

Role of emotion regulation in children's development



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Emotions Social Development

Although the concept of 'emotion regulation' is an important one for Differential Emotions and Social Constructivist theories, these two theories approach emotional development in different ways. Compare and contrast these two approaches and discuss the evidence about the role of emotion regulation in children's development.

Introduction

Emotions have a vital role in everyday life. Like other psychological phenomena, emotions are easily recognised but difficult to define. According to Wikipedia, "Emotion is an intense mental state that arises autonomically in the nervous system rather than through conscious effort, and evokes either a positive or negative psychological response" (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2008).

Emotions also play a vital role to healthy social and cognitive functioning. Therefore, the main focus of psychologists is on emotional development nowadays. There are various definitions of emotion regulation but most researchers agree that emotion regulation involves an ability to modulate emotional arousal in such a way that facilitates social, cognitive, and language development as well as the ability to cope with everyday tasks and environmental changes. According to Thompson (1994), as cited in Fox & Stifter (2005), emotion regulation is the ability to modulate, maintain or control emotional expressions or behaviour.

There are different emotional theories in psychology for example

Evolutionary Theories, James-Lange Theory, Cannon-Bard Theory and

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Cognitive Appraisal etc. The concept of 'emotion regulation' is an important one for *Differential Emotions and Social Constructivist theories*. These two theories approach emotional development in different ways. By comparing and contrasting these two different approaches, the role of emotion regulation in children's development is focused in this essay.

- Differential Emotions Theory and Emotional Development

According to Differential emotions theory there are 9-11 basic emotions which are hard wired in the human central nervous system and their development is strongly influenced by neuro-physiological maturation. According to this theory, these basic emotions are biologically prepared responses to certain types of stimuli which involve universal facial expressions. Izard & Malatesta (1987) claim that each of these basic emotions consists of the following:

- A particular neural substrate;
- Neuro-muscular feedback from facial expressions;
- Associated with a specific feeling tone.

Later on Ackerman, Abe & Izard (1998) claimed that "neurochemical component variously involves processes in the somatic nervous system that activate and regulate emotion" (Ackerman, Abe & Izard, 1998, p. 86).

According to the *Differential Emotions Theory*, children are born with some independent emotions such as interest, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust. These emotions are independent of cognition and can be identified

by facial expression. These are innate and universal emotions which appear early on predictable timetable.

When infants are four months old, most of them develop the ability of anger, surprise, joy and sadness. It is also observed that fear appears when infants are 7-9 months old. These emotions are called primary (basic) emotions because as these are formed in the first year of life.

Early *Differential Emotions Theory* also maintains that emotions are products of natural processes which are independent of social norms and cognitive system. But later on Izard & Malatesta (1987) accept the role of cognition on emotional development and also recognise the importance of maturational processes. Izard & Malatesta (1987) argued that an..... emotion arises in infancy, as well as in later years, as a function of direct perception that does not necessarily involve appraisal or interpretive processes.

However, cognitive appraisal, comparison, semantic processing, inference, and imagery are frequent activators of emotion as soon as the requisite cognitive capacities are in place..... (Izard & Malatesta, 1987, p. 500)

According to Ackerman, Abe & Izard (1998), " emotion regulation describes processes involved in initiating, motivating, and organising behaviour and in preventing stressful levels of negative emotions and maladaptive behaviour"(Ackerman, Abe & Izard, 1998, p. 99).

Furthermore, they argued that a modular emotion system regulates itself to some extent but to a large extent emotion regulation is a process by affective cognitive structures. But it is not clear enough so there is need to

know how children in general learn to regulate emotions and why some children fail to acquire emotion regulation.

Fox & Stifter (2005) also argued that “ During the first three years, there is rapid development of complex emotional states. These states may involve the expression of discrete facial expression” (Fox & Stifter, 2005, p. 240).

They said that there are three motivating forces which are involved in emotional development (first year of life):

- ‘ Basic motivational continua of approach and withdrawal to novelty and uncertainty’.
- ‘ Emotions emerge as a function of social interaction’.
- The ability to monitor behaviour especially self monitor responses

Fox & Stifter (2005) also proposed that interest, disgust and undifferentiated distress are present at birth. Social smiling and anger are two discrete and distinct emotions which appear in the first year of life as a result of social interaction. They argued that by the end of first two year infants have some emotional development that guide them how to behave in their social sphere. They suggested that emotion regulation depends upon physiological, cognitive and social development.

