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5 Emotional development in preschoolers and socialization

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to determine the relationship between the emotional development variables and later adaptation in society for preschoolers living in Omdurman, Sudan. The secondary objective is to study the socio-emotional problems the 4-year-old boys and girls coming from families with different structure deal with. The article is based on a study that involved 300 children aged 4–5 years, attending Omdurman twon kindergartens. The children's emotion knowledge was measured through the Emotion Matching Task and the social competence was measured using the shortened version of the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation scale, introduced by LaFreniere. The research results may be utilized for the creation of emotional development program^{mes} for Sudan kindergartens. These findings allow preventing the development of abnormal behavio^{ur}al tendencies, which are linked to the emotional intelligence, social adaptation, and anxiety in preschoolers.

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30 Introduction

The emotional development of preschool children is a subject of strong debate among scientists (Denham, Bassett, Zinsser, & Wyatt, 2014; Rademacher & Koglin, 2019). Child development specialists from various fields (e.g. education, medicine, child welfare) recognize the crucial role of positive social and emotional development in the child's welfare (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Isakson, Higgins, Davidson, & Cooper, 2009).

Emotional knowledge and emotional self-regulation both affect the ability of preschool children to adapt to the social standards of behavio^{ur} (Di Maggio, Zappulla, Pace, & Izard, 2016). A child is immersed into the system of relations from a very early age in and through which (s)he acquires emotional experience and forms one's own pattern of behavio^{ur} (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008). The ability to understand the very concept of emotions, or emotional knowledge, represents a multicomponent construct, which embraces (1) the children's knowledge about the nature of emotions and factors influencing the presence of positivity/negativity resonance; and (2) the children's realization of their ability to keep one's own emotions under control (Ewing, Herres, Dilks, Rahim, & Trentacosta, 2019; Molina et al., 2014). The studies reveal a positive connection between self-regulation and developmental abilities such as emotional and social competencies (van der Pol et al., 2016). You can start building a foundation for emotional development in children when they hit the age of four. At this age, they learn the essential and begin to define emotions (Powell & Dunlap, 2009). This is the stage known as the *initiative vs guilt* stage, according to the Erickson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development, at which the preschooler learns how to take the initiative, make decisions independently,

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and be in charge of something (McLeod & Erikson, 2008). Preschoolers (3–4 years old) begin to build emotional contacts outside the family by entering in friendship relations. They are learning the difference between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and gain specific skills like perseverance when completing difficult tasks; endurance (i.e. paying attention for longer periods of time; expressing emotions in a socially acceptable manner; and resolving social issues independently (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015)). Emotional self-regulation is a component of emotional development, which allows for the promotion of specific abilities. Among these, self-distancing, empathy, and sympathy. For instance, as the child copes better with one's own emotions, (s)he enters into an empathic state by passing three distinct psychological stages: mentalizing; affect matching; and empathic motivation (Yi, Gentzler, Ramsey, & Root, 2016).

The emotional development of a 3–4 year-old is characterized by the expression of affection for family members and a friendly attitude towards others. An emphatic child is capable of understanding the feelings of another and emotively respond to them (e.g. console and help a peer in the moment of emotional suffering). Such a child may be ashamed that his/her deeds are 'bad' but this and abovementioned feelings do not last long (Johnson, Hawes, Eisenberg, Kohlhoff, & Dudeney, 2017).

Empirical evidence indicates that the child–parent relationships in Russia adoptive and birth families have similarities in the degree of parental care for children, and differences in the quality of positive emotions, their direction and parenting empathy channels (Yashkova, Buyanova, Sukharova, & Alaeva, 2019).

