Do Young Children Understand Love as Persisting?

Do children consider love to be an emotion that persists regardless of emotions (e.g., happiness, anger) provoked by the current situation? In eight stories, an 8-year-old boy's parent, or a benign stranger made him feel happy, grateful, sad, or angry. Adults indicated that he loved his parent, and the majority said that he did not love the stranger, regardless of concomitant emotion. Adults view love as a persisting emotion. More than half of the children (N = 132, preschool to Gr 1) reported that the boy did not love his parents or the stranger when they made him sad or angry. At least 88% reported that the boy loved his antagonist when he was happy or grateful. For children, love is a volatile emotion.

Introduction

As adults, we understand that if our mother makes us angry, we continue to love her.

That is, love persists across changes in current emotions.

Conversely, we do not feel love for a stranger who performs a kind act for us. Love is not bestowed so easily.

An understanding of these aspects of love is important for our own relationships, as well as for our understanding others' behavior.

The question the current research addressed was if and when young children (3 to 7 years) understand love that persists.

Only two studies have investigated children’s beliefs about the effects of current emotions on love (Harter, 1977; Klein, 1989).

In both studies, children (2;6 to 8;8 years) reported that when they were angry at their family members (parents, siblings) or friends, they did not love them anymore.

In addition, children said that people who hugged and kissed them, or gave them gifts, loved them (Klein, 1989).

The results of these two studies suggest that young children do not understand love as persisting as adults do.

Rather, for young children, love is volatile. It comes and goes with the current emotion.

The Study

In the current study, children (3 to 7 years of age) were told about an 8-year-old boy named Jamie. Each story included one antagonist, some event, whether or not Jamie liked or wanted the event, and whether Jamie felt happy, grateful, sad, or angry about the event.

For example: One day, Jamie’s mom saw him being bad and sent him inside. Jamie was very angry. The participant was then asked three questions about the story. In this example: Does Jamie love his mom? Did Jamie want to be sent inside? Was Jamie angry?

Based on the results of Harter (1977) and Klein (1989), we predicted that children would say that Jamie loved his parents when they made him happy or grateful but not when they made him sad or angry.

But the open question was how they would respond to the stories in which the postman or gardener were the antagonists.

An adult group was included to test our assumptions about adults’ understanding of the persistence of love, and to provide a comparison group for the children.

Method

Participants

The participants included 132 children: 64 young preschoolers (mean age = 43 months, sd = 23), 44 older preschoolers (mean age = 59 months, sd = 5), and 44 kindergartners (mean age = 77 months, sd = 10). All children were enrolled in on-campus or public schools in the Greater Boston area and were fluent in English. A comparison group of 20 younger- and older-aged adults was also included.

Materials

Eight stories were created by crossing four emotions (happy, grateful, sad, angry) with two antagonists (mother, postman, or gardener) (Table 1).

All eight stories concerned an 8-year-old boy named Jamie, who was made to feel one of the emotions by one of the antagonists. Each story was accompanied by a drawing of the current emotion (e.g., the yard, kitchen). Jamie’s parents were chosen as antagonists because Jamie loves his parents; the postman and gardener were chosen on the assumption that Jamie did not love them.

Procedure

Prior to hearing the eight stories, each child was told, “In this game I am going to tell you some stories about a boy named Jamie. Jamie is 8 years old, and he lives with his mom and dad. Jamie’s mom and dad love him very much and take very good care of him. Jamie loves his mom and dad. Each day the postman (gardeners) comes to Jamie’s house to bring the mail (fake care of the plants and garden). Jamie doesn’t know the postman (gardener) very well.”

After each story the child was asked three questions:

1. Whether Jamie loved his antagonist;
2. Whether Jamie denied the event;
3. Whether Jamie felt a particular emotion (happy, grateful, sad, angry).

Children’s different understanding of love may be cause for concern both from a child-rearing perspective and from a child-safety perspective.

In addition, if children don’t understand that love persists, understanding and predicting others’ behaviors becomes more difficult.

The question is: Why is there no change in this age range? And when might we expect children to begin to understand love in a more adult-like manner?

The answer to these questions may lie in a classic theory of cognitive development:

Children’s attributions of love exhibit many of features of children in Piaget’s preoperational stage (2 to 7 years) of cognitive development (e.g., Piaget & Inhelder, 1958).

Preoperational children can attribute only one dimension or attribute of an object or event at a time.

Although all the children in the current studies were told that Jamie loved his parents, and then correctly answered a question about whom Jamie loved, 30% to 64% of the children said that Jamie did not love his parents when they made him sad, and 64% to 88% said that he did not love his parents when they made him angry.

Thus, the children may have been focusing on Jamie’s current emotion and reasoning about his love from there.

References


Procedures

Results

Responses to the Love Question

Adults’ (Figure 1) and children’s (Figure 2) responses to the love question revealed two different patterns.

Figure 1. For adults, love persists: Even when Jamie’s mother or father made him sad or angry, most of the adults indicated that love persisted. For the stranger, although a few people thought that Jamie loved the postman or gardener when they made him happy or grateful, almost none said that he loved them when they made Jamie sad or angry.

Children’s different understanding of love on kind strangers.

For young children, love is a volatile emotion, apparently similar to happiness.

Table 1. Stories Used in the Study

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Figure 2.

Figure 2. For children, love is volatile. When someone, whether it was Jamie’s parent or a stranger, made him feel good, children said that Jamie loved them. But when someone, whether it was Jamie’s parent or a stranger, made him feel sad or angry, less than half the children said that Jamie loved them. The emotion x antagonist interaction was not significant, F(1, 327) = 2.20, p < .09. For different emotions, children attributed love to both antagonists in the same way.

Responses to the Desire and Emotion Questions

Each story included a stereotypically desirable or undesirable event and explicitly stated Jamie’s emotional response to the event.

Both adults and children answered the desire (Figure 3) and emotion (Figure 4) questions correctly.

Note. Half the children heard these stories.

The other half heard the same stories, but with the gardener as the antagonist instead of Jamie’s mom, and with Jamie’s dad instead of the postman.

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Conclusion

Children between ages of 3 and 7 years do not understand that love persists when another person makes them unhappy.

These children also bestowed love on kind strangers.

For young children, love is a volatile emotion, apparently similar to happiness.

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Thus, the children may have been focusing on Jamie’s current emotion and reasoning about his love from there.

Rather than taking into account the more global fact that Jamie loved his parents.