

Strategies for Emotional Management in Early Childhood

Shuyu Liu*, Liluo Zhang

Wuhan Donghu College, Wuhan 430212, Hubei, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: The *Guide to Learning and Development for Children Aged 3–6* states that “a pleasant emotion is one of the important indicators of children’s physical and mental health, and it is also the foundation for learning and development in other areas.” Emotional health in early childhood plays a significant role in their future development. This article focuses on understanding the characteristics of young children’s emotions and the factors that affect their emotional management. Simultaneously, it proposes effective methods for families and kindergartens to jointly protect children’s emotional and mental health, providing a healthy and positive growth environment for preschool children, and jointly supporting their growth.

Keywords: Early childhood; Emotion recognition; Emotion management; Home-kindergarten co-education

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1. Concept of emotional management in early childhood

Emotional management refers to the ability of individuals to correctly recognize their own emotions and adopt effective strategies to manage and regulate them, thereby maintaining a good emotional state. In early childhood, children are already able to display basic emotions such as happiness, anger, fear, and sadness. The emotional characteristics and behavioral patterns formed at this stage have a profound impact on the psychological development of individuals throughout their lives^[1]. This process requires the guidance and support of adults, the attention of kindergartens and society, and the utilization of available resources to help children manage their emotions. It also necessitates the gradual development of children’s own emotion regulation skills. The core of emotional management in early childhood lies in children’s ability to recognize emotions, distinguish between negative and positive emotions, and master methods and techniques for emotion regulation. Effective emotional management can not only help children reduce emotional stress and promote mental health development but also enhance immunity and promote physical health to a certain extent.

2. Characteristics of emotional management in early childhood

Through reviewing relevant literature and observing more than 300 children in a kindergarten in Hongshan District, Wuhan, it was found that the current emotional management of young children presents the following characteristics: unclear emotion recognition, limited emotion expression, and emotional instability as the norm.

2.1. Unclear emotion recognition

This article mainly refers to preschool children aged 3–6. At this stage, due to their young age, children lack the cognition and ability to perceive and recognize emotions. They often cannot accurately distinguish between basic emotions, and their self-emotion perception is relatively vague. For example, they may express anger as a feeling of being wronged when their toys are snatched away, leading them to “complain” to their parents. When facing the death of a small animal, they may express sadness as fear. However, when these negative situations occur, children often feel uncomfortable, manifesting as crying, fussing, etc. These different negative emotions are often interpreted by parents as “unhappy,” resulting in inadequate venting and guidance of children’s negative emotions.

Simultaneously, when socializing with peers, they may misinterpret others’ emotions, leading to escalated social conflicts. For instance, when seeing a peer crying, a child may continuously offer toys without inquiring about the specific reason, which is a misinterpretation of sadness as a material need.

Furthermore, the spiritual environment and interpersonal relationships in the early childhood stage are relatively simple. Children are more sensitive to the external environment, and they mostly focus on themselves. They often attribute their negative emotions to the external environment. For example, in a constructive game organized by a kindergarten, a child may attribute the anger caused by several failed constructions to “the blocks are broken,” rather than their own mistakes in block assembly.

2.2. Limited emotional expression ability

Firstly, when children cannot effectively vent their emotions, they often exhibit various extreme expressions. Their emotional release may present a characteristic of “all or nothing,” such as sudden screaming, smashing objects, or long periods of silence and ignoring others. For instance, in a kindergarten construction game, after failing to construct, a child may continuously destroy others’ creations and shout, “Stop playing altogether.”

Secondly, children may display aggressive behavior. When playing with peers and their demands are not met, they may exhibit aggressive behaviors such as “hitting peers with toys.” When facing parents, children often use instrumental expression, employing crying as a means to achieve their goals, such as crying on the ground to obtain toys from their parents.

Compared to adults, children’s physical functions are less developed. When they are emotionally excited, they often experience many uncontrollable physiological reactions. These physiological reactions are usually converted from emotional stress. For example, when facing criticism or accusations from parents, children may experience frequent urination due to nervousness, headache, and other physical reactions when they are extremely angry.

2.3. Emotional instability as the norm in early childhood

Children’s emotions change rapidly, and they cannot maintain a stable emotional state for a long time. This is especially true for children at play. They may be happily playing with toys with their peers one moment and suddenly become angry due to toy inequality the next. Simultaneously, physiological needs such as hunger and fatigue can also cause children to develop negative emotions. However, when these physiological needs are

met, children can instantly recover from negative emotions.

3. Causes of children's emotional management problems

3.1. Children's own development

3.1.1. Limited cognitive development of children

According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, children aged 2–7 are in the preoperational stage, where their thinking has limitations. They tend to be self-centered, processing environmental signals from their own perspective. Meanwhile, their thinking is not reversible, and they cannot fully deduce facts, often changing their emotions based on their current feelings. This leads to their emotional recognition process relying on specific contextual clues (such as “toys being snatched away”), making it difficult to abstractly understand the psychological essence of emotions, which can result in emotional dysregulation. Sometimes, children cannot achieve perspective-taking and misjudge others' emotions, such as attributing a companion's crying to “wanting a toy” rather than emotional needs, abstracting psychological feelings into the most direct physical emotions.

