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Parent’s Modeling of Emotions and Children’s Emotional Displays

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Abstract

This study focused on parental modeling of emotions and children’s emotional displays. The predictor variable was parental emotional displays. The outcome variable was children’s emotional displays. The study measured parental emotional displays with a questionnaire that the parents filled out. Children’s emotional displays were measured through observations of the researcher. The study included 100 parents, ages 25 to 40 years old and 100 children, ages two to four years old. The study was ethnically diverse. There were an equal amount of male and female parents and children. The study was statistically significant. The results of this study can be used for teachers to educate parents of the importance of parental modeling of emotional displays.

Children’s emotional displays are strongly affected by parental modeling of emotions. Thy hypothesis of the study suggested there is a strong relationship between parental emotional displays and children’s emotional expressions. The predictor variable was parental emotional displays and the outcome variable was children’s emotional displays. Children are taught and influenced by others starting at a very young age. According to Parke and Saarni, children’s emotional competence is one of the key elements in their ability to form relationships with others (Cited in Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Stradberg, Auerback, & Blaire 1997).

While many believe in and understand the importance of children’s ability to control their emotions and use sympathy and empathy towards others, many people do not consider the source that the children are receiving their emotional knowledge from. Although children’s emotional competence develops throughout the lifespan, young children are already proficient in many of these areas including emotional recognition and empathy. (Denham, et. Al. 1997).

Much of what people understand about themselves and the world around them is very much related to the ways in which people comprehend and express their emotions (cited in D.G., Ekman, 1972; Izard, 1977). Much of what children pick up on and store in their emotional competence knowledge base is dependent on what is observed from the adults around them. Children’s interactions with adults help them learn how to express and control their emotions. (Fivish, et.al 2000).

While parents are some of the most important teachers and contributors to children’s emotions and emotional competence, they are often overlooked when it comes to this topic of study. However, studies have shown that emotional competence and attachment starts in infancy. When faced with a situation in a study, that required children to describe a specific situation, there were strong differences in the explanations of children who were securely attached in infancy and children who were insecurely attached. Children who were securely attached were able to describe the anxiety provoking qualities in greater detail, while insecurely attached children were not (Slough & Grenberd, 1990).

The overall level and usage of empathy is greatly dependent on infant attachment. (Inannotti, Zahn-Waxler, Furber, & Sroufe, 1989).While all children are on different developmental paths, it is believed that children’s understanding of emotions is largely dependent on the nature of that specific emotion (Hadwin & Perner, 1991).Researchers and psychologists often overlook the great impact adults have on the development of children’s emotions. Parental modeling of emotional displays is also often overlooked when observations and research studies of children take place.

It may be true that many researchers of this day and age are strictly focused on the child and his or her emotional displays. However, much research conducted by Albert Bandura, having to do with parental influences on children’s emotional competence. According to Bandura, modeling influences play a large role in the emotional displays and actions of children. (1986; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1928, cited in Bandura 1986).

This research design focuses mainly on parental emotional displays and children’s emotional modeling. This focus is different than many past research designs because it specifically analyzes parental influences of emotions on children. The research hypothesis suggests that parents who surround their children with positive emotions, touch, and a stimulating environment will raise children who are also emotionally competent and up to par with their age group and peers. Conversely, parents who do not provide sufficient emotional support and positive modeling will raise children who have deficiencies in their emotional competence. This is important because emotional competence is such a large part of the culture of America and it is also important to take the time to understand where children are truly obtaining their emotional competence from.

Methods

*Overview*

The purpose of this study was to examine the role parents play on children’s emotional development as well as to examine parental influences on children’s emotional competence. This study was conducted using a correlational research design. This was an appropriate design because no two groups were being compared. The predictor variable was the parental emotional displays. The outcome variable was the children’s emotional displays. Parental emotional displays were measured by the distribution of a questionnaire with specific questions for the parents to answer. These questions were focused on the parent’s emotional displays towards their children. Children’s emotional displays were measured through observations and documented by the researcher on a fixed response scale. The level of measurement for the questionnaires in this research design was ordinal because the responses to the questions provided a ranking for each answer. The open answer questions for the teachers were nominal because there was nothing being compared.

*Procedures*

The institutional review board was obtained from California State University Chico prior to the beginning of the study. There were 30 preschool instructors contacted from various preschools in Northern California. There were 18 instructors whom agreed to participate. Letters of informed consent were distributed to the teachers and families at 16 preschools in Butte County. The informed consent letter explained the purpose of the study and ensured confidentiality of participants. There was a questionnaire included with each informed consent letter for parents to fill out asking specific questions about their displays of emotions around their children. There was also a questionnaire included with each teacher’s informed consent letter for the teacher to fill out, pertaining to each child participant. There were a total of 100 informed consent letters and questionnaires signed and returned. There were gift certificates distributed to participants that went toward several local family restaurants.

