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## Emotions in school and symptoms of psychological maladjustment from kindergarten to first grade



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### ABSTRACT

The associations between children's ( $N = 301$ ) observed expression of positive and negative emotion in school and symptoms of psychological maladjustment (i.e., depressive and externalizing symptoms) were examined from kindergarten to first grade. Positive and negative emotional expressivity levels were observed in school settings, and teachers reported on measures of children's externalizing and depressive symptoms. In longitudinal panel models testing bidirectional paths, depressive symptoms in kindergarten were negatively associated with positive expressivity in first grade but not vice versa. Children's externalizing symptoms in kindergarten predicted higher negative expressivity in school in first grade. There was also significant prediction of externalizing in first grade by negative expressivity during kindergarten. Implications about child psychological maladjustment in early schooling are discussed.

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## Introduction

Symptoms of psychological maladjustment have roots in a person's capacity to appropriately express and regulate emotions. Thus, researchers have investigated individuals' emotional dispositions to understand the etiology of psychological maladjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2001), including the etiology of symptoms of depression (which includes feelings of sadness and irritability) and externalizing problems (e.g., conduct disorder, oppositional defiance, relational aggression symptoms; Armstrong, Goldstein, & MacArthur Working Group on Outcome Assessment, 2003). For instance, the tripartite model of depression and anxiety proposes that the presence of a disposition toward negative emotion and lack of positive emotion are risks for depressive symptoms (Clark & Watson, 1991; Lonigan, Phillips, & Hooe, 2003). Furthermore, a lack of positive emotion and the presence of negative emotion have been typically associated with higher externalizing behaviors such as conduct problems and aggression (e.g., Buss, Kiel, Morales, & Robinson, 2014), although there have been some mixed findings for positive emotion (e.g., Ghassabian et al., 2014; Stifter, Putnam, & Jahromi, 2008), which we discuss further. In this study, we focus on understanding the development of early symptoms of maladjustment given their long-term implications for well-being (Côté et al., 2009; Moffitt, 1993; Olson et al., 2013).

The experience and expression of emotion are overlapping but not synonymous constructs. During early childhood, it is likely that most emotional expression reflects felt emotion, although even young children can mask some emotions (Cole, 1986). Particularly as children transition into formal schooling years, children's emotion expressivity, or outward expressions of positive or negative emotion, may be an important marker of children's adjustment (Denham, 2006). The transition to elementary school is often a challenging one, with changing demands and expectations (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). During this transition, children's regulation skills are also still maturing (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010), and although the expression of emotion is normal, the quality of interactions with peers and teachers likely is related to the ability to suppress the expression of emotion, especially negative emotion, in some school contexts (e.g., the class).

Researchers have typically assessed children's emotionality with adults' reports (e.g., Valiente, Swanson, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012; Zhou, Lengua, & Wang, 2009) or, less commonly, with observations, often in laboratory settings (e.g., Ghassabian et al., 2014; Olino et al., 2011). However, emotion dispositions are also shaped by social experiences and relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Given that depressive and externalizing symptoms (e.g., conduct problems, aggression) are tied to social difficulties with others (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010), including in the school context, exploring whether depressive and externalizing symptoms also predict children's emotional expressivity in naturalistic school settings could help to clarify how psychological difficulties affect school experiences and, consequently, emotions expressed at school. Thus, the goal of this study was to examine cross-lagged associations between positive or negative emotional expressivity observed in school settings and depression or externalizing symptoms from kindergarten (K) to first grade (G1).

### *Emotional expressivity predicting depressive symptoms and externalizing behaviors*

Consistent with prior theory (Clark & Watson, 1991; Lonigan et al., 2003), children who express more positive emotion or less negative emotion have lower levels of depressive symptoms during childhood (from 3 to 10 years of age in the following studies: Dougherty, Klein, Durbin, Hayden, & Olino, 2010; Eggum et al., 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Ghassabian et al., 2014; Olino et al., 2011). For instance, expressing anger and irritability (both negative emotions) and showing disinterest or lack of pleasure (which displays a lack of positive emotions) in regular activities, such as school activities, are associated with more depressive symptoms (Eggum et al., 2012). Thus, children who demonstrate less positive expressivity and more negativity at school may show more depressive symptoms over time.

Negative emotional expressivity also appears to be a risk factor for externalizing behaviors during childhood (e.g., from 2 to 9 years of age in the following studies: Buss et al., 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2005). For instance, unregulated anger has been associated with aggression (Lochman, Barry,

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