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Infancy and Childhood: Emotional Development

Emotion is a familiar but psychologically complex human experience. Consequently, the growth of emotion integrates diverse developmental processes in infancy and childhood, including psychobiological

growth, perceptual processes, emotional and social understanding, self-awareness and self-understanding, and the growth of self-regulation. The study of emotional development has also been stimulated by basic questions concerning the nature of emotion itself, and its role in behavior and development. This article explores the issues that have contributed to considerable research interest in emotional growth early in life.

1. The Nature of Emotional Development

Emotions color the life experience of people of all ages. For infants and children, emotions have especially powerful motivational consequences because emotional understanding is rudimentary, capacities for emotion self-regulation are limited, and the young child's engagement or withdrawal from events is primarily emotional in quality. Emotional development is central to understanding the growth of social competence, intellectual achievement, self-understanding, and the earliest origins of mental health or psychopathology because of the importance of emotion to the organization and regulation of early behavior (Lewis and Haviland-Jones 2000). Emotional development provides a window into the psychological growth of the child as, from infancy to late childhood, emotions become integrated into the broader fabric of behavioral competence, become objects of thought and analysis, can be strategically expressed or concealed in social situations, are shaped by the child's experience of significant relationships, motivate prosocial as well as aggressive tendencies, become part of self-understanding (especially in feelings of guilt and pride), and color the individuality of personality growth.

1.1 Emotions and Development

Emotional development was vigorously studied earlier in the twentieth century, and has recently received renewed attention after a period of dormant interest. There are several ways that the contemporary study of emotional development differs from traditional approaches rooted in psychoanalytic or Piagetian theories. First, emotions are regarded as centrally important to understanding development in infancy and childhood, rather than as a peripheral or disruptive facet of early growth. Second, emotional development offers a uniquely integrative perspective on human development. Understanding emotional growth requires synthesizing biological perspectives on development (including neurobiological growth, temperamental individuality, and neuroendocrine functioning) with social perspectives (including relational and family influences, and the child's developing understanding of cultural norms). Third, emotions are

viewed as having constructive as well as disorganizing features. Although emotions are capable of undermining effective functioning (which accounts for current scientific interest in the growth of emotion regulation), developmental researchers also emphasize how emotions motivate and organize social interaction, underlie the quality of early social relationships, shape self-understanding, and provide incentives for developing new skills and capabilities. This is consistent with a new appreciation for the constructive, organizational role of emotions in other areas of psychological study.

Contemporary study of emotional development in infancy and childhood is also motivated by clinical concerns—most notably, a growing realization of the early emergence of emotionally related disorders in young children, including depression, anxiety disorders, and behavioral and conduct problems. Thus the study of emotional development is informed by developmental psychopathological studies of the origins of these disorders in troubled parent–child relationships, temperamental vulnerability, environmental and genetic risk, and individual capacities for emotional self-regulation. This research further underscores the complex, integrative quality of emotional growth, and the various risks that exist for emotional dysfunction as well as alternative avenues to prevention and remediation.

Developmental research on emotions has required a broad range of methodologies. These include fine-grained analysis of videotaped facial expressions, naturalistic observations of social interaction at home or school, conversations with young children about their comprehension of emotional events, detailed study of the responses of children to emotionally evocative laboratory vignettes, parent-report approaches, and psychobiological measures of heart rate, cortisol, or cerebral asymmetry during emotionally arousing situations. Developmental scientists are increasingly integrating these methodological strategies in broadly based longitudinal studies that enable them to study the emergence of emotional capacities over time and in the context of family processes, psychobiological maturation, and other influences.

1.2 What is Emotion?

Contemporary study of the functions of emotion in behavior and development is accompanied by debate over the nature of emotion itself. Two broad perspectives can be distinguished. The structuralist perspective defines emotion in terms of discrete emotional states, each with unique patterns of subjective feeling, cognitive appraisal, physiological arousal, and facial expression (Izard 1991). These emotion components are tightly interconnected and are deeply rooted in human evolution because of their relevance to reproductive success (e.g., feelings of anger involve

visceral, perceptual, subjective, and expressive components relevant to self-defense). This view is consistent with the everyday tendency to distinguish basic emotions like anger, fear, sadness, and joy as readily dissociable states.

