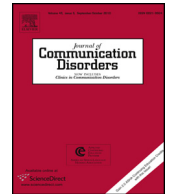


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Communication Disorders



The use of emotions in narratives in Williams syndrome

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 January 2013

Received in revised form 9 January 2014

Accepted 10 January 2014

Available online 21 January 2014

*Keywords:*Williams syndrome
Language production
Emotion words
Narratives

ABSTRACT

Although individuals with Williams syndrome are very sociable, they tend to have limited contact and friendships with peers. In typically developing children the use of positive emotions (e.g., happy) has been argued to be related to peer relationships and popularity. The current study investigated the use and development of emotion words in Williams syndrome using cross-sectional developmental trajectories and examined children's use of different types of emotion words. Nineteen children with Williams syndrome (WS) and 20 typically developing (TD) children matched for chronological age told a story from a wordless picture book. Participants with WS produced a similar number of emotion words compared to the control group and the use of emotion words did not change when plotted against chronological age or vocabulary abilities in either group. However, participants with WS produced more emotion words about sadness. Links between emotion production and friendships as well as future studies are discussed.

Learning outcomes: After reading this article, readers will be able to: explain the development of positive and negative emotions in Williams syndrome and recognize that emotion production is atypical in this population.

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1. Introduction

Emotional competence is an important aspect in children's social success (for discussion, see [Denham, 2007](#)). Emotional competence does not only include the recognition and understanding of certain emotions, but it also includes when and how emotions can be expressed. Children's talk about emotions, in addition to emotion understanding, is thus a key predictor for social competence. For example, the number of emotion words that children use with their peers during everyday interactions in preschool classrooms predicts their popularity with peers ([Fabes, Eisenberg, Hanish, & Spinard, 2001](#)). Furthermore, emotion development and its expression predict conflict resolution between friends in typically developing children ([Dunn & Herrera, 1997](#)). Finally, children who express happy emotions are more likely to be pro-social and liked by their peers compared to those who communicate negative emotions, such as sadness and fear ([Denham, 2007](#)). Thus, understanding the frequency with which children invoke emotion words is an important aspect of children's social development. There are some studies that have investigated emotion recognition in atypical populations. However, very few studies have examined the use of emotion words in children with Williams syndrome. For this reason, this study examined the frequency of emotion words in children with Williams syndrome and is the first to investigate the use of different types of emotion words.

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Williams syndrome (WS) is a rare genetic neurodevelopmental disorder (1 in 20 000 live births) characterised by an uneven cognitive profile with strengths in verbal abilities and face recognition in contrast to difficulties with visuo-spatial abilities, number, and planning (see [Martens, Wilson, & Reuters, 2008](#) for an overview). Behaviourally, people with WS can be recognised by their extreme friendliness and overt social behaviour ([Doyle, Bellugi, Korenberg, & Graham, 2004](#); [Jones et al., 2001](#)). They have little fear of strangers with studies reporting higher positive ratings towards unfamiliar faces compared to controls ([Bellugi, Adolphs, Cassandy, & Chiles, 1999](#); [Jones et al., 2001](#)). Hypersociability has been reported in both adults and very young children within a wide range of settings. For example, researchers have observed that during testing participants with WS kept smiling and gazing at the experimenter's face ([Jones et al., 2001](#); [Mervis, Robinson, Rowe, Becerra, & Klein-Tasman, 2003](#)). In contrast to age-matched children with developmental disabilities of other etiologies, children with WS received higher scores for empathy and shyness on a parental questionnaire ([Klein-Tasman & Mervis, 2003](#)). Yet, although people with WS have an excessive desire towards social contact, they have little contact with peers ([Howlin & Udwin, 2006](#)). In addition, they have high general anxiety (especially about new situations) with higher levels of fear persisting throughout life ([Dykens, 2003](#); [Leyfer, Woodruff-Borden, Klein-Tasman, Fricke, & Mervis, 2006](#)). It is currently not well understood why individuals with WS, who tend to be extremely social, have problems establishing friendships with peers and experience social difficulties including isolation ([Laws & Bishop, 2004](#)).

