their emotion understanding

- Child emotion language is a strong predictor of emotion understanding -- more than maternal conversational contributions -- even with language competence controlled