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Brief Report

Function of child anger and sadness in response to a blocked goal

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the functional theory of emotion, anger is proposed to serve adaptive functions such as motivating children to persist in overcoming difficulties to achieve their goals, whereas sadness helps children to shift attention away from goals that they determine cannot be attained. Despite the theorized importance of anger to persistence, it does not always relate to persistence in expected ways empirically; the role that sadness might play in how anger relates to persistence is often not considered even though children often experience both anger and sadness when goals are blocked. We hypothesized that how anger relates to persistence would depend on the level of sadness that children felt and, thus, tested sadness as a moderator of the relation of anger to persistence. We expected that the relation of anger to persistence would be stronger when sadness is lower. Child anger, sadness, and persistence were observed in a locked-box frustration task when children were 4 or 5 years old ($N = 116$). Although higher levels of child anger were associated with more persistence, the association between anger and persistence was stronger when sadness was lower than when sadness was higher. The findings indicate that children's ability to use the motivational aspects of anger to promote persistence may depend on the levels of sadness felt.

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Introduction

Typically, empirical research on children's anger has focused on less optimal aspects of anger by showing its relations to negative child outcomes such as aggression (Ostrov, Murray-Close, Godleski, & Hart, 2013), externalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 2007), and peer rejection (Juvonen, 1991). Largely neglected in this research is the potential adaptive theoretical function of anger, where anger is proposed to motivate children to remove obstacles to achieving their goals (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Saarni, Campos, Camras, & Witherington, 2006). Examining the relation of child anger to children's persistence at problem solving is important, especially because the motivational function of anger to promote persistence has been related to positive outcomes for children such as better academic achievement (Mokrova, O'Brien, Calkins, Leerkes, & Marcovitch, 2013) and more socially appropriate behaviors (Spinrad et al., 2006). The goal of the current study was to examine the interplay between the motivational aspects of anger and the potential role of sadness as they both relate to children's motivation to overcome an obstacle.

Anger is theorized to be experienced when goals that individuals have set for themselves are blocked (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1984). Carver and Harmon-Jones (2009) proposed that anger is an approach-related affect that often promotes approach tendencies, efforts, and actions allowing children to be more persistent when solving problems. Anger can also energize those who are experiencing it (von Salisch & Saarni, 2011), motivating and organizing individuals' self-regulatory actions (Buss & Goldsmith, 1998; Izard & Kobak, 1991). In addition, anger may motivate socially appropriate behaviors. Cannon (1915) considered anger as one of the fighting emotions. For example, when seeing friends being treated unfairly, maintaining a certain level of anger or even upregulating anger might help children to stand up for their friends.

Although anger is theorized to motivate individuals to overcome difficulties (Barrett & Campos, 1987), empirical studies have found that anger promotes persistence in some cases but not in others. In situations where preschoolers tried to open a box, in which there was an attractive toy, but were given a set of wrong keys, they were found to be more persistent on the task when angry, engaging in appropriate regulatory actions such as solving the problem by themselves (e.g., actively trying different keys to open the box and get the toy) and seeking solutions and support from others (e.g., asking the experimenter how the lock works) (Dennis, Cole, Wiggins, Cohen, & Zalewski, 2009; He, Xu, & Degnan, 2012). Despite this evidence suggesting that anger can relate to children's persistent effort in eliminating difficulties to obtain their goals, other research (Buss & Goldsmith, 1998) has found that children may distract themselves from the stimulus when angry. Child anger was also found to be negatively correlated with persistence on various tasks, such as cognitive assessment tasks and mother-child interaction tasks, during 3-h home visits in a sample of children aged 4–8 years (Deater-Deckard, Petrill, & Thompson, 2007). These findings suggest that anger decreased children's persistence.

Because the pattern of findings related to children's anger have not always provided consistent findings, the current study examined the factors associated with how children use anger in ways that allow them to be more persistent at overcoming obstacles presented to them. One of the factors that previous studies did not consider was other emotions that likely co-occur in emotion-eliciting situations. In situations where goals are blocked, children not only experience anger but also can experience sadness with the appraisal of the loss or the unattainability of the goals (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Dennis et al., 2009). In fact, studies found that children often expressed both anger and sadness in goal blockage situations (Crossman, Sullivan, Hitchcock, & Lewis, 2009; Dennis et al., 2009; Sullivan & Lewis, 2012). For example, in a frustration task where 3- and 4-year-olds were given a set of wrong keys to open a box, on average 54% of the episodes involved expressed anger and 17% of the episodes involved expressed sadness (Dennis et al., 2009).

Even though anger and sadness can co-occur, research typically only studies them independently, most likely because of the different functions they serve, with anger considered an approach-related emotion and sadness considered a withdrawal-related emotion. Sadness often relates to low efforts toward goals or moving away from goals (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Lewis et al., 2015) because it serves to help children reserve energy and shift attention to more attainable goals when they appraise difficulties in goal achievement. Lewis, Alessandri, and Sullivan (1990) found that sadness, compared with

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