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Emotional Competence and the Development of Self

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Functionalist thinking in emotions theory has focused new attention on the growth of emotional competence and its relational origins (Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). As defined by Saarni (1990, 1999), emotional competence is the capacity for self-efficacy in emotion-eliciting social transactions. Its constituents include an awareness of one's emotions and those of others, a capacity to use emotion vocabulary and expressions, empathy, the differentiation of internal subjectivity from outward expression, emotion regulation and coping skills, and adaptive emotional communication within relationships. This portrayal of emotional competence is somewhat broader than (but consistent with) the one adopted by Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spinrad in their target article, and illustrates how intimately interconnected are processes of emotional growth with allied developments in social competence, self-understanding, relational security, social cognition, and moral understanding. This is perhaps inevitable because emotion itself is an integrative developmental process, making it difficult to chart the growth of emotional competence without appreciating its connections to many other features of sociopersonality, intellectual, and motivational development.

In this light, what are parental emotion-related socialization behaviors (ERSBs)? The authors' insightful analysis emphasizes parental reactions to children's emotional expressions, discourse concerning emotion, and the adult's emotional expressiveness. They acknowledge, however, that this does not exhaust the scope of socialization practices relevant to emotional competence in offspring. Indeed, given the breadth of influences on the growth of emotional competence, it is arguable that many parental practices socialize emotion in children even when they are not specifically emotion focused or occur in the context of emotional expressions. This is especially true early in life, when, for example, (a) the security of attachment shapes initial schemas (or *working models*, according to attachment theorists) of relationships that influence emotional experience and its expression, (b) parental efforts at behavioral management (beginning late in infancy) introduce new contingencies between parent and child, and (c) parental socialization of instrumental competence shapes emergent self-representations and the emotional consequences of self-confidence or self-doubt (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997; Laible & Thompson, 1998; Stipek, 1995; Thompson, 1998). When a parent persistently

redirects a determined toddler away from the VCR, encourages a preschooler's artistic efforts or applauds a drawing, or uses inductions to underscore another's hurt feelings owing to a child's teasing, emotional competence is being socialized. The breadth of potentially influential emotion-related socialization practices means that studying the growth of emotional competence requires examining allied influences on the development of conscience, self-understanding, and relational security.

Consider, for example, the following conversation between a 21-month-old and his mother about an event earlier in the morning:

Child: Eat my Weetabix. Eat my Weetabix. Crying.

Mother: Crying, weren't you? We had quite a battle.
"One more mouthful, Michael." And what did you do? You spat it out!

Child: (pretends to cry) (Dunn & Brown, 1991, p. 97)

This is a discussion of emotion, but also of so much more. Embedded within this short exchange is the mother's account of the causal sequence of events leading to the child's crying, an assignment of culpability, and attributions about the self in the context of the mother's moral evaluation. Lessons about crying at breakfast are embedded in lessons about cooperation, responsibility, and self-control in the context of the parent-child relationship. There is emerging evidence that such conversations between very young children and their parents scaffold early autobiographical event representation, as adults provide a narrative structure for the young child's direct, but transient, recollection of events (Nelson, 1993; Snow, 1990; see review by Thompson, 1998). In doing so, however, parents also shape broader representations (or working models) of self, emotions, morality, and relational processes. It may be difficult, and unfruitful, to examine such discussions of emotion, except within the broader context of their lessons concerning self, conscience, and relationships as well.

This is especially apparent when emotional competence is considered not only in relation to emotions of sadness, anger, distress, and fear, but also in relation to self-referent emotions of guilt, pride, shame, and embarrassment. Self-referent emotions have surprisingly early developmental roots, appearing initially around the second birthday at the same time that most of the socialization practices profiled by Eisenberg et al. be-

gin to become influential (Lewis, 1993; Stipek, 1995). Because emotions like pride and guilt require an appreciation of standards of conduct and the application of those standards to one's behavior, parental reactions are crucial to the emergence of self-referent emotions. During the toddler and early preschool years, parents not only provide approval or disapproval, but explicitly link these reactions to behavioral standards involving moral compliance or achievement. Parents' direct induction of self-referent evaluations in young offspring further underscores the relational foundations to early feelings of pride, guilt, and related emotions (Barrett, 1995; Emde, Johnson, & Easterbrooks, 1987). Thus, feelings of pride, guilt, shame, and embarrassment occur fundamentally in a social, and socialization, context.

The social-relational foundations to self-referent emotions make them highly relevant to an analysis of the development of emotional competence. Indeed, many of the constituents of emotional competence—including the ability to understand one's own and others' emotion, the capacity to display emotion in a situationally and culturally appropriate manner, and to acceptably manage and cope with emotional arousal—are highly relevant to a developing capacity for self-efficacy in relation to emotions like pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment. It is less clear, however, whether the modes of parental socialization of emotional competence profiled by Eisenberg et al. have comparable consequences for the development of self-referent emotions as they do for basic emotions like anger, fear, and sadness. The authors are not to be faulted for this—the relevant research is very limited. Nevertheless, the questions are important. Given the significance of parental practices for their elicitation, for example, is parental acceptance and constructive support for the expression of emotions like pride, guilt and shame facilitative of emotional competence? What is the meaning of parental sensitivity and open communication as they relate to self-referent emotions? Thoughtful empirical exploration of these questions in studies that recognize the intimate connections between the growth of emotional competence and the development of conscience, self-understanding, and relationships is likely to significantly advance developmental emotions theory.

Note

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