

EMOTIONS

Synthesis

How important is it?

Emotional competence (EC) is a developmental process that comprises three interrelated competencies: 1) emotion expression; 2) emotion knowledge; and 3) emotion regulation (i.e., being aware of one's emotions and modifying them when necessary). At a young age, children already display a range of emotions in social situations through non-verbal messages (e.g., giving a hug, sulking). Then, advances in cognitive development allow children to identify their own and others' emotions, and the circumstances that lead to their expression. This emotional understanding, in turn, allows children to monitor and to modify their emotions in order to cope with difficult situations.

Emotional development in infancy and early childhood is important for several interrelated skills. In comparison to children with deficits in emotional development, children with a developed EC are more likely: 1) to sustain learning; 2) to engage in empathic and prosocial behaviours; 3) to express appropriate emotions in various contexts; 4) to use adaptive strategies to deal with negative/upsetting emotions (e.g., anger); and 5) to reduce several risk factors associated with psychopathology. Taken together, these abilities predict children's early school success and positive interpersonal relationships with peers and family members.

What do we know?

Emotion related competencies vary with age. They are also manifested differently across cultures. The culture wherein children grow up tends to influence the intensity and the type of emotions expressed. Specifically, emotion expression and understanding are likely to vary among children depending on the way children are socialized, the presence of comfort of objects, the proximity with parental figures, and situational contexts.

Emotions do not all emerge at the same time. Primary emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, interest, and joy) appear in the first year whereas secondary emotions (e.g., embarrassment, guilt, and shame) are usually expressed by the end of the 2nd year of life. Children's mental representation about the "self" is acquired around the age of two and the standards, rules, and goals (SRGs) conveyed by their entourage set the stage for self-conscious emotions, such as embarrassment.

Along with environmental factors, emotional competence is also influenced by child factors including cognitive

development, temperament, and approach/withdrawal behaviours. Approach refers to behaviours and facial expressions that move a child towards stimuli. Withdrawal refers to behaviours that move a child away from stimuli. Approach emotions (i.e., interest, smiling, joy, and anger) are related to positive aspects of behaviours, such as sustained efforts when minor difficulties are encountered, and they predict emotional competence in children. In contrast, the expression of withdrawal emotions (i.e., sadness and fear) in face of negative events is associated with behavioural difficulties, poor emotion regulation, and helplessness. Withdrawal behaviours are also a risk factor for childhood depression.

Emotions play an important role in the onset of psychopathologies in childhood. Children with a history of negative social experiences, such as maltreatment or insecurity attachment, have a tendency to be hyper vigilant for signs of threats. Accordingly, they display anxiety, and aggressive and fear behaviours as a mean of self-protection. Their negative affectivity, poor emotion regulation, and imbalances in the different emotional systems in the brain (e.g., the fear, the care, the seeking systems) predict both internalizing and externalizing disorders (e.g., depression and aggression, respectively).

What can be done?

In order to promote emotional competence in children, parents are encouraged to model various emotional expressions. Given that the emotions displayed at home largely influence those expressed by children with their peers and the larger school setting, positive parent-child interactions are valued. Specifically, parents are encouraged to engage in positive parenting practices and to play a supportive role when children encounter challenges. Early interventions aimed at improving emotional control and the goodness of fit between the parent's and child's emotional state are strongly encouraged. Examples of such programs include Parent-Child Interaction therapy and the Incredible Years program.

Although few studies have directly examined the contribution of school context in children's emotional competence (EC) development, policies encourage teachers to be trained in intervention programs, such as PATHS, to be able to foster children's emotional understanding. Not only children will benefit from these skills across social and learning contexts, but also teachers will be more likely to teach in harmonious classroom environments.