As identified by previous research in typically developing children ([Denham, 2007](#)), the use of emotion words might provide a possible explanation. However, little is known about the use of emotion words in WS. Yet, there have been some studies that have examined comprehension of emotion words and emotion recognition in WS. These studies have shown that expression recognition is less accurate for children with WS than typically developing children of a similar chronological age ([Gagliardi et al., 2003](#); [Lacroix, Guidetti, Rogé, & Reilly, 2009](#)). In addition, adolescents and adults with WS were found to perform significantly worse on identifying negative emotions compared to age-matched typically developing controls ([Plesa-Skwerer et al., 2006](#)). However, a study by [Lacroix et al. \(2009\)](#) showed that participants with WS produced the same proportion of correct answers for the emotions *sadness* (0.47) and for *happiness* (0.47) in an emotion labelling task. Due to the fact that emotion recognition is impaired in individuals with WS and comprehension generally precedes production, it can be predicted that emotion production will be impaired as well. However, given the conflicting evidence for emotion recognition in previous studies, it is not clear whether there are any differences for the types of emotions produced in WS. Production of specific emotion types merits examination given that using happy words was correlated with children's peer popularity ([Denham, 2007](#)).

Narratives provide a means to examine children's production because they serve as an important cultural tool for expressing socio-cognitive understanding of feelings and beliefs ([Fivush, 1989](#)). Indeed, the use of affective expressions and emotion words is often the primary means of creating a shared context between the story narrator and listener ([Losh, Bellugi, Reilly, & Anderson, 2000](#)). Some researchers suggest that fictional narratives, in comparison to personal narratives, present advantages as a more controlled form of discourse. From a methodological perspective, [Bamberg and Damrad-Frye \(1991\)](#) argue that fictional narratives enable more precise analyses than personal narratives because of variability in the latter form. Furthermore, telling a fictional narrative, as opposed to retelling a personal experience becomes more salient to children as they encounter fictional narratives as a means of school-based instruction ([Ukrainetz et al., 2005](#)). Researchers have found that children are able to attribute emotion and mental states to story characters within a fictional context ([Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991](#); [Bamberg & Reilly, 1996](#); [Peterson & Slaughter, 2006](#); [Reilly, 1992](#)), and use different narrative events (i.e., goals, outcomes, reactions) to determine the causes of emotion for story characters ([Bourg & Stephenson, 1997](#)). The spontaneous language of children's narratives thus provides a naturalistic sample to study the use and understanding of emotions.

Previous studies investigating narratives in WS have found that children with WS use more social evaluation devices (such as phrases and exclamations to capture the listener's attention) in their narratives compared to typically developing (TD) children ([Losh et al., 2000](#); [Reilly, Losh, Bellugi, & Wulfbeck, 2004](#)). However, the use of evaluation devices (which include emotional dimensions as well as social dimensions) declines as participants with WS age ([Crawford, Edelson, Plesa-Skwerer, & Tager-Flusberg, 2008](#)). In addition, [Pearlman-Avni and Eviatar \(2002\)](#) compared the amount of emotion language produced in children with WS compared to those with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (ASD) using a re-tell task. Participants with WS overall used more emotion language than those with ASD but were not different from typically developing 7 and 11 year olds. However, their measure of emotion language not only included how the characters felt but also how they thought or acted, which are not all emotional uses of language. As a result, their coding was not specific to emotions and does not provide inside into the use of emotions unambiguously. Specific evaluative devices that describe story characters' frames of mind ([Bamberg & Damrad-Frye, 1991](#); [Peterson & Slaughter, 2006](#)) often include emotion along with mental state terms (e.g., think, know) and perceptual (e.g., heard, looked) terms. In a sample of 5- to 8-year-old TD children, older children used more mental state terms and perceptual terms than did younger children, but equal numbers of emotion words ([Aldrich, Tenenbaum, Brooks, Harrison, & Sines, 2011](#)). Specific age-related patterns related to the particular frame of mind under investigation further demonstrate that emotion words need to be examined separately from other evaluative devices. Also, [Pearlman-Avni and Eviatar \(2002\)](#) did not take into account different aspects of emotion, such as expressions of happiness versus sadness. The present study contributes to the literature by unravelling emotion language from mental state talk. Furthermore, previous studies have failed to investigate whether there are any developmental changes when it comes to emotion words. Finally, as shown in TD participants the use of positive emotions has been linked to popularity with peers ([Denham, 2007](#)). Thus far no studies have investigated the occurrences of negative and positive

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