

Ability to Match Emotions is Related to Social and Emotional Difficulties

'SKIP Research Bites' is a series of short summaries based on findings from the Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project.

What does research tell us?



Being able to recognise emotions, such as when someone is happy, sad, or fearful, is a skill that is essential in developing positive social behaviors in early childhood. Children who misread negative emotional expressions may misinterpret others' actions or may show less empathy towards them. Misreading positive emotional expressions may result in children missing opportunities to engage in fun interactions with their peers. Research shows that children who are better able to recognise emotions are better liked by other children, are rated higher in social competence, and show fewer challenging behaviours (e.g. aggression, defiance, impulsive behaviours).



What is this study about?

In this study, we wanted to know...

1. Do pre-school children find some emotions more difficult to match than others?
2. How does the ability to match emotions relate to social and emotional skills?

Over 1200 children attending pre-school centres in Singapore participated in activities to measure their ability to match emotional expressions. The six types of emotional expression were happy, sad, anger, disgust, fear and a neutral expression. Children were shown photographs of children expressing the different types of emotion, and they had to make decisions such as which two children showed the same or a different emotion.

Children's social and emotional strengths and difficulties were rated by the teacher using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ assesses children's (1) emotional difficulties, (2) conduct problems, (3) hyperactivity, (4) peer relationships problems, and (5) pro-social behaviour.

To learn more...

Ministry of Education, (2012). Nurturing Early Learners: A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore

Ministry of Education, (2013). NEL Educators' Guide: Social and Emotional Development

Domitrovich, C. E., Cortes, R. C., & Greenberg, M. T. (2007). Improving young children's social and emotional competence: A randomized trial of the Preschool "PATHS" curriculum. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 28 (2), 67-91.

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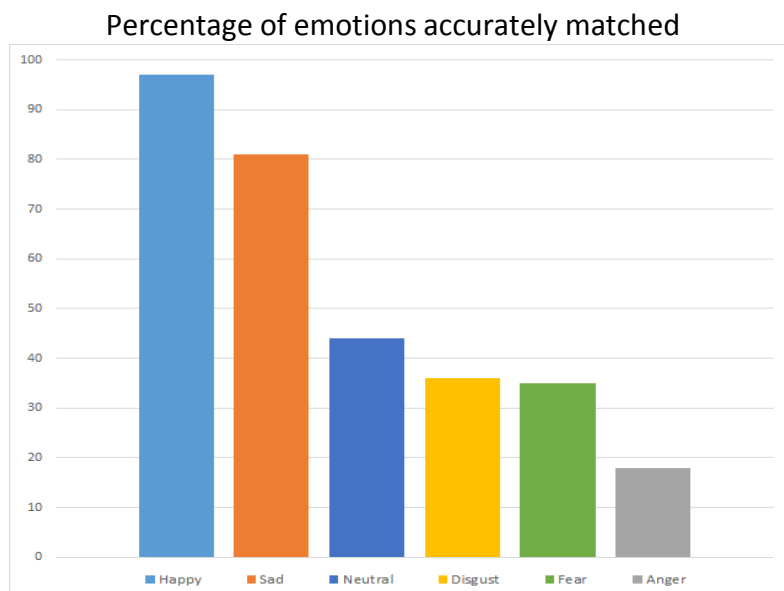
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What did we find?

Research Question 1. Do pre-school children find some emotions more difficult to match than others? To investigate children's accuracy in matching each type of emotion, we looked at accuracy for each type of emotion.



Research Question 2

How does the ability to match emotions relate to social and emotional skills?

Scores on the SDQ can be classified into different levels to identify risk for social and emotional difficulties. Based on their teacher-rated scores, each child was classified as low risk, borderline risk, or high risk for difficulties.

It was found that the ability to match emotions is related to social and emotional difficulties. Children who were better able to differentiate emotions were less likely to be classified in the borderline or high risk category.

What does it mean for teaching and learning?

The importance of recognising emotions is emphasised in the NEL Framework, which lists the following learning goals in relation to children's ability to recognise emotions:

- Develop an awareness of personal identity as they identify and recognise emotions
- Manage their own emotions and behaviours as they express and cope with emotions, and self-regulate their behaviour
- Show respect for diversity by respecting others' feelings and show understanding what others are going through
- Communicate, interact and build relationships with others by being attentive to what others feel, and using friendly ways to manage negative emotions

Teachers can focus on using specific strategies to enhance emotion-matching ability in children by:

- Encouraging children to look into mirrors and make different facial expressions, or use them with a friend to show each other examples of how an emotion can look on different people
- Providing children access to suitable resources such as books and videos about feelings, and provide opportunities for children to talk about and share their own experiences
- Using dramatisation and role play for children to explore emotions and responses