More recently, however, functionalist perspectives on emotional development have questioned whether emotional life is so discretely packaged and have offered an alternative view (Saarni et al. 1998). In this perspective, emotion is defined in terms of the quality of the transactions between the person and the environment on matters of significance to the individual. In this regard, what defines an emotion is not a network of internal subjective, physiological, and other components, but rather the constellation of a person's goals, appraisals, action tendencies, and other capacities in relation to environmental incentives, obstacles, and opportunities. As a result, emotional experience is not confined to a predefined set of emotion categories, but can encompass the rich variety of subtly nuanced emotional blends characteristic of everyday experience, as well as the breadth of how emotion is conceptualized in diverse sociocultural groups based on how specific person–environment transactions are conceived.

A functionalist approach is also well suited to developmental analysis. One way that emotions develop, for example, is in how the generalized arousal conditions of early infancy mature into the more specific, organized, and refined emotional states apparent in older children and adults. Young infants do not necessarily experience or express emotions in ways that fit into the discrete emotion categories of English speakers, but appear instead to experience more diffuse affective systems that become progressively better differentiated as a result of early social experiences and socialization, cognitive growth, and psychobiological maturation. Studying this developmental process requires methodological creativity and breadth, as functionalist theorists suggest. Rather than relying exclusively on facial expressions as primary indicators of underlying subjectivity, for example, developmental researchers increasingly index emotion multimodally, integrating facial, vocal, and other behavioral indicators into an organizational interpretation in relation to the child's interaction with environmental opportunities and challenges.

2. What is Emotional Development the Development of?

The primary challenge of developmental analysis is understanding why developmental changes in emotion occur, and how emotional growth is associated with concurrent advances in social, cognitive, linguistic, and physical development. Exploring the various components of emotional development reveals how

emotional experience integrates significant aspects of psychological development in infancy and childhood.

2.1 Psychobiological Growth

Emotions are biologically basic features of human functioning. They are predicated on richly interconnected brain structures and hormonal influences that organize the interplay of activation and regulation that constitutes emotional reactions. The young infant's capacity to exhibit distress, fear, surprise, happiness, and rage reflects the early functioning of these biologically deep-rooted psychobiological systems. Emotional development is based, therefore, on neurophysiological, neuroendocrine, and other biological processes that change rapidly in infancy and childhood (LeDoux 1996, Panksepp 1998). For example, the developing stability of sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system functioning in infancy helps to account for the growing predictability, manageability, and environmental responsiveness of the infant's emotional responding. Later in childhood, as higher brain regions (especially in the frontal neocortex) progressively mature and become integrated with early developing regions of the limbic system and other subcortical structures, emotional life becomes increasingly characterized by more acute emotion appraisals, complex emotional blends, and growing capacities for emotional self-regulation. Because an apparently simple emotional reaction is actually a surprisingly complex psychobiological event, developmental changes in multiple brain regions, hormonal functioning, and neurotransmitter regulation are involved in emotional growth.

2.2 Perceiving and Responding to Emotions in Others

Throughout life, emotions are evoked by one's perception of emotion in others. Infants are capable of discerning the emotional meaning in an adult's facial and vocal expressions before the end of the first year, and there is evidence that they respond resonantly to the sound of another infant's crying even earlier. Moreover, by the end of the first year, infants not only attend to the emotional expressions of adults but also incorporate the meaning of these expressions into their understanding of the adult's behavior. This phenomenon is called 'social referencing,' and it is analogous to how people enlist the emotional expressions of others into their assessment of their circumstances (Feinman 1992, Saarni et al. 1998). In a comparable manner, when a one year old encounters an unfamiliar person or object, the sight of a trusted adult's reassuring smile or terrified look (especially if it is accompanied by appropriate vocalizations and other behavior) significantly influences the child's approach or withdrawal tendencies. It appears that the infant

'reads' appropriately the meaning of the adult's emotional expression and its referential relevance to the unfamiliar event.

