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Emotional availability (EA): Theoretical background, empirical research using the EA Scales, and clinical applications



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ABSTRACT

Emotional availability (EA), as a construct, refers to the capacity of a dyad to share an emotionally healthy relationship. The Emotional Availability (EA) Scales assess this construct using a multi-dimensional framework, with scales measuring the affect and behavior of both the child and adult partner (caregiver). The four caregiver components are sensitivity, structuring, non-intrusiveness, and non-hostility. The two child components are the child's responsiveness to the caregiver and the child's involvement of the caregiver. We first describe this relationship construct, look at psychometric properties in basic and prevention/intervention efforts, then review the extant empirical literature in order to examine the scope of studies assessing EA by using the EA Scales. We also explore its use in clinical practice. Throughout, we critically evaluate the knowledge base in this area as well as identify areas for further growth.

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Introduction

The intent of this paper is to outline the theoretical background and use of the Emotional Availability (EA) Scales, a tool that can be used to “take the temperature” of relationships between children and their caregivers. There is a large body of empirical research using the EA Scales, a relationship-based assessment that can be used to examine caregiver–child relationships across a broad spectrum of adult–child relationships (e.g., parent–child, child care provider/teacher–child), developmental ages (e.g., infancy, preschool, middle childhood, and adolescence), and contexts (e.g., naturalistic, semi-structured and structured play, teaching, feeding, bathing, separation–reunion). Our goal in this paper is to (a) provide an overview of the theoretical background of the EA Scales; (b) examine the psychometric evidence in basic science, prevention/intervention studies, and cross-cultural applications; (c) summarize the large body of empirical research using these scales; (d) understand the clinical practice that employs the EA Scales; and (e) critically evaluate this work and interpret the findings emanating from it.

Theoretical background

Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) first used the term “emotional availability” to describe a mother’s supportive attitude and presence in the context of infant/toddler explorations away from her. They noted that healthy mother–child relationships allow for exploration and autonomy, at the same time recognizing the importance of physical contact and emotional “refueling.” Other writings (e.g., Sorce & Emde, 1981) emphasized the importance of emotional availability including not merely physical presence, but also emotional signaling and awareness of such signaling from others. For Emde (1980, 1983, 2000), emotional availability in a parent–child relationship refers to the adult’s “receptive presence” to the child’s emotional signals. Emde and Easterbrooks (1985) stated that emotional availability is an affective barometer of the relationship between a parent and a child and emphasized affective attunement to a broad spectrum of negative *as well as* positive emotions.

Emde wrote:

“Emotional availability refers to an individual’s emotional responsiveness and ‘attunement’ to another’s needs and goals; key is the acceptance of a wide range of emotions rather than responsiveness solely to distress (Emde, 1980, p. 80).”

In other words, emotional availability involves a full range of emotions, both negative (e.g., distress, anger, sadness, disgust) and positive (e.g., interest, satisfaction, joy, and surprise). The child’s emotional expressions provide the parent with information about what the child is feeling and what he/she may or may not need or want:

“Crying, for example, gives a message of ‘come change something’, a message that is species-wide and peremptory, while smiling gives a species-wide message something like ‘keep it up, I like it’ (Emde, 1980, p. 97).”

Thus, a caregiver’s emotional availability toward both positive and negative emotional feedback and initiatives from the child is central to the child’s thriving, and the child provides feedback to the caregiver about how the adult’s behavior is received. Often, the literature concerning parent–child relationships does not emphasize the fact that a child’s emotional expressions are part of a feedback system that both assures parents of their competence and is rewarding. That is, not only is the parent’s emotional availability important for the child, it is important for the child to be emotionally available to the parent – to let the parent know how he or she has been feeling, to give the parent feedback, to communicate that the parent is being needed and appreciated, and to demonstrate that time with the parent is enjoyed. In good-enough circumstances, the child’s emotional availability to the parent enables a mutual exchange which is varied, interesting, dynamic, and satisfying. Such mutuality of emotional exchange confirms that the parent’s love and care has been received by the child.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) is an important foundation for the concept of emotional availability. The idea of sensitivity to the infant’s emitted cues and

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