Harris (1989) argued that in the process of emotional development, the emergence of imaginative representational abilities at three to four years of age is a crucial period. He proposed that an early understanding of facial expressions leads the child to an understanding of other aspects of emotions.

The child's growing knowledge of not only his own mental states but also others' mental states leads him gradually to a better social understanding and control of emotions. He argued that this understanding also leads the child to an increased differentiation. As his main focus is on understanding of facial expressions the implication is that, once the basic emotions are in place, it is cognitive regulation of emotion that develops, rather than the emotions themselves.

- Social Constructivist Theory and Emotional Development

Contrasts to Differential Emotions Theory, Social constructivist theory more focus on social roles and the construction of emotions as part of the process of taking on a society's values, assumptions and way of thinking. Social constructivists argued that emotions are largely determined by social norms. Avrill (1980) argued that emotions can be considered as social roles. These social roles need an active explanation by the individual for their 'enactment'. According to Avrill (1980), an emotion "is not something we do (an action), but something that happens to us (a passion)" (Avrill, 1980, p. 311).

Social constructivists also believe that emotional knowledge is represented in a purely symbolic manner. As Averill (1980) explained the relationship between culture, consciousness, and emotions by stating that the emotions are viewed as transitory social roles, or socially constituted syndromes.

The social norms that help to constitute these syndromes are represented psychologically as cognitive structures or schemata (i. e. like grammar of

language) which provide the basis for the appraisal of stimuli, the organisation of responses, and the monitoring of behaviour.

Ratner (1989) also stated that " Social Constructivist maintains that emotions are depended on a social consciousness concerning when, where, and what to feel as well as when, where, and how to act" (Ratner, 1989, p. 4). From Social Constructivists point of view, emotion is a dynamic interplay between individual and environment. They also believed that emotional development is influenced by social context as well as cultural context.

It seems that Social Constructivists are more focused on social cognitive development rather than emotional development. Witherington, Campos & Hertenstein (2001) emphasised on the role of emotion regulation as it can be determined at various levels in the emotion process & person-environment relationship.

According to Witherington, Campos & Hertenstein (2001), infants' emotional development rely on systematic changes in the way they regulate their goal directed activity & their interaction with the people around them. The emotions can be viewed from the standpoint of its regulatory effects on person-environment relationship during each stage of development (Witherington, Campos & Hertenstein, 2001, p. 456).

As *Differential Emotions* theorists focused on facial expression which was their criterion to measure emotion so they are criticised by Social Constructivist by questioning about the criteria to judge the emotion i. e. is emotional expression enough to judge emotion? Harris & Saarni (1989)

pointed out the two assumptions of facial expression:

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- Facial expressions are seen as only one part of a 'repertoire' of expressive behaviour.
- Facial expressions give a restricted view of what the child actually understands.

Based on their work it was argued that there is no compelling evidence which can differentiate between emotions (pride and relief) with respect to facial, postural, or vocal cues. Witherington, Campos & Hertenstein (2001) also criticised that facial and other expressions are not treated as a criteria for observing emotions.

They stated that " the facial expressions of infants or adults undergoing emotions in real-life settings are not strongly related to the states that they are supposed to express; often, facial expression are rarely or never seen when they should be"(Witherington, Campos & Hertenstein, 2001, p. 428).

Saarni, Mumme & Campos (1998) defined emotion as " the person's attempt or readiness to establish, maintain or change the relation between the person and the environment on matters of significance to that person" (Saarni, Mumme & Campos, 1998, p. 238). They examined that emotional states are initially broad and undifferentiated and emotional awareness is learned with experience.

They emphasized on the functional development of emotion. They argued that infants may be born with the elements of emotional expression but it is only in the course of development that the elements become functionally organised.

- Role of Emotion Regulation in Children's Development

The role of emotion regulation in children's development is still under investigation. Although definitions vary, most researchers agree that emotion regulation involves an ability to modulate emotional arousal in such a way that facilitates social, cognitive, and language development as well as the ability to cope with everyday tasks and environmental changes. There is growing evidence that interaction with parents play a vital role in children's early life to acquire positive or negative effective emotion regulation.

