

Emotional Expression in Children

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The development of emotional expression begins from the time an infant bonds with his or her caregiver. Establishing this bond occurs through both the caregiver expressing her feelings to the child and understanding the emotions expressed by the infant. This communication is almost exclusively non-verbal for a long period of time, which requires understanding of and ability to express emotions via facial expressions and vocal inflections. Infants use non-verbal communication to express needs and wants, and the caregiver's ability to respond to these expressions appropriately is essential to establishing emotional bonds and a confidence in the ability to have one's emotional expressions understood by others. Evidence suggests that when infants display emotional expression in non-verbal manners, mothers experience neural activation of mirror neurons, specifically in regions of the brain associated with empathy. This research likely indicates that not only seeing, but also mimicking the expressed emotion, establishes an understanding between the infant and mother. Having a strong connection early on allows the infant to begin to develop comprehension of emotional expression which sets the stage for use of this when they become verbal.

Children learn about emotional expression from early experience; not only how their expression is received, but also how they see adults express their own emotions. Their ability to express emotions early on directs how their parents care for them, learning what they need and want based on the initial non-verbal, and later on verbal, expressions. As children begin to verbalize their emotions, differences in how they are received appears to impact later emotional expression. One such example is that of gender differences in emotional expression. Stereotypes

of emotional expression in western culture often suggest that boys are expected to be more stoic and express less than girls, particularly regarding sadness and other internalizing emotions. Similarly, girls are often expected to limit emotions such as anger or others that might be disruptive; girls, stereotypically, are expected to try and keep peace with others.

The biological model of gender differences indicates that there are inborn differences between girls and boys that become more evident as hormones begin to change. Research has shown that even in infancy, boys display less behavioral inhibition than girls, while girls display more language earlier than boys. This could indicate that females' tendency to be more expressive than males is not due to outside influence, but rather predispositions encoded in their genes. The social-development model, suggests that differences in gender-specific emotional expression is learned over time through social experiences and observed expectations. Through these experiences and observations, children develop schemas for 'appropriate' emotional expression based on their gender.

Finally, the social-constructionist theory indicates that gender-appropriate expression is seen more in contexts in which gender roles are expected, such as in social situations or with peers, but less so in comfortable situations, such as at home with parents. Similarly, it seems that children show more differences in emotional expression as they age and mature. This suggests that societal expectations play a larger role in the expression of emotions than actual biological tendencies. It appears most likely that a combination of these truly provides a better of understanding of why differing emotion expression develops. While children likely present differently from birth due to essential characteristics, it seems logical that parents and society then tend to respond to the stereotypical gender-appropriate emotional expression, particularly as children grow older, leading to a social conditioning of emotional expression.

It is important to consider how the stereotypes of emotional expression may have an impact on children's emotional well-being and the typical psychopathology seen in young boys and girls. In school-age boys, disorders focused on attention deficits and defiant behavior are becoming more and more common. These behaviors seem directly linked to the expectation that males are to express more aggressive, externalizing emotions. Since girls are expected to present as happy most of the time, the tendency to develop disorders such as anxiety and depression by adolescence is also increasing. The ability to accurately express emotions is important in children's development, such as in how they handle social situations, which are essential for solving problems. Children's association between emotion and appropriate action indicates how they choose to resolve situations with peers as they grow older.

Emotional expression is a key aspect of a child's social development. From the time they are born, the ability to accurately express emotions allows those caring for them to understand their wants and needs. As they grow older, expressing emotions provides them with a gauge of how to proceed in social situations and leads to development of successful relationships.

Further Reading

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