Today, children are emotionally immature and this sets a challenge. The child's best friends these days are digital gadgets and TV, and their favourite ways to spend time are to watch animation movies and to play computer games. The extended screen time may result in little to zero communication with adults and peers in the future. In so far as it concerns the preschoolers' leisure activity, one should keep in mind that children may become insensitive and incapable of controlling one's own emotions at an early age (Poletaeva & Merzlyakova, 2018; Watanabe et al., 2019). Alongside the personal characteristics of preschoolers, a bunch of external factors such as family relations, the teacher's behaviour, and the country in which they live influence the socioemotional development (Breux, Harvey, & Lugo-Candelas, 2016). In recent studies, it was shown that children who do not live with both parents together deal with more problems compared to those who live in full families. Additionally, when stratifying by custody arrangement, girls in rural areas living alternately with each parent had more problems compared to those in urban areas (Eurenius et al., 2019).

The problem of making preschoolers tap into the social norms remains one of the leading ones in personality development. The accumulation of social experience accomplished by the child independently and under the guidance of adults contributes to the exploitation of potential. It also allows for the development of school readiness skills and lifetime abilities necessary to cope with the adult life. Hence, the preschool years represent a period during which the foundations for child's social maturity (competence) are laid down (Garner & Parker, 2018). This preconditions his/her development path and facilitates the adaptation efforts (Zakharova, 2011). Social development is a complex process during which the child appropriates the objectively set norms of behaviour and constantly discovers oneself as a social subject (Garner & Estep, 2001).

For preschoolers, the main mechanisms of socialization are social orientation (time spend in contact with a social partner), reflex regulation, mimicry/imitation tasks, and normative regulation (refers to the set of social rules that a child must follow). To ensure successful socialization, parents must take an active part in this process, adjusting the behaviour of their child (van der Pol et al., 2015).

Social experience is one of the leading mechanisms in socialization and it plays a significant role in the emotional and cognitive development. It also serves as a major factor influencing the formation of values, attitudes, and a behavioural style (Warren & Stifter, 2008).

Between 2010 and 2015, the United Arab Emirates has been putting into action the Friendship Program, designed to provide social skills training to schoolchildren in the community that are

referred to it. Such programmes address psychosocial concerns reported by them and their families that are typical to those experienced in a Western culture – such as having few or no friends, shyness and/or anxiety, dealing with bullying, difficulty with peer or teacher relationships, and various other issues of simply ‘not fitting in’. Families in UAE are generally enthusiastic about enrolling their children in this social skills programme, as any potential stigma in attending a ‘therapy group’ is minimized (including changing the marketed name to ‘Friendship Group’ instead of ‘Social Skills Group Therapy’ (Rios-Habib, 2015)).

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), preschool institutions should focus on the socio-emotional component of development more in order to prepare children for school. The social-emotional competence is a crucial marker of school readiness. As of late, the UAE is going through changes in the preschool education (Al-Momani, Ihmeideh, & Momani, 2008). Parents are increasingly taking active participation in the upbringing of children. The supportive efforts vary though, depending on the educational background, curriculum complexity, and the school, which their children attend (Mahmoud, 2018). The UAE recognizes the role of moral education in helping young children develop their own values and beliefs and lays the groundwork for a sustainable society based on respect and tolerance.

In Sudan, there is large group of children that should be in pre-primary school but are not. Sudan has both the largest number and the highest out-of-school children rate in the Middle East and North Africa region. The 2010 Education Management Information System data indicates that a total of 3 million children between the ages 5–13 are out of school in Sudan. This comprises 490,673 children of pre-primary age (5 years), (UNICEF, 2015). Exclusion of pre-primary children from access to quality education was based on their socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, language, disability and funding allocations.

In Sudanese kindergartens, there are children from three years and nine months to five years and ten months. Besides, the number of children in a kindergarten classroom could range from five to sixty children. In addition, one teacher can be responsible for six and up to thirty-eight children. From an educator’s point of view, one might argue that it is a difficult task for any teacher to provide developmentally appropriate teaching for that wide range of age and number of children.

