Co- and self-regulation of emotions in the preschool setting

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1. Introduction

Self-regulation of emotion is considered as one central aspect of the broader concept of self-regulation, and a growing amount of empirical research points out that self-regulation of emotions is associated with competencies that are relevant for school readiness and academic achievement (for reviews see Blair & Raver, 2015; La Paro & Pianta, 2000). Acquiring self-regulation of emotion—with those aspects of emotion regulation that the child is able to perform independently of others—constitutes a central developmental task in the preschool age. It has important implications for psychosocial adaptation and the acquisition of other important developmental milestones (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Sroufe, 1996).

Children acquire self-regulation of emotion in several socialization contexts. Both parents and teachers significantly contribute to this development of emotion-regulation, providing experiences that promote or hinder developmental achievements (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). Most research to date has focused on how emotion regulation is influenced by the family and parent-
and, on average, each preschool teacher takes care of six to eight children (Bock-Famulla & Lange, 2013). Therefore, the focus of the present study is on teachers’ interactions with preschoolers during naturally occurring situations that are emotionally challenging for children. The main aim of this study is to test theoretical assumptions concerning effective ways of co-regulating these situations and, by doing so, to provide evidence that has implications for early educational policy and practice.

1.1. Co- and self-regulation of emotion

During the preschool years, children increasingly learn to control their emotions and to handle their emotions in productive ways (Denham et al., 2012; Eisenberg, 2000). Typically, this occurs in situations that require a delay of need satisfaction or in which motives conflict within or between individuals. In these situations, children must be able to volitionally inhibit or modify their emotions so that the dominant action readiness of the emotion is not enacted but replaced by a subdominant behavioral alternative (Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004; Holodynski, Hermann, & Kromm, 2013; Holodynski, Seeger, Hartmann, & Wöermann, 2012). We refer to this process as reflective emotion regulation. Children develop their reflective emotion regulation with support from caregivers in at least two ways: first, caregivers facilitate emotional awareness, and second, they co-construct a repertoire of effective emotion regulation strategies.

1.1.1. Emotion coaching facilitates emotional awareness

When children acquire reflective emotion regulation, they have to be able to distance themselves psychologically from a current emotional episode, taking a bird’s eye view, in order to evaluate the current episode in terms of causes, consequences, and alternatives (Bischof-Köhler, 2000; Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Holodynski et al., 2013; Saarni, 1999). Children’s awareness of their feelings can be promoted by conversations with caregivers about emotions, in which caregivers label feelings and relate emotions to specific causes, appraisals, expressions, behavioral inclinations, and possibilities for regulation (Denham et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2007). A caregiving style that is characterized by conversations about emotions, as, for instance, validating, labeling emotions and emotion talk, is a central feature of what others have called emotion coaching, which is associated with children’s self-regulation capacities (Garner, Carlson Jones, Gaddy, & Rennie, 1997; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997; Gottman & DeClaire, 1998). While these previous studies have been primarily correlational, there is one intervention study that provides evidence that children, whose parents underwent emotion coaching training, had lower levels of negative emotionality and problem behaviors as compared to a waitlist control group (Havighurst & Harley, 2007; Wilson, Havighurst, & Harley, 2012).

1.1.2. Co-regulation catalyzes constructing a repertoire of effective emotion regulation strategies

Once children are aware of their emotions, they can acquire a repertoire of effective emotion regulation strategies. Developmentally, self-regulation emerges from co-regulation, that is, the regulation of the child’s emotions through caregivers. Similarly, we differentiate four general types of emotion regulation strategies that all emerge during the preschool years, namely distraction, reappraisal, soothing, and response modulation, including both the inhibition and modification of emotionally triggered behavioral impulses (Gross & Thompson, 2007; Stansbury & Sigman, 2000).

Following a process model of emotion regulation, different types of emotion regulation strategies have their primary impact at different points in the emotion generative process (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Depending on how an event is appraised, adaptive body reactions (e.g., peripheral-physiological reactions) and a specific action readiness (e.g., expression and impulse of fleeing or attacking) are triggered. These are subjectively experienced as felt sensations (i.e., feelings) that, in sum, lead to motive-serving behavior (see upper half of Fig. 1).

As described above, regulation strategies operate in order to shift from the dominant to a more desirable behavioral response. More specifically, distraction strategies shift the focus to a new event, establishing a line of consecutive processes resulting in a different emotion. Reappraisal strategies are tailored toward taking a fresh look at the same event. Soothing strategies directly address body reactions and felt sensations. Finally, response modulation strategies directly operate on the level of behavioral inclinations and either inhibit or modify these to a more appropriate alternative response. Importantly, all emotion regulation strategies can be used by others to co-regulate emotions and by oneself to self-regulate own emotions. Both co- and self-regulation strategies influence different points in the emotion generative process. However, the emotion generative process may be an ongoing process when co-regulation is applied. For instance, sensations and behavioral inclinations (relatively late processes) can be regulated by re-appraisal strategies (relatively early process) that also affect the following emotion generative processes. In the following, we will lay out how children acquire a repertoire of self-regulation strategies through being supported by co-regulation.
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