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Emotion regulation and understanding Implications for child psychopathology and therapy

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Abstract

This paper considers the role of emotion regulation (i.e., extrinsic and intrinsic monitoring and adjusting of emotion) and emotion understanding (i.e., comprehension of the signs of, causes of, and ways to regulate emotion) in childhood adjustment. Developmental and clinical research focused on emotion regulation and emotion understanding are reviewed with an emphasis on studies including psychopathological samples. The implications of emotion research for the study of child psychopathology and child therapy are examined. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Emotion and child psychopathology

Behaviorism, a guiding theoretical perspective in psychology, for many years generated the lion's share of empirical research. However, in eschewing "internal" variables, some argued that behaviorism left possibly important mental variables out of the equation. The so-called cognitive revolution brought "meaning making" back under scientific scrutiny, but the emphasis on cognitive factors may have underappraised the role of emotion. Although the field refers commonly to "emotional disorders" or "emotional problems" and emotion is considered a cornerstone of human experience, many current theoretical models and the

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research bodies they have generated have not adequately considered the role of emotion in development and psychopathology.

Fortunately, recent research efforts by a diverse group of investigators suggests that the field is in the midst of an “emotion revolution” (cf. Fischer & Tangney, 1995). Research in developmental psychopathology in particular has led to an increase of emphasis on the importance of emotional processes in normative and atypical development (e.g., Cicchetti, 1984; Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995; Luthar, Burack, Cicchetti, & Weisz, 1997; Sroufe & Rutter, 1984). In addition, advances in neuroscience and psychophysiology have greatly expanded our knowledge about the neural and other psychophysiological concomitants of emotion and how these might impact adjustment (e.g., Caciopo, Klein, Berntson, & Hatfield, 1993; Davidson & Fox, 1982; Dawson, 1994; LeDoux, 1993; Nelson & Bloom, 1997; Panksepp, 1993; Porges, Doussard-Roosevelt, & Maiti, 1994; Stansbury & Gunnar, 1994). Furthermore, an interest in emotion has been fueled by the concepts of emotional intelligence, emotional competence, and emotional education that are burgeoning in educational, scientific, medical, and legislative domains (e.g., Buck, 1993; Goleman, 1995; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2000; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997).

The present review provides a framework for one focus of future research, the scientific study of the relations among emotion regulation, emotion understanding, and child adjustment (i.e., clinical child psychology). Overall, there are several objectives of the review. First, the paper provides a review of the literature on emotion regulation and emotion understanding examining developmental findings drawn from normative samples along with a smaller body of research, which has focused on emotion processes in at-risk and clinic-referred samples. After the review, the relevance of this research for studying and understanding child psychopathology is discussed. Finally, applications of the emotion research literature to child therapy research are described. Because most current treatment and prevention paradigms used in research settings are based in cognitive and behavioral formulations, there is a need to reexamine these in light of findings from emotion research.

The review focuses on two aspects of emotion: *emotion regulation* and *emotion understanding*. This focus is not because they are the only areas of emotion research with relevance to clinical child psychology. For example, research on temperament and emotional intensity (EI; e.g., Bates & Wachs, 1994; Chess & Thomas, 1990; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, et al., 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, et al., 1997; Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1988; Nachmias, Gunnar, Mangelsdorf, Parritz, & Buss, 1996; Park, Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1997), psychophysiological work on emotion (e.g., Field, Pickens, Fox, Nawrocki, & Gonzalez, 1995; Katz & Gottman, 1995; Nachmias et al., 1996; Porges, 1995; Stansbury & Gunnar, 1994; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, Welsh, & Fox, 1995), and the flourishing research on the neural aspects of emotion (e.g., Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1996; Andreasen et al., 1992; Barkley, 1997; Davidson, 1994; Dawson, 1994; Fox, 1994b; Gray, 1990; Heller, 1990; Izard & Harris, 1995; Panksepp, 1990; Reiman, Raichle, Butler, Herscovitch, & Robins, 1984; Rourke, 1988; Seidman, Biederman, Faraone, Weber, & Ouellette, 1997; Steinmetz, 1994) all represent critical areas for further study with importance to developmental psychopathologists. However, because one main goal of the paper concerns using emotion research to improve psychosocial intervention, the work on emotion regulation and emotion understanding was considered most relevant. Nonetheless, in this introduction, we briefly review research on

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