Pre-primary is officially recognized as a subsystem of the general education system that must fulfil the following criteria:

- be offered for two years for children aged 3–5 years;
- ensure that children are ready for primary school;
- provide quality learning opportunities;
- be widely available;
- provide two classrooms in each public primary school;
- be sufficiently financed by the government (Habib, 2005).

In order to teach in pre-primary school, a teacher must have a secondary school certificate or diploma and teaching qualification from a recognized teacher training institute (Ministry of General Education and Instruction, 2012). Policy requires that every pre-primary school should be attached to a primary school (with some physical separation between the two), have a secure playground equipped with outdoor play equipment, and that the distance to pre-primary schools should not exceed one kilometre. Further, the teacher to learner ratio should be 1:20, and pre-primary schools should conduct regular assessments of student learning outcomes to guide grading and promotion. There are currently seven learning areas (subjects) in the pre-primary curriculum including: language activities, creative activities, mathematics activities, outdoor and physical activities, musical activities, environmental, personal and social activities and religious education activities (Saima, 2019).

This work aims to determine the relationship between the emotional development variables and later adaptation in society for preschoolers living in the Omdurman, Sudan, having different gender, age, and family structure of households.

To achieve the research objectives, the following tasks were set:

- (1) Measure the emotion knowledge in children.
- (2) Explore the children's social adaptation.
- (3) Identify if these children deal with socio-emotional problems.
- (4) Determine the psychometric characteristics of preschool children.

The children's emotion knowledge is expected to be positively related to emotional self-regulation and, consequently, to social adaptation.

Methods

Participants

The study involved 300 children, 142 boys and 158 girls, at the age of four ($N = 199$) to five ($N = 111$), recruited from two state kindergartens in Omdurman, Sudan. The mean age of this group was 4.36; SD, 0.76. Ninety-six children were excluded from the study due to a missing parental consent. Of these 300 children, 97 were raised in single-parent households (51 boys and 46 girls).

Before the beginning of the study, parents and teachers were invited to a preliminary meeting with the researchers at which they were informed about the research goals and methods. Demographic information was obtained through a short list of questions attached to the said form. The pre-school director and the kindergarten teachers were assisting throughout the course of the study. None of the parents was against the participation of their child in the study and everyone completed the informed consent form).

The emotion knowledge testing

To measure the emotion knowledge (EK) of each child individually, an Emotion Matching Task (EMT) was performed, as suggested in (Di Maggio et al., 2016; Izard, Haskins, Schultz, Trentacosta, & King, 2003) and translated and adapted for Arab children. This measure allows evaluating the child's ability to recognize happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and surprise. The EMT consists of four parts: (1) emotion expression matching; (2) emotion situation knowledge; (3) expressive EK; and (4) receptive EK. It allows for the overall assessment of EK as well as the assessment of individual EK components. Each EMT part consists of 12 items, scoring 0 or 1 so that the overall score can vary between 0 and 12. Higher score indicates better EK. The composite ENT score (48 tops) can be obtained by summing the four separate scores.

Social competence

To measure the social competence of children, a 30-item version of the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation (SCBE-30) Scale (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996) was used with Arabic translation. Teachers were asked to fill out the SCBE-30 questionnaire, which was composed of three factors, among which social competence (pro-social behaviour), anxiety-withdrawal (internalizing behaviour), and anger-aggression (externalizing behaviour). Items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale, where 1 was 'never,' and 6 was 'always.'

Social-emotional problems of children aged 42–53 months

The socio-emotional screening was performed using the ASQ:SE questionnaire, developed by Squires, Bricker, Heo, and Twombly (2002), namely the adapted Arabic version of A-ASQ-3 Squires

Q5 et al. (2018). Studies have shown that A-ASQ-3 has sufficient reliability (Charafeddine et al., 2019). All items on the A-ASQ-3 were reviewed and discussed with a child psychologist, a pediatric occupational therapist, and an early child education expert. Items that were found to be culturally sensitive were modified; for example, the item 'shopping cart' was removed and replaced by 'other toys on wheels'.