In the years that follow, advances in emotional understanding significantly expand the young child's capacity to respond appropriately and insightfully to the perception of emotion in others. By the end of the second year, for example, toddlers are more consciously aware of the subjectivity of emotional experience (i.e., another person can feel differently than oneself) and of the causes for others' emotions. This is often manifested when young children are observed comforting a distressed adult or peer, teasing a sibling, during pretend play, or even in humor (Denham 1998).

In early childhood, moreover, genuinely empathic responses to another's distress can be observed. Initially, young children respond with concerned attention to the sight and sound of another's distress, but empathic responses increase in sophistication and scope in the years following. Early empathy is not reliably accompanied by prosocial initiatives toward the distressed person because empathic arousal is a motivationally complex experience for young children (Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990). Young preschoolers have been observed to laugh, tease, become distressed, and even hit a distressed parent, for example, as well as offering comfort. With increasing age and greater understanding of their own efficacy as prosocial agents, empathy becomes somewhat more regularly associated with helping others.

2.3 Emotional Understanding

The advances in emotional understanding accompanying conceptual growth enable children to better understand others' emotions, and also their own. Consistent with growth in their naive 'theory of mind,' for example, two to three year olds appreciate how emotion is associated with the satisfaction or frustration of desires (which vary for different people), and four to five year olds understand the more complex associations between emotion and thoughts, beliefs, and expectations (Bartsch and Wellman 1995). The latter is important because it contributes to the growing realization that emotions can be based on false beliefs or appearances (a peer anticipating a delicious dessert that is actually missing from her lunch bag), and that outward emotional appearance does not necessarily reveal underlying emotional reality.

In middle childhood, children begin to understand the dynamics of emotional experience, such as how emotional intensity gradually dissipates over time, how specific emotions are related to specific antecedent causes, and how a person's unique background, experiences, and personality can yield unique emotional reactions. By late childhood, children begin to

appreciate how multiple emotions can be simultaneously evoked by a single event, such as feeling happy and afraid when performing before a group (Saarni et al. 1998). Despite these conceptual advances, important features of emotional understanding do not emerge significantly until adolescence, such as an awareness of the psychological causes of emotion in relational experience, the experience of ambivalence or emotional conflict, and a grasp of complex emotional states (e.g., poignancy).

2.4 Emotion, Self-Awareness, and Self-Understanding

Emotional development is complexly tied to the growth of self-awareness and self-understanding in infancy and childhood. Prior to a dawning awareness of the self as a psychological entity, for example, a young child's emotional repertoire does not include self-referent emotions such as pride, guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Late in the second and during the third years of life, however, as young preschoolers reveal increasing psychological self-awareness (e.g., calling self by name, insisting on 'doing it myself'), these self-referent emotions begin to appear (Tangney and Fischer 1995). As young children begin to see the self as an object of analysis by others, and also by oneself, the simple joy of success becomes pride in achievement, and in response to conspicuous attention young children increasingly respond with gaze aversion, smiling, and other signs of embarrassment.

Emotional reactions to the self are significantly shaped by the reactions of others to the child. The development of self-referent emotions is advanced not only by growing psychological self-awareness but also by the young child's increasing understanding of behavioral standards and the ability to apply those standards to an evaluation of personal behavior (Kochanska and Thompson 1997). Guilt derives, for example, from an awareness of how personal behavior has departed from an acceptable standard. Parental reactions are crucial to the young child's dawning awareness and application of these standards of conduct, and indeed the earliest expressions of self-referent emotions commonly occur in contexts where young children can explicitly perceive, or anticipate, parental reactions to their accomplishments or misconduct. With increasing age, children appropriate parental standards that become the child's own internalized expectations for conduct. Thus the manner in which parents convey, reinforce, and attach emotional and relational significance to a young child's achievements or misbehavior is an important influence on the child's emotional life, and developing self-esteem and self-concept.

