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Children's emotion understanding: A meta-analysis of training studies



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ABSTRACT

Background: In the course of development, children show increased insight and understanding of emotions – both of their own emotions and those of others. However, little is known about the efficacy of training programs aimed at improving children's understanding of emotion.

Objectives: To conduct an effect size analysis of trainings aimed at three aspects of emotion understanding: external aspects (i.e., the recognition of emotional expressions, understanding external causes of emotion, understanding the influence of reminders on present emotions); mental aspects (i.e., understanding desire-based emotions, understanding belief-based emotions, understanding hidden emotions); and reflective aspects (i.e., understanding the regulation of an emotion, understanding mixed emotions, understanding moral emotions).

Data sources: A literature search was conducted using PubMed, PsycInfo, the Cochrane Library, and manual searches.

Review methods: The search identified 19 studies or experiments including a total of 749 children with an average age of 86 months ($S.D. = 30.71$) from seven different countries.

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Results: Emotion understanding training procedures are effective for improving external (Hedge's $g = 0.62$), mental (Hedge's $g = 0.31$), and reflective (Hedge's $g = 0.64$) aspects of emotion understanding. These effect sizes were robust and generally unrelated to the number and lengths of training sessions, length of the training period, year of publication, and sample type. However, training setting and social setting moderated the effect of emotion understanding training on the understanding of external aspects of emotion. For the length of training session and social setting, we observed significant moderator effects of training on reflective aspects of emotion. **Conclusion:** Emotion understanding training may be a promising tool for both preventive intervention and the psychotherapeutic process. However, more well-controlled studies are needed.

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Introduction

Emotional competence can be analyzed in terms of various domains (Saarni, 1999), including the ability to experience basic emotions such as joy, sadness, fear, and anger, the ability to express emotions, to recognize emotions (both those of the self and those of others), to control their expression and to regulate the subjective experience of emotion. Finally, competence also includes a cognitive understanding of emotions, including their nature, causes, consequences, and strategies for regulating them. These different domains of emotional competence are interconnected. In particular, improved emotion understanding has been linked to greater competence in various other domains, such as emotion recognition, control and regulation (Harris, 2008). Emotion understanding (EU) is also connected to the broader construct of Theory-of-Mind (i.e., knowledge and awareness of mental states – including desires, beliefs and emotions). With respect to several different aspects of emotion understanding, marked developmental differences (especially in preschool and school-age children) as well as individual differences have been reported (Pons, de Rosnay, Andersen, & Cuisinier, 2010).

An empirically-derived model of emotion understanding by Pons, Harris and de Rosnay (2004; Pons & Harris, 2005) identified three hierarchically organized levels of emotion understanding (with three components per level). The first level – *external* – consists of the following components: recognizing emotional expressions (e.g., of sadness, anger, happiness, etc.); understanding external or situational causes of emotions (e.g., the death of a pet causes sadness), and understanding the impact of external reminders (e.g., understanding that re-encountering a situation with emotional significance in the past can reactivate the emotion). The second level – *mental* – consists of the following components: understanding the role of desires (e.g., understanding that different people like/hate/fear/ ... different entities); understanding the role of beliefs (e.g., recognizing that a person's belief about a situation determines his or her emotional reaction to it); and understanding hidden emotions (e.g., realizing that expressed and felt emotions can differ). The third level – *reflective* – includes the following components: understanding emotion regulation (e.g., understanding that different coping strategies have different effects); understanding mixed emotions (e.g., understanding that the same situation can make someone feel both excited and anxious); and understanding moral emotions (e.g., understanding that transgression elicits guilty feelings). Based on this model, Pons and Harris (2005; Pons et al., 2004) have developed a comprehensive test of emotion understanding, the Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC).

Children's understanding of emotion is an important aspect of cognitive development that has been linked with a variety of outcomes. Children and adolescents with good emotion understanding show better academic performance (e.g., Doudin, Martin, & Albanese, 2001; Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011; Jones, Brown, Hoglund, & Aber, 2010; Lecce, Caputi, & Hughes, 2011; Pons, Harris, & Doudin, 2002), and are more successful in their social interactions with peers and teachers (e.g., Bosacki & Astington, 1999; Cassidy, Parke, Butkovsky, & Braungart, 1992; McDowell, O'Neil, & Parke, 2000). Conversely, children with poor emotion understanding show poorer academic performance, are more likely to be rejected

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