For this study, children at the age between 42 and 53 months were selected, 91 boys and 105 girls (total, 196 subjects). The questionnaire consists of 36 items. Out of these, 33 items are divided into the following psychological domains: self-regulation, compliance, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect, communication and interaction (Squires et al, 2018). For 33 items, the parent indicated on a three-point Likert scale how they perceived their child's behaviour. This leads to a total score of 0–495 points. If the score was higher than 70, then the child was considered as one that has social and emotional problems (Squires et al., 2018). The ASQ:SE User's Guide was followed when calculating the total mean score for all children. For each item, the distribution of responses was calculated, separately for boys and for girls.

Data processing

Data obtained during the study were analysed using the cross-sectional descriptive and comparative statistical methods. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationship between age, EK, and socio-emotional problems. The Fisher t-test was used to analyse differences between variables. For this study, the significance level was set 0.05 and the corresponding confidence level was 95%. Data was analysed using the Statsoft Statistica version 6.0 and the SPSS Statistics version 10.

Translation and back-translation of instruments

At the first stage of the research process translation of the SCBE-30, an Emotion Matching Task and back-translation for maintaining conceptual equivalence was done. The original English versions of both instruments were translated into Arabic by the first author. The back-translation was done by a native speaker of English and fluent in Arabic. Independent back-translations were compared with the original to identify any items that might not be comparable. These items (11%) were discussed by a team of bilinguals in order to resolve any translation problems. As a final step, these items were resubmitted to an independent back-translation until all problems were resolved. Special attention was focused on culturally sensitive items; in addition, the perceived necessary modifications were made after reaching a consensus.

Limitations

Recruits in the study are representatives of urban population only. In addition, we did not take into account certain differences between children such as race and social status. Scale of SCBE-30 was not adapted for Arab children.

Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for EMT total and SCBE-30 subscales in groups divided by gender, age, and custody arrangements.

The EK correlated significantly with gender ($t = 1.45; p < 0.001$) and age ($t = 2.02, p < 0.001$) variables. The gender had a significant effect on both externalizing ($t = 0.2, p < 0.05$) and pro-social ($t = 0.18, p < 0.05$) behaviour, with boys showing higher scores on anger-aggression and lower on social competence. A significant effect of age was found ($t = 0.06, p < 0.001$). Hence, 4-year-old children are less emotionally and pro-socially competent compared to older children.

Table 1. Distribution of mean scores (SD) in EMT and SCBE-30 for age, sex, and family structure.

		Emotion knowledge	Social competence	Anger-aggression	Anxiety-withdrawal	
<i>Sex</i>						
	Boys	M (SD)	40.2 (6.26)	3.74(0.92)	2.0(0.87)	3.01(0.99)
	Girls	M (SD)	42.3(6.46)	3.92(0.95)	1.76 (0.84)	2.99 (0.99)
<i>Age (years)</i>						
	4	M (SD)	31.2(5.63)	3.86 (0.87)	1.83(0.75)	1.88 (0.78)
	5	M (SD)	36.1(5.62)	3.94(1.1)	1.74(0.76)	2.22 (0.65)
<i>Family Structure</i>						
	Nuclear	M (SD)	37.5(6.16)	3.75(0.96)	1.24(0.65)	2.22(0.78)
	Single-Parent	M (SD)	35.5(6.26)	3.34(1.01)	1.44(0.45)	2.67(0.88)

No statistically significant effects of gender were found on the measure of internalizing behaviour ($t = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) but such an effect of age was clearly observed. Older children demonstrated higher scores on anxiety-withdrawal ($p < 0.001$) (Table 1).

Children in nuclear families had significantly higher EMT total ($t = 1.45$, $p < 0.05$) and a higher level of social competence. The analysis revealed an indirect connection between EK and pro-social behaviour (95% CI = 0.02–0.05).