This underscores the complexity of the association between self-understanding and the growth of self-referent emotions. A dawning psychological self-awareness is necessary before self-referent emotions

become part of a young child's emotional repertoire. Once these emotions are possible, however, the circumstances in which they are elicited and their relational consequences are significant for further growth in self-concept and self-understanding.

2.5 Emotion and Emotional Displays

One consequence of young children's developing understanding of the difference between belief and reality is the growing realization that emotional expressions may not accurately reveal underlying emotional reality. This awareness emerges at the same time that children discover the social expectations governing emotional expressions. A person is supposed to show delight when opening a gift in the presence of the gift-giver, for example, even if the gift is undesirable. This and other emotional 'display rules' governing the expression of emotions in social situations proscribe how emotions are used to avoid hurting others' feelings, protect self-esteem, and preserve relationships.

Young children do not understand display rules, but they can be observed using them as young as age four. Not until middle childhood do children grasp the nature and purposes of emotional display rules, but once they do so they can enlist them in their interactions with family members, peers, and others (Saarni 1999). As they do so, children also begin to appreciate the privacy of emotional experience: emotions need not necessarily be conveyed to others if one can manage emotional experience and its expression.

2.6 The Development of Emotion Regulation

One of the important differences between infants and adolescents is in their capacities for emotion regulation. Emotion regulation is distinct from emotional display rules because although the latter regulate the *expression* of emotion, the former manages emotional *experience*. People have many reasons for managing their emotions: to feel better under stress, elicit support from others, act courageously, resist bullying, enhance motivation, think better, and for many other reasons. Although the goals underlying emotion regulatory efforts are easily understood in very young children, these goals become increasingly complex and nuanced in the more complex social situations of older children. Competent emotion regulation may be observed, for example, when a child loudly protests a peer's provocations when adults are nearby, but quietly tolerates the bully when adults are absent. Moreover, in conditions of risk for developmental psychopathology, the goals underlying a child's emotion regulatory efforts may be complex, mutually inconsistent, and thus, in some senses, self-defeating (Thompson 1994).

In infancy, emotions are primarily regulated by others, especially parents. Parents manage a baby's

emotions by directly intervening to soothe the child, and also by regulating the emotional demands of familiar settings like home or child care (often in accord with their perceptions of the child's temperament), altering how the child construes an emotional arousing situation (such as by smiling reassuringly when a friendly, but unfamiliar, adult approaches the child), and later by actively coaching young children on expectations or strategies of emotion management. More broadly, the security that young children derive from their emotional attachments to caregivers is an important resource for emotion regulation because of the confidence it inspires that events will not be uncontrollable and that the adult will intervene helpfully when necessary (Cassidy 1994). Emotion regulation is fostered by others, in other words, not only by their immediate interventions but also by the reassurance provided by the child's relationship with a caring adult.

From an early age, however, young children are also developing rudimentary skills for managing their own emotional experience (Thompson 1994). This can be observed initially in the comfort-seeking of a distressed infant or toddler, but skills of emotion self-regulation expand considerably in early childhood. Young children can be observed making active efforts to avoid or ignore emotionally arousing events, changing or substituting goals that have been frustrated, redirecting activity or attention, using distraction, engaging in encouraging or reassuring self-talk, obtaining further information about the situation, or enlisting other simple behavioral strategies. In the years that follow, moreover, older children become increasingly proficient at enlisting psychologically more sophisticated strategies of emotion regulation, such as using emotion-blunting ideation, redefining the situation (or attributions for behavior), or acting in a manner inconsistent with felt emotion. The growth of strategies for emotion self-regulation occurs in concert with the development of emotion understanding and children's increasing psychological self-awareness, and contributes to developing social competence with peers and adults.

3. Relational Influences on Emotional Development

Emotions are not just the outward expression of an internal experience, but are deeply influenced by the social contexts in which they occur. Emotional development illustrates how early in life, intrinsically human and biologically fundamental response processes take shape in a social context.

Social influences on emotional development are especially apparent in children's close relationships with caregivers and other adults. Many things happen in their relationships with adults that guide the course of children's emotional growth (Thompson 1998).

