Children’s Understanding of Unregulated Expressions of Emotions in Private versus Public Contexts

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Abstract
What do children think about unregulated emotional expressions in private versus public contexts? Children (N=66, 3-9 years) heard brief stories about a protagonist who feels a certain way (e.g., happy, sad, angry, etc.) and behaviorally responds in a prototypical but disruptive manner (e.g., for sad: bursts into tears). The story protagonist was either at home with her mother or in a public place surrounded by strangers. After each story, children indicated whether the protagonist’s behavior was “Ok” or “not Ok.” Young children’s understanding of unregulated emotional expressions is initially broad, but gradually becomes differentiated and more complex. 3- to 4-year-olds base their judgments only on the valence of the emotion being expressed; positive emotions are “OK” to express whereas negative ones are “not Ok,” regardless of context. By 5 years, children begin to tolerate the expression of negatively valenced emotions, but only in private contexts. By 8 years, children’s tolerance of unregulated emotional expression varies, depending on both context and the specific emotion being expressed.

Introduction
• Prior research has focused primarily on children’s understanding of display rules, specifically masking or regulating one’s internal feelings in different social situations
  • By the age of 3 years, children understand that internal feelings are distinct from emotional displays, and have clear ideas about whether or not to express or hide one’s internal feelings (e.g., Banerjee, 1997)
  • For example, preschoolers readily admit that a story protagonist should hide her feelings about her grandma’s yucky-tasting casserole but believe that the protagonist should express her feelings at an enjoyable birthday party, whatever the circumstance
• The current study focuses on children’s understanding of unregulated expressions of emotion in private versus public contexts and how that understanding changes with age

Method
• Participants: N=66, 22 children in each of 3 age groups: 3-4 years, 5-7 years, and 8-9 years
• Between-subjects: 2 story conditions
  • private (protagonist is at home accompanied by her mother)
  • public (protagonist is in a public place accompanied by strangers)
• 10 stories: 2 each for happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust

Story example:
“One day, Sally was in the kitchen/at the park when something happened that made her feel very sad. She felt so sad that her mom/everyone there could tell she was sad. And do you know what she did when she felt sad? She burst into tears.

Children were then asked:
• “Do you think it was “Ok” or “not Ok” for Sally to do that?

Results
Children said “Ok” most often for happiness, followed by sadness and fear, and least often for anger and disgust, F(4, 240)=58.16, p<.001.
As age increased, children were less likely to say “Ok” to happiness and more likely to say “Ok” to negatively valenced emotions, F(4, 240)=2.79, p=.066.
• For happiness and sadness, the two older groups (5-7, 8-9 year olds) did not differ significantly from each other but were significantly different than the 3-4-year-olds
• For fear and disgust, 8-9-year-olds were significantly (p < .05) more likely to say “Ok” than were each of the younger age groups.

Discussion
• Young children’s understanding of unregulated emotional expressions changes between the ages of 3 and 9 years
• Before the age of 5 years, children:
  • disregard context when deeming an unregulated emotional expression as “Ok” or “not Ok”
  • have difficulty understanding that the unregulated expressions of positively valenced emotions may be disruptive, and that those of negatively valenced emotions may be beneficial

Figure 1
Proportion of Children In Each Age Group Who Said It Was “Ok” to Express Each Emotion

Figure 2 (a – c)
Proportion of Children In Each Age Group Who Said Sally’s Emotional Expressions in Private versus Public Contexts were “Ok”

• 5- to 7-year-olds show a simple form of differentiation, with a bias towards unregulated emotional expression in private contexts
  • Sadness is the only negatively valenced emotion whose expression is tolerated in public contexts
• 8- to 9-year-olds show a complicated form of differentiation by which the contextual bias shifts depending on the emotion that Sally expresses

Future research should examine the developmental changes in children’s reasoning which underlies their tolerance of unregulated emotional expressions, and what they understand about the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that unregulated emotional expressions elicit from others.

Figure 2
Proportion of Children In Each Age Group Who Said Sally’s Emotional Expressions in Private versus Public Contexts were “Ok”