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Original article

Emotion comprehension and attachment: A conversational intervention with school-aged children



Compréhension de l'émotion et attachement : une intervention dialoguée avec des enfants en été scolaire

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – As part of the flourishing line of enquiry into children's emotion understanding, we report the results of a conversation-based intervention study aimed at improving participants' emotion comprehension, and exploring the intervention effect as a function of attachment security.

Method. – The study was conducted at school with the participation of 98 second-grade children (mean age: 7 years, 7 months; SD: 3.4 months). Participants were assigned to experimental and control groups that were balanced with respect to attachment security and insecurity as evaluated using the Separation Anxiety Test (SAT). The experimental group was exposed to a conversational intervention, in which short story readings with emotional content were used to stimulate discussion on the nature, causes and regulation of emotion. The children in the control group listened to the same stories, but did not take part in the conversational activity. Children from both groups were individually pre- and post-tested on measures of emotional lexicon (ELT) and emotion comprehension (TEC).

Results. – The training was found to have a significant effect on the emotion comprehension of the children allocated to the experimental group. In addition, non-secure children displayed higher gains in emotion comprehension than secure participants. The implications of the findings for educational and school contexts are discussed.

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RÉSUMÉ

Introduction. – Dans le domaine fertile des recherches sur la compréhension de l'émotion par les enfants, nous exposons les résultats d'une étude, basée sur le dialogue, visant l'amélioration de la compréhension de l'émotion de la part des enfants et explorant l'effet de l'intervention en fonction de la sécurité de l'attachement.

Méthodologie. – L'étude a été conduite à l'école, avec la participation de 98 étudiants de deuxième année (âge moyen : 7 ans, 6 mois ; écart-type : 3,5 mois). Les étudiants ont été répartis dans des groupes expérimental et de contrôle, équilibrés par rapport à la sécurité ou l'insécurité de l'attachement et évalués par le Separation Anxiety Test (SAT). Le groupe expérimental a été exposé à une intervention conversationnelle, basée sur des courts contes à contenu émotionnel, visant la stimulation de la discussion sur la nature, les causes et la régulation de l'émotion. Les enfants dans le groupe de contrôle ont écouté les mêmes contes, mais ils n'ont pas pris part à l'activité conversationnelle. Les enfants des deux groupes ont été individuellement testés a priori et a posteriori sur des mesures de lexique émotionnel (ELT) et de compréhension de l'émotion (TEC).

Mots clés :

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Résultats. – Les analyses ont montré un effet significatif de l'entraînement à la compréhension de l'émotion parmi les enfants du groupe expérimental. Également, les enfants insécurisés ont fait preuve de gains plus importants dans la compréhension de l'émotion par rapport aux enfants sécurisés. Les implications de ces résultats sont ensuite discutées.

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The present study falls within the broad area of enquiry into the development of children's social cognition (Dunn, 2006), a set of skills that embraces both theory of mind and emotion comprehension (EC). The last-mentioned ability is a key aspect of socioemotional competence – a construct that has been developed and consolidated thanks to the work of Saarni (1999) and Denham (1998, 2000) – and which along with emotion comprehension includes emotion expression and emotional regulation.

Emotion comprehension is itself made up of a range of abilities that are crucial for successful everyday social interaction and school achievement (Mavroveli & Sánchez-Ruiz, 2011). Following Pons, Harris, and de Rosnay (2004), EC may be said to comprise three main dimensions: understanding the nature of emotions, their causes and the fact that they may be regulated. In the current study, we explored the efficacy of a conversational intervention conducted at school and designed to enhance all three components of primary school children's emotion comprehension, while also examining its effects in relation to different attachment profiles, or more specifically in relation to secure versus insecure and disorganized attachment (Ainsworth, 1979).