Diamond & Aspinwall (2003) stated that from developmental perspective "infants and children initially rely on interactions with their caregivers to regulate their emotions, and they progressively internalise these abilities as they mature" (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003, p. 126). Laible & Thompson (2002) suggested that nature of parent-toddler conflict is related to individual differences in socioemotional and sociomoral development at later age.

In their study, it was evident that parent-child conflict is very important for behaviour regulation. Diamond & Aspinwall (2003) stated that children learn different strategies for emotion regulation and individual differences which influence their coping styles, problem solving, social support processes, relationship quality, and mental and physical health.

There is also evidence that due to temperamental dispositions it is difficult for some children to acquire emotion regulation. Children learn affective regulation through their early attachments and relationships while dysregulation leads them to psychopathology as they grow. As Fox and

Calkins (2003) pointed out cited in Diamond & Aspinwall (2003),..... it is critical to understand not only what children “ bring” to emotion-regulation situations in the way of temperament differences, but how the child’s caregivers and peers respond to these temperamental factors, and how dynamic processes occurring at different developmental moments alter the developmental trajectory of emotion regulation and related capacities.....

(Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003, p. 128).

Gross & Thompson (2007) also argued that from infancy through adolescence is a crucial period because it is a time when temperamental, conceptual, and social (e. g., family, teachers, and peers) elements come together to build the foundation for the individual differences in emotion regulation which can be observed in adulthood.

According to Gross & Thompson (2007), contextual factors play vital role in the development of emotion regulation of which includes the varieties of caregiving influences. Most infants and young children rely upon those caregiving influences for managing their emotions.

Furthermore, they related emotion regulation to the growth of language by which emotions are understood, conveyed, and managed; the settings in which the expression of emotion may have adaptive or maladaptive outcomes; and the cultural values also define the limit of men and women emotions in social context.

Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins (2006) conducted a study to find out the role of emotion regulation in children's early academic. In their study, it was observed that children with better emotion regulation skills had a slightly
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more positive relationship with their teachers and were less likely to have behaviour problems.

According to Graziano, et al (2006), " Better emotion regulation skills also facilitate children's ability to independently attend to and learn new information presented by their teachers. A positive student-teacher relationship may further reinforce such independent behaviour and motivate children to continue to learn" (Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins, 2006, p. 16).

This is also evident that emotion regulation is related to age-specific tasks and competencies and its sensitivity to multiple developmental transitions. Thompson (2006) as cited in Gross & Thompson (2007) argued that " Over time, individual differences in emotional regulatory capacities develop in concert with personality, so that children manage their feelings in a way that is consistent with their temperament-based tolerances, needs for security or stimulation, capacities for self-control, and other personality processes" (Gross & Thompson, 2007, p. 19).

Gross & Thompson, 2007 gave an example that ' cognitive reappraisal has a healthier profile of consequences than expressive suppression'. With the maturation and experience people learn how to use healthy emotion regulation strategies (reappraisal) and how to avoid negative emotion regulation strategies (suppression). It means that with the help of emotional regulation, people can control internal feelings (self-regulation) when interacting with others (mutual regulation) using learned strategies.

Conclusion

Two different approaches towards emotional development were discussed in this essay. From Differential emotions theory's perspective children are born with some independent emotions. And according to this theory emotional development means the development of processes of appraisal, modulation and integration. But on the other hand, Social Constructivist believes that emotions are depended on a social interaction and environment.

These both approaches have their importance. None of it can be ignored completely. As these both approaches are very important for emotion regulation so nowadays more focus is on the development of emotion regulation which plays an important role in children's emotional development.

Differences in how young children understand and regulate their own emotions are closely associated with parents, peer and teacher perceptions of their social competence. Children's early abilities to deal with their emotions have a great impact in their future life. There is a need to understand that " how developmental processes emerge and integrate in emotional regulation skills". There is a need for further research to investigate the development of emotions in children and how to regulate their emotions. More research is needed to find out foundational factors involve in emotion regulation and how to learn healthy emotion regulation strategies in detail.

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