Preschoolers’ Scripts For Basic-Level Emotions: Understanding Causes Vs. Consequences

Sherry C. Widen* & James A. Russell
Boston College
Presented at the Cognitive Development Society’s 2007 Conference, Santa Fe, NM

Abstract
Preschoolers are actively acquiring emotion scripts, including the causes and consequences of different emotions. In the current study, stereotypical situational causes and behavioral consequences were presented in separate stories for happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Children’s (N = 108, 3 to 5 years) labeling performance was higher for the causes of fear, disgust, and happiness than the corresponding consequences, but higher for the consequences of anger than its causes. Thus, in acquiring emotion scripts, no one cue is primary.

Introduction
Emotion scripts describe the prototypical events and displays we associate with each emotion, including the cause, label, facial expression, vocalization, behavioral consequence, etc. By isolating individual aspects of emotion and asking children to respond to them, we can learn which cues they learn earlier and are thus more powerful. Only one study has compared children’s understanding of the causes of emotions vs. their consequences (Russell, 1990).

• Children (4 to 5 years) were asked to describe either the causes or consequences.

• Overall, children’s performance was higher for causes than for consequences.

• This effect was strongest for fear and surprise.

The Study
The current study investigated whether this advantage of causes over consequences holds in the less difficult task of labeling brief stories describing the causes or consequences of emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust).

Method
Participants. Participants were 108 children (3 to 5 years) enrolled in preschools in the Greater Boston area. All children were proficient in English. There were 54 girls and 54 boys.

Stories of Emotional Events. The stories describing stereotypical emotion-eliciting events and behavioral consequences of emotions were created based on prior work in our lab in which children generated causes and consequences for specific emotions (Russell, 1990; Russell & Widen, 2002).

• The stories emotion-eliciting events were: happiness (birthday party), sadness (pet fish dies), anger (someone cutting in line), fear (monster in closet), surprise (mom unexpectedly dyes hair pink), and disgust (biting a rotten apple).

• The stories for the behavioral consequences were: happiness (jump up and down and clap hands), sadness (walk slowly to a chair with tears in his eyes), anger (yell and hit another kid), fear (scream and run away), surprise (staring and trying to figure out what happened), and disgust (wanting to wash).

Procedure
Each child was tested individually and participated in three phases.

1. Simple priming – experimenter initiated a conversation in which each of the target emotions mentioned. e.g. Anger is a feeling. Have you ever been angry?

2. Animal Labeling (Training task) – Children labeled brief descriptions of the same animals (cat, dog, rabbit) (e.g., This kind of animal can purr and likes to catch mice. What kind of animal is it?)

3. Free labeling – Each child labeled 12 stories (one cause and one consequence story each for happy, sad, angry, fear, surprise, disgust).

• Cause: One day, Danny built a tower. But then another boy came and knocked Danny’s tower down on purpose.

• Consequences: One day, while Danny was at school, something happened that made him feel a certain way. It made Danny yell and hit another kid. He clenched his fist and stomped his feet. He yelled really loud.

Scoring.
The participants were allowed to use any label they chose. The scoring key used in this study was drawn from Widen and Russell (2001), who describe the development of a scoring key based on ratings of two judges blind to the source of the labels.

Discussion & Conclusion
The current study demonstrated that causes are stronger cues to emotion than are the corresponding consequences.

• This finding extends Russell’s (1990) findings to a new method and demonstrated that causes are the stronger cues for happiness, sadness, fear, and disgust.

There were two exceptions to the overall pattern:

• First, for anger, the consequence was the stronger cue.

• This result replicates a prior study in which the behavioral consequence for anger was shown to be a stronger cue than the label or the facial expression (Widen & Russell, 2004).

• Second, for surprise, there was no significant difference between the cause and consequence stories.

• This result may point to the difficulty of isolating the moment of surprise.

• Surprise is a momentary reaction, which then shifts to a positive emotion or a negative one, depending on the situation.

• The current study joins with prior research (Widen & Russell, 2004) in showing that there is no one cue that is primary’s understanding of emotion.

When children used a nontarget label for the sad, angry, scared, and disgust stories, they were most likely to label them sad or angry.

• This finding supports research in which children labeled facial expressions: Preschoolers used sad and angry most frequently (e.g., Gosselin & Simard, 1999; Iard, 1971, 1994).

• On free labeling tasks, these early-emerging categories (Widen & Russell, 2003) are more accessible and the ones that children use to label more stimuli.

References


*contact Sherri Widen: widensh@bc.edu