1. Training children's emotion comprehension

Recent years have seen an increase in intervention studies on the development of socioemotional competence with both typical and atypical populations (e.g., Izard, Trentacosta, King, & Mostow, 2004; Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Bierman et al., 2008). Many of these studies have been conducted with at-risk populations (e.g., due to social disadvantage and poverty) with the aim of assessing the efficacy of broad-sweeping programs targeting social and emotional abilities and problem-solving (for a recent review: Cefai & Cavioni, 2014). Among these studies, the most important programs are the PATHS, a universal school-based preventive intervention model whose effectiveness has been showed with both school-aged (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995) and preschool children (Domitrovich et al., 2007), and the REDI (Bierman et al., 2008), a program promoting school readiness competencies in the domain of social-emotional development. Other studies, which are among those informing the current research, have reported interventions that specifically focused on the role of conversational mechanism to improve emotion comprehension, a key correlate of psychological wellbeing, cognitive development and academic success (Denham et al., 2003; Denham, Ji, & Hamre, 2010; Jones, Brown, & Lawrence Aber, 2011). Pioneering work in this particular line of enquiry was carried out by Peng, Johnson, Pollock, Glasspool, and Harris (1992). These authors evaluated an intervention with 4- to 7-year-olds that was designed to improve the children's comprehension of mixed or conflicting emotions, that is to say the awareness that in certain situations it is possible to experience emotions of opposite valence in relation to the same stimulus. The training involved reading story episodes eliciting mixed emotions and prompting the children to identify the causes.

Nonetheless, a genuine interest in assessing whether it is possible to help children develop their general emotion comprehension has only emerged over the past 15 years. Pons, Harris, & Doudin (2002) conducted an intensive 3-month program with 9-year-old children divided into experimental and control groups. The

13 areas covered by the intervention included recall of past and present emotions, identification of loved and not loved persons, the distinction between actual and apparent emotions, the origins of pride and guilt, and so on. Children were helped to develop their EC in each of these areas by means of specifically designed activities based on reading, conversation and discussion. The results reflected significant gains in participants' emotion comprehension independently of gender. In a different study, Guajardo and Watson (2002) manipulated 3- to 4-year-old children's exposure to social discourse during storybook reading. The individual training sessions involved discussion of mental-state concepts (e.g., intentions and emotions) in the context of story reading, with the storyteller highlighting the characters' inner states and actions, and asking the children to explain them. The findings provided support for the hypothesis that social discourse on inner states influences children's emotion comprehension and theory of mind. Grazzani Gavazzi and Ornaghi (2011) also reported positive outcomes – in terms of significant improvements in social cognition – for a training intervention conducted in kindergartens with both male and female preschoolers. The training consisted of reading stories enriched with psychological lexicon and then getting the children to “play language games”, that is, to converse using a series of emotional terms with a view to enhancing their emotion comprehension as well as other aspects of their social cognition. In a study by Tenenbaum, Alfieri, Brooks, & Dunne (2008), children between the ages of 5 and 8 years either explained (self-explanation condition) or listened to an experimenter explaining (experimenter-explanation condition) the causes of story characters' hidden and ambivalent emotional reactions in several different situations. Compared to a control group who listened to the story scenarios and answered questions unrelated to emotions, school-age children in both experimental conditions displayed gains in EC; the authors discussed the outcomes of their study, emphasizing the fact that children's emotion comprehension was enhanced by participation in explanatory conversations. Similar results were recently obtained with toddlers (Grazzani, Ornaghi, Agliati, & Brazzelli, *in press*) attending nursery schools, who participated in an intervention based on conversing about emotions in small groups of children.

Most of the studies just reviewed adopted a conversational method of training. In the course of infancy and childhood, conversational activities, such as explaining mental states and discussing them with other people, crucially contribute to children's understanding of the mind (Turnbull & Carpendale, 1999; de Rosnay & Hughes, 2006), helping them to transform their implicit knowledge into explicit awareness, as borne out by the ample body of longitudinal studies reported in the literature (Hughes, White, & Ensor, 2014). During the training phase, a conversational approach gives children the opportunity to discuss, reflect on and reason about the themes introduced by the adult, helping them to develop new perspectives and access the viewpoints of others (Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Grazzani, 2014). Nonetheless, the conversational studies reviewed above focused on a narrow set of emotion comprehension skills, e.g. the comprehension of ambivalent or mixed emotions (Peng et al., 1992; Tenenbaum et al., 2008), or tested the efficacy of intervention on a variety of skills but only with preschool participants (Grazzani Gavazzi & Ornaghi, 2011; Ornaghi, Grazzani, Cherubin, Conte, & Piralli, 2015).

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