Early in life, the responsiveness of caregivers to a baby's emotions influences the frequency, persistence, and intensity of the infant's emotional signaling, as well as the baby's developing confidence in the adult's helpful assistance. The adult's emotional expressions influence the child's vicarious emotional and behavioral responses to events, in a phenomenon earlier described as social referencing. Parental behavior is often also a catalyst for empathic responding, especially when parents fix the attention of offspring on another's distress and carefully explain the causes of that person's feelings. As earlier noted, the behavioral standards that parents convey in their responses to good behavior and misbehavior shape the earliest experiences of pride, guilt, shame, and embarrassment, as well as developing self-concept and self-esteem. More broadly, the simple conversations shared by parents and their young offspring about the day's events help to color and socialize emotional understanding by how the parent describes and explains emotional experiences, attributes motives and emotions to people, and interprets the emotional events they have shared (Dunn 1994). Among the many things children learn from these conversations are the sociocultural rules governing emotional expressions in social situations. Finally, adults in close relationships are influential as they directly manage the emotional arousal of young children, and as they coach (and model) the child's use of personal strategies for emotion self-regulation.

Beyond these specific influences, the broader quality of the parent-child relationship provides a context of security and confidence, or of insecurity and uncertainty, that colors emotional growth and the development of emotion self-regulation (Cassidy 1994). In the security or insecurity of the parent-child attachment relationship that is inaugurated in infancy and maintained throughout childhood, young children experience reassurance that emotions are constructive, enlivening, and manageable facets of life experience through the support of others, or instead learn that emotions are potentially overwhelming and undermining events that are faced alone.

Because of the importance of these relational influences, the 'emotional climate' of the home is a significant influence on early emotional development (Gottman et al. 1997). The emotional climate is significantly shaped by sociocultural values, for example, that guide how emotions are socialized and how children learn to interpret their emotional experiences. In more extreme conditions, unfortunately, the home climate is characterized by the emotional turmoil created by marital dysfunction, parent-child interactions defined by coercion or abuse, or the adult's affective problems. In these circumstances, caregivers not only fail to be sources of emotional support for the child but they contribute to emotional demands that most young children find difficult to manage and which are, for many, potentially overwhelming (e.g.,

Cummings and Davies 1994). As a consequence, children are themselves at risk for emotional disturbance resulting from their inability to cope with the emotional demands they face, their enmeshment in the emotional turmoil of their caregivers, their heightened sensitivity to cues of emotional arousal around them, and their exposure to a compelling model of emotional dysfunction in the adults they live with (Garber and Dodge 1991). Sadly, studies of such children illustrate further the importance of close relationships to healthy emotional growth.

In more constructive family environments, by contrast, parents contribute to the child's growing ability to understand and enlist emotions constructively in social relationships, and enjoy emotional experience personally. In other words, they contribute to the growth of emotional competence (Saarni 1999).

4. Future Directions

This discussion reflects two themes that will guide future research on emotional development. The first concerns children's developing representations of emotional experience, especially as they predict children's responses to emotionally arousing events. How do children understand emotion and its influence upon them, and how does this affect their efforts to manage emotion and respond adaptively to situations that evoke emotion? How do these representations change with age and in concert with changes in other representational abilities? The second, and related theme, concerns the emotional dimensions of developmental psychopathology. How are relational influences, self-awareness, and other developmental processes relevant to emotional growth pertinent to how children cope with anxiety disorders, depression, conduct problems, and other emotion-related forms of psychopathology? Future research on both questions will advance normative understanding of emotional development, and its applications to clinical and other practical issues.

See also: Adulthood: Emotional Development; Attachment Theory: Psychological; Communication and Social Psychology; Early Childhood: Socio-emotional Risks; Emotions, Children's Understanding of; Emotions, Evolution of; Emotions, Psychological Structure of; Harlow, Harry Frederick (1905–81); Self-regulation in Adulthood; Self-regulation in Childhood

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Infant and Child Development, Theories of

From infancy through childhood, and across the adult and aged years, individuals develop, showing systematic and successive changes over time (Baltes 1987). These changes are interdependent with variations in

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