3.1.2. Imbalance of physiological and psychological development

There is a relatively hidden coupling of emotional and behavioral reactions within children's bodies, and the inhibitory function of the children's nervous system is not yet perfect. Emotional experiences directly trigger behavioral reactions (such as tearing up homework when angry) without cognitive buffering. Children's emotional expression channels are also very narrow. Their action representations (hitting, crying) often precede symbolic representations (language descriptions). Initially, they use actions to express their emotions, and later, with the development of language structure, verbal expressions gradually emerge, forming a developmentally appropriate way of expression.

3.2. Parents' educational methods

3.2.1. Parents' misunderstandings about children's emotional cognition

Such misunderstandings include parents' functional misunderstanding of “emotional management.” For some parents, healthy emotional management is equivalent to their children “not crying or making a fuss.” When children experience negative emotions, parents often habitually ignore the complete development of children's emotional cognition, expression, and regulation. Parents only temporarily eliminate children's negative emotions without reasonably using professional methods to guide children and completely eliminate negative emotions from their psychology. As a result, when children experience similar or the same negative emotions again, they still undergo the same inner activities.

Parents' cognitive biases can also manifest in gender stereotypes towards their children. For example, when boys face setbacks, parents may teach them “not to cry” due to the stereotype that “boys should be brave.” On the other hand, girls may be overprotected, and when they express emotions incorrectly, parents often overly tolerate various emotional releases. This protective approach can lead to girls becoming overly indulged during their rebellious phase, resulting in personality defects such as “princess syndrome.”

Parents' misunderstandings about children's emotional cognition often lead to incorrect responses when children's emotions are out of control. For instance, to stop a crying child, parents may immediately fulfill the child's demands to end their continuous expression of negative emotions. For example, during the New Year, if a child cannot adapt to the noisy atmosphere and cries incessantly, parents may immediately give them a phone to pacify them, hoping they can eliminate their negative emotions by watching cartoons or playing games on the phone.

3.2.2. Limitations of parents' ability to handle their own emotions

Emotional violence in the family is often an important factor that affects children's emotional management ^[2]. For example, parents may take out their frustrations from work on their children, resulting in "displaced anger and scolding." When regulating their own negative emotions, parents sometimes hide their emotional coping mechanisms. For instance, a father may drink excessively when things are not going well in his business, and the child witnesses this but does not understand this way of dealing with negative emotions. Children are adept at imitation, and much of their social learning comes from imitating their parents, including problem-solving techniques and emotional expression methods ^[3]. As the primary guardians of children, parents should set a good example for them. However, in some families, parents have double standards for emotional expression. For example, parents may demand that their children speak politely, but they themselves argue loudly in the family. Children may indirectly imitate this unhealthy way of venting emotions. However, when children vent their emotions in the same way, parents severely stop them, which often leads children to ask, "Why can you do this, but I can't?" resulting in anxiety for the child.

Parents' repression of children's emotions and gender biases may stem from their own childhood traumatization, which is reflected in their children's education through the mechanism of emotional feedback. Research shows that parents who have experienced emotional neglect may have a reduced ability to empathize across generations, making it difficult for them to identify the reasons for their children's emotions and provide comfort through language. Parents sometimes transfer workplace stress into negative language and pass it on to their children, creating a vicious cycle of "stressor-emotional violence-behavioral imitation." Children who have suffered such verbal abuse for a long time become extremely sensitive, emotionally unstable, and unable to calm themselves when their emotions get out of control.

3.3. The education system of kindergartens

3.3.1. Utilitarian curriculum evaluation system

As the second most important growth environment for children, kindergartens have a significant impact on the development of children's emotional management. However, the current kindergarten curriculum evaluation is utilitarian, and teachers lack observation skills and professional literacy. Most of them aim to complete kindergarten tasks and satisfy parents, while there is a lack of strategies and teachers who genuinely care about children's physical and mental development. Simultaneously, kindergartens generally have not gained widespread recognition from various sectors of society, and economic support is relatively scarce. Even though government departments have issued relevant economic policies to support kindergartens, the effect is still not satisfactory. This leads kindergartens to save costs and focus on developing children's intelligence and physical strength, with limited resources allocated to emotional management.

3.3.2. Functional deficiencies in kindergarten environment creation

Kindergarten environment creation includes both material and spiritual environment creation, which plays a vital role in children's physical and mental development. Children's emotional health is inseparable from relevant creations in kindergartens. In kindergartens, teachers often emphasize imparting relevant experiences related to children's lives and educational knowledge. Therefore, when placing activity materials, they often provide single-game activity materials. There are very few places in kindergartens related to emotional venting, and children lack ways and venues to vent their emotions. For example, in the "sand and water area" of kindergartens, to reduce resource consumption and save operating costs, kindergarten teachers often only open it once a week. Even in economically tight situations, such emotional venting activity areas are only open

during class time, and children cannot release their daily negative emotions through continuous play.

