The Emotionate Child

The importance of early relationships

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1922-1923

Founding of the Vienna Psychological Institute

"Golden age in psychology"

Charlotte Bühler

Founding of developmental psychology at the University of Vienna

"to view development from the perspectives of biological function and cultural value, of society and the individual"
The emotional child

\[ R^2 = .59, \ p < .01 \]
Can Preschoolers Be Depressed?

The sympatho-adrenomedullary (see the left-hand side of the figure) and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) (see the right-hand side of the figure) axes are the primary systems for maintaining or reinstating homeostasis during stress. Stressor exposure results in activation of preganglionic sympathetic neurons in the intermediolateral cell column of the thoracolumbar (T and L, respectively) spinal cord (shown in blue). These preganglionic neurons project to pre- or paravertebral ganglia that in turn project to end organs and to chromaffin cells of the adrenal medulla. This sympathetic activation represents the classic 'fight or flight' response that was first characterized by Walter Cannon and colleagues in the early twentieth century

For the HPA axis, stressor exposure activates hypophysiotrophic neurons in the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus that secrete releasing hormones, such as corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) and arginine vasopressin (AVP), into the portal circulation of the median eminence. These releasing hormones act on the anterior pituitary to promote the secretion of adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), which in turn acts on the inner adrenal cortex (that is, the zona fasciculata) to initiate the synthesis and release of glucocorticoid hormones (for example, corticosterone in rats and cortisol in humans). Circulating glucocorticoids then promote the mobilization of stored energy and potentiate numerous sympathetically mediated effects, such as peripheral vasoconstriction. Moreover, the adrenal cortex is directly innervated by the sympathetic nervous system, which can regulate corticosteroid release. Thus, the HPA axis and sympathetic system have largely complementary actions throughout the body, including energy mobilization and maintenance of blood pressure during stress.
Sources: Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2005; Kessler, Chin, Demler, & Walters, 2005; Egger & Angold, 2006; and data from the Duke Early Childhood Study, courtesy Dr. Helen Egger, Duke Univ. Medical Center.
Emotionate (i-ˈmō-ʃənət):

1. characterized by emotional apperception, sensitivity, and/or insight (an emotionate side to his nature)

2. behaviors reflecting emotional insight or understanding (her sympathetic response showed that she was an emotionate child)
early experience (security of attachment) →
representations of people and relationships ("internal working models") →
social and emotional competence; self-concept
Secure attachment with Mother

age 3

Negative attribution bias
Belief that others have negative intentions in uncertain situations (e.g., a block tower falls over when another child runs by)

Social problem solving
Number / variety of positive solutions to social problems (e.g., how to make friends with another child)

Loneliness
Children’s responses to short interview questions (e.g., “Is it easy for you to make new friends?”)

Negative attribution bias


$p < .05$ to .01
Positive self-concept
age 5

Secure attachment with mother
age 4

Mother's stress / depressive symptoms
age 4

$R^2 = .46, p < .001$

Elements of mother-child emotion conversation:

Causes

- Total emotion references
- Requests for information

Outcomes

- Linking events

Definitions

• It’s hard when you feel so angry. You’re going “AAAHH, he’s bouncing my guy off there!” Right?

• How did the other kids feel when you shut off the game?

• It makes you sad thinking about it, doesn’t it?

• After you stopped the game, the other guys said, “You know, Joey wasn’t really doing so bad.” You thought you were losing, but you weren’t.
Security of attachment is significantly associated with the combination of these measures of conversation quality.

2 ½ years: Mother-child conversation elements during conflict episodes in the lab

- Talking about rules
- Talking about the consequences of actions
- Talking about people’s emotions
- Moral evaluative statements ("good girl!")
- Compromising or bargaining
- Justification and reasoning / Low use of threats, teasing or insistence

Prosocial measures . . .

• Helping (neutral experimenter)

• Helping (sad experimenter)

• Sharing

• Empathy (repair)
Are there reliable individual differences in prosocial responding by toddlers?
How is prosocial behavior associated with children's sympathetic concern and personal distress?

For Personal Distress: $F(2, 80) = 4.78, p < .05$
For Sympathetic Concern: $F(2, 75) = 8.08, p < .001$
What characteristics of children, mothers, and their relationship are associated with differences in prosocial behavior?

Maternal personality characteristics

Toddler's emotion understanding

Picturebook reading: emotional references to child

Mother's mind-mindedness

Maternal sensitivity

Toddler temperamental self-regulation

Prosocial behavior (combined) 18 months

Do preschoolers show reliable differences in prosocial responding at age 4 ½?
Prosocial groups at 6 years of age

Prosocial groups: Low (N=4), Medium (N=12), High (N=27), Helpers of convenience (N=8)

Prosocial Aggregate Score

- Helping
- Sharing
- Empathy
Mother-child conversation about helping and not helping

- References to emotions, needs, and desires – of the (potential) help recipient or the child -- were frequent for each conversation type, along with positive or negative moral evaluative statements.

- Conversations about not helping at age 4 ½ were shorter but were more strongly associated with prosocial behavior at age 6, particularly in mothers’ use of positive moral evaluatives (“That was nice to do”).

- Shared positive affect between mothers and children at age 4 ½ was also a significant predictor of prosocial behavior at age 6.

- Maternal rule-based justifications were never associated with children's prosocial behavior at any age.
Development of the emotionate child

- An emotional connection to another’s experience develops early and contributes, more than rules and sanctions, to emergent conscience, helping and sharing, and empathy-related actions.

- The content and quality of mother–child conversation enlists this emotional capacity into representations of people, relationships, and the self that also support constructive social conduct.

- Early relational experience provides a context of safety and security that buffers stress, strengthens positive self-regard, and enhances young children’s positive orientation toward others.

- Both what is said and how it is said is important: positive, emotion-focused discourse in the context of relational warmth provide young children with the experience of sensitivity to their own feelings as they become sensitive to others’ emotions.
Thanks!

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UC Davis
University of California

SEDL
The Social and Emotional Development Lab
Any Psychological Disorder

Prevalence (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toddler &amp; Preschool (2-5 yrs)</th>
<th>Children and Youth (5-17 yrs)</th>
<th>Adult</th>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
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Toddler helping in experimental and control conditions