



2023

What We Say Matters! How Parents Affect Their Child's Emotional Knowledge

Savanna Nielson
sjnielsen98@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives>



Part of the [Life Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nielson, Savanna (2023) "What We Say Matters! How Parents Affect Their Child's Emotional Knowledge," *Family Perspectives*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives/vol5/iss2/4>

This Research and Writing Spotlight is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Family Perspectives by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



What We Say Matters! How Parents Affect Their Child's Emotional Knowledge

By Savanna Nielsen
Brigham Young University

Everyone loves talking to a baby, but have you ever wondered how much of what you say actually sticks? Is what you say to them really going to affect them in the long run? When it comes to developing a child's emotional knowledge, the answer is yes.

Emotional knowledge is the ability to identify emotions and their causes. Children who score higher on emotional knowledge tests often also have greater social and academic success. Parenting can play a vital role in a child's development of emotional knowledge.

Dr. Peter J. Reschke of BYU's School of Family Life and his fellow researchers conducted a study to examine how parent-child communication affect children's emotion-talk and emotional knowledge during toddlerhood.

The Study

Researchers gave parents cartoon pictures of characters experiencing different emotions and told them to explain each picture to their two-and-a-half-year-old child. As researchers watched and listened to these interactions, they noted that parents used "teaching" language to describe the characters. They would say things like, "He is jumping" or, "See his face? He looks sad." Interestingly, parents who used more emotion words to describe the pictures had children who had a larger emotion-based vocabulary.

One year later, when the children were about three-and-a-half, they did this activity again with the same parents and children and they found a pattern: the children who utilized a large emotion-based vocabulary at the first visit also utilized more emotion words during their second visit. This shows rank order stability in emotion-based vocabulary throughout toddlerhood.

However, there was a notable change in how parents interacted with their now older children. Instead of just using emotion words to describe the picture, parents instead used "coaching" language to encourage their child to play an active part in the meaning-making of the depicted characters. For example, they would say

things like “how do you think she feels?” and “why does he feel sad?” This change in parent-child communication demonstrates the dynamic nature of sensitive parenting such that parents change their dialogue, not only to match the current cognitive level of the child, but also to support his/her emerging competencies.

In regard to this adaptation in parent-child communication as the child grows, Dr. Reschke and his associates commented that, “It is possible that certain socialization strategies, such as teaching, are more successful in scaffolding children’s emotion knowledge earlier rather than later in childhood, whereas other strategies, such as coaching, continue to help children internalize emotion concepts throughout childhood.”

This process of internalizing emotion-concepts was demonstrated when the children participated in another round of assessments at 4 ½. Findings indicated that toddlers who had a larger emotional vocabulary became young children who had more robust emotional knowledge. In essence, utilizing the descriptive language of emotion is a precursor to understanding both the causes that precede and meanings that underlie emotion. Importantly, this study illustrates how parents socialize emotional understanding in children starting from an early age.

What Does This Mean For Me?

The findings of this study encourage parents to be purposeful in dialoguing about emotion-based topics. This can be difficult to prioritize as a parent, particularly if you grew up in a family where emotions were not openly discussed or expressed. But once you understand the benefits and commit to increasing emotional communication with your child, you will find that there is no shortage of opportunities to talk about emotions in the context of daily family-life. You can narrate your child’s emotions throughout the day; explain your own emotions and how they relate to your behavior; focus on emotional meaning and expression in the stories you read together; as your child grows, encourage him/her to take a more active part in the emotional meaning-making of situations. The result will be an emotionally knowledgeable child who knows that (1) what they say matters, (2) what they feel matters, and (3) what they say about what they feel matters.

Reference:

Reschke, P. J., Clifford, B. N., Brown, M., Siufanaua, M., Graver, H., Cooper, A. M., Porter, C. L., Stockdale, L. A., & Coyne, S. M. (forthcoming). “I found a snake at grandma’s house.” direct and indirect links between parent-child conversations about emotions and children’s emotion knowledge across early childhood.