Children's daily activities in kindergartens follow a strict schedule that outlines what teachers and children should do and their daily activities within a certain time frame. However, the downside is that some preschool teachers strictly adhere to fixed processes. For instance, a teacher may require children to move to another activity area after playing in the construction area for 20 minutes, interrupting children who are immersed in construction activities and disrupting their emotional process. Over time, children become unable to focus on the same event and form stable emotions.

3.3.3. Weaknesses in the home-school coordination mechanism

The main form of communication between families and kindergartens is primarily through a "home-school communication book." Preschool teachers usually only record children's naps, eating habits, and other physiological indicators, lacking detailed descriptions of the children's emotional states. When using WeChat or other electronic communication methods, they only record happy moments of children playing in the activity area, avoiding negative emotions such as conflicts among children during the day.

Parents' educational stance towards their children often differs from that of the kindergarten. For example, teachers may suggest "allowing children to have moderate emotional release" and comforting them immediately when their emotions are out of control, such as "giving them a candy." On the other hand, parents often insist that "they must stop crying immediately" or let the children calm down by themselves. Children receive two completely different educational approaches in kindergarten and at home, and their emotional management methods often deviate from the correct path, leading to rebellious or confused emotions.

4. Countermeasures to improve children's emotional management

4.1. Teaching children to correctly identify and express emotions

Games related to emotion recognition can be conducted ^[4], such as "Emotion Transformation" and "Emotion Piggy Bank," to help children learn to correctly identify and express emotions. In the "Emotion Transformation" game, parents can first create cards representing different emotions. When children experience various emotions, parents can show them the corresponding emotion card, allowing them to correctly recognize which emotion they are feeling through the card. Through such games, parents can help children correctly identify emotions, improve their emotion recognition ability, and reasonably express their needs, thus quickly and positively managing their emotions. In this process, parents should learn to use positive reinforcement, replacing traditional and overly general expressions like "Yes, you did well" with specific complimentary descriptions such as "It is great that you know the blue ball represents melancholy. I will give you a thumbs-up." This helps children recognize that the emotion recognition methods they have learned are correct and understand the correct steps.

4.2. Parents and children practicing emotion regulation together

Parents are role models for children, so they need to learn how to manage their own emotions in daily life. When they have negative emotions, they should choose the right way to express and regulate them, setting a good example for their children. At the same time, they should actively help children learn methods of emotion regulation and management in their daily lives. For example, parents can provide bedtime comfort and joint emotion management. The former requires parents to review their children's emotional performances of the day before bedtime, specifically praising them for what they did right in emotion management. For incorrect

ways of venting emotions after losing control, such as throwing toys or screaming loudly, parents should inquire about the reasons and jointly develop management strategies. The latter requires parents and children to manage emotions together, adjust together, and improve each other. While managing their children's uncontrolled emotions, parents should also reflect on whether their own emotions have been fully released and reasonably vented. They should continuously extend such games into daily life, promoting their long-term existence and becoming a tool for family members to reasonably express their emotions.

4.3. Integrating emotion management into kindergarten games

Kindergarten games are diverse, allowing teachers to integrate various gameplay elements. For instance, combining performance games with constructive play, children can role-play as cartoon characters with different emotions and build safe houses for their characters. This activity explores ways to calm down when emotions spiral out of control. Through the integration and innovation of these games, children are immersed in different emotions, deeply experiencing and perceiving them, leading to better emotion recognition. This enhances their understanding of various emotions when they communicate with their parents at home. Additionally, interaction among children during games aids in emotion management ^[5]. Children prefer to play with peers who have stable emotions and do not lose their temper easily. Teachers should promptly intervene when they observe emotional outbreaks during play, helping children view conflicts rationally, understand the reasons for emotional outbursts, and foster healthy friendships. For example, when children are playing in the construction area and one child accidentally knocks down another's creation due to excitement, leading to a dispute and emotional outburst, the teacher should intervene immediately. They should separate the children, clarify the situation, and propose that they complete the next construction together after both parties have calmed down.

4.4. Strengthening home-school communication and collaboration for children's emotion management

The growth and progress of children are the result of joint efforts between families and kindergartens ^[6]. Both should form a unified understanding of assisting children in emotion management, recognizing their respective responsibilities and obligations. Kindergartens possess expertise in studying children's physical, psychological, and emotional development, and can organize lectures and activities accordingly. Parents who spend considerable time with their children have numerous emotional case studies to share with teachers, providing valuable insights and methods for emotion management. Only through positive communication and cooperation can we effectively cultivate children's emotion management skills.

5. Conclusion

Emotion management in early childhood is crucial for their physical and mental health development. Adults who maintain stable emotions, quickly recover from negative feelings, and identify key issues to calmly solve problems often attribute this to optimal emotion management learned during childhood. Therefore, it is essential to assist children in recognizing and regulating their emotions.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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