*Participants*

This study used a probability sample. Participants were randomly selected. A list of all the preschool teachers from all 16 preschools included in the study was obtained. Teachers and families were then chosen at random. Probability sampling was the most efficient way to conduct this study because this study was focused on a topic that could have been observed and analyzed within practically any family. This study was not designed to exclude any particular ethnic or societal groups. This study included 200 parents. There were 100 fathers ages 25-40 years old. There were an equal number of male and female children. There were 100 mothers ages 25-38 years old and 100 children ages two to four year olds. There were 40 two year olds, 20 three year olds, and 40 four year olds. Twenty-seven and one-half percent of the mothers were white. There were 29.4% African American mothers and 29.4% Hispanic mothers. The father participants were 29.4% white, 39.2% African American, and 29.4% Hispanic.

*Materials/Instrument Descriptions*

This study included a questionnaire for the parents to fill out with five questions that were specifically designed to measure parental emotional displays towards their children. The questionnaire used was a fixed response scale. The answers ranged from one to five. The number one represented never, two represented rarely, thee represented sometimes, four represented often, and five represented very often. This test was quantitative. Parents answered the questions and had the choice of choosing a number between one and five. The total numbers were added up and higher scores represented a higher level of parental emotional displays toward the child. Children’s emotional displays were measured through observations. The researcher used a five question fixed response scale. There were five possible answers with numbers ranging from one to five. The number one represented never, two represented rarely, three represented sometimes, four represented often, and five represented very often. The higher scores in the children’s measure represented higher observed emotional displays. The observations were quantitative because the researcher had to mark the number on the checklist that best fit the child’s actions. The teachers were each given multiple questionnaires for each child in their class. The questions were also based on a fixed response scale. The questions were asked about children’s overall emotional competence. This was based on a fixed response scale. There were also two open answer questions at the bottom of the questionnaire regarding the child’s overall emotional competence.

Results

The hypothesis of this study was that parental emotional modeling has a direct influence on children’s emotional displays. This was a correlational design. This was the appropriate design because no two groups were being compared. The predictor variable was parental emotional displays. The outcome variable was children’s emotional displays. The mean for the predictor variable was 21.7. The median for parental emotional displays was 23. The mode was 23. The standard deviation was 3.37. The minimum was 15 and the maximum was 25. The mean for the outcome variable was 16.7. The median was 18. The mode was 18. The standard deviation was 3.37. The minimum was 10 and the maximum was 20. The alpha level for this study was set at .05. The alpha at this level means that five times out of 100, the results would be statistically due to chance alone. The observed p value was .003 which was less than alpha. This means that this test was significantly significant. The correlations between parental emotional displays and children’s emotional displays was significant; r(.298)=.29, p<.05.

Discussion

The hypothesis of this study suggested that parental modeling of emotional displays has a major impact on children’s emotional expressions. This study also focused on how parental modeling of emotions related to children’s emotional competence. This study was significantly significant. There was a strong relationship between the predictor variable, parental emotional displays, and the outcome variable, children’s emotional displays. As the scores of the predictor variable increased, the scores of the outcome variable increased. This study yielded statistically significant results. There was a statistically significant relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. Therefore, this study supported the hypothesis. This study can be used as an education opportunity. Teachers can use this information as a means of informing parents of the importance and effects of their emotional displays on their children. This study included a wide span of parental ages. The study used a questionnaire with specific questions that directly related to the research hypothesis. There were only three ethnic populations represented in this study. The study used a questionnaire for the parents to fill out. The parents may or may not have been truthful in their responses. If further research were to be conducted on this topic it would be helpful for parents to be observed as well as given a questionnaire. This may help yield results that are more accurate as well as leave less of a chance for the researcher to use false information from the parental questionnaires in the study. A similar study could also use more than one observation of the children. This would provide a more accurate evaluation of children’s emotional displays and therefore their emotional competence.

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Appendix

1. Family Demographic Questionnaire
2. Parental Measure of Emotional Modeling
3. Child Measure of Emotional Displays
4. Table 1
5. SPSS Data File: Variable View
6. SPSS Data File: Data View
7. SPSS Output File: Results

Demographic Sample

Please choose the answer that best fits you and your family. You may circle the answer of write one in.

1. My race/ethnicity is:
2. White
3. Hispanic
4. Black
5. Asian
6. Other\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
7. I am \_\_\_ years old.
8. I am:

Married Single Divorced

1. My child is \_\_\_ years old.
2. I am:

Male Female

Parental Emotional Displays

Please check the box that best describes your relationship with your family and child.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 Never | 2 Rarely | 3 Sometimes | 4 Often | 5 Very Often |
| How often do you show distress in front of your child? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often do you hug your child? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often do you show anger in front of your child? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often do you hug/kiss your spouse in front of your child? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often do you comfort your child when he/she is sad? |  |  |  |  |  |

Children’s Emotional Displays

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 Never | 2 Rarely | 3 Sometimes | 4 Often | 5 Very Often |
| How often did child share with another child? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often did child cry? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often did child laugh? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often did child show good cooperation? |  |  |  |  |  |
| How often did child hit another child? |  |  |  |  |  |

Table 1

*Effects of Parental Emotional Displays in Children*

Parental Emotional Displays Children’s Emotional Displays

Mean 21.7 16.7

Median 23 18

Mode 23 18

Std. Deviation 3.37 3.37

Minimum 15 10

Maximum 25 20

*Note*: Sample study of n=300 mothers/fathers/children