Using the correlation analysis, we studied the relationship between the mean age, the EK measure, and SCBE-30 subscales. The analysis showed that EK is positively associated with social competence (Table 2) and negatively with the measure of internalizing behaviour. Age is positively correlated with EK and social competence. A negative correlation was found between social competence and the anxiety-withdrawal subscale, between age and the measure of internalizing behaviour.

Table 3 provides details regarding the parent-reported social and emotional problems of the 4-year-old children. The ASQ:SE total score had a mean of 37.7 ± 19.4 . Boys had a total mean score of 35.2 with the range of 0–225 (SD, 19.1) and girls had a total mean score of 27.8 with the range of 0–200 (SD, 16.6; $p < 0.001$). Thirteen percent of children ($n = 26$) had a value above the recommended cut-off (70 points). Moreover, boys had more social-emotional problems (14.1%) than girls (6.1%; $p < 0.005$).

Boys had a significantly higher mean total score for 20 out of 33 items (55%). This result indicates a greater number of socio-emotional problems (Table 3). Girls scored highest on self-regulation ($p < 0.041$). The highest scores were obtained in categories communication and affect.

Studies show that emotional development and socialization problems of preschoolers are closely related to the family situation. For instance, more socio-emotional problems were found in children living with one parent (Table 4).

To conclude this section, we will indicate that socio-emotional problems in 4-year-olds are positively correlated with the EK measure ($r = 0.58$).

Discussion

This study showed that children's emotion knowledge positively affects their social adaptation. Note that the child's age has an impact on his/her emotional development. For instance, the child receives

Table 2. Intercorrelations between EK measure and SCBE-30 subscales.

	Emotion knowledge	Social competence	Anger-aggression	Anxiety-withdrawal
Age	0.44*	0.24	0.18	-0.1
Emotion Knowledge		0.40**	-0.12	0.4
Social Competence			-0.86***	-0.62***
Anger-Aggression				0.34

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.005$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Distribution of ASQ:SE mean total scores for boys and girls at age four.

Domain	Boys (%)				Girls (%)				p value
	0	5	10	15	0	5	10	15	
Self-regulation	78.2	11.3	9.9	0.6	88.5	10.4	0.9	0.2	0.041
Compliance	59.4	38.9	1.5	0.2	66.9	32.1	0.8	0.2	0.00
Communication	90.1	5.4	3.8	0.7	93.3	5.1	1.3	0.3	0.00
Adaptive function	92.7	5.8	1.3	0.2	98.1	1.5	0.3	0.1	0.02
Autonomy	64.1	30.6	5.1	0.2	64.2	30.8	4.9	0.1	0.03
Affect	98.0	1.3	0.7	0	98.2	1.2	0.4	0	0.01
Interaction	89.7	7.9	2.2	0.2	94.1	5.6	0.2	0.1	0.06

emotion knowledge that is more conscious at the age of five. The study shows that 11% of subjects had parent-reported socio-emotional problems. The gender patterns in emotional development were established, with girls being more socially competent and adaptable than boys. On the other hand, boys had two times more socio-emotional problems compared to girls. Parents who did not live together reported more social and emotional problems in their children than those living together (Jee et al., 2010). The study revealed that the emotional state of preschoolers affects their communication with peers. The emotional development of preschool-age children occurs through situational communication and peer-peer interaction experience (Scrimgeour, Davis, & Buss, 2016). In children with emotional disorders (emotional distress), negative emotions such as fear, grief, anger, shame, and disgust prevail. Similar results were obtained in this study. They have increased anxiety and feel positive emotions on rare occasions. We have shown that emotional knowledge is negatively correlated with anger and anxiety. Therefore, special attention must be paid to the psychological and pedagogical conditions in the preschool institutions (Semenova, 2019). Previous researchers have conceptualized the relationship between emotion regulation and attachment from a unidirectional perspective, that is, either that children's emotion regulation predicts the quality of their attachment to their parents, or that attachment security predicts the development of children's emotion regulation (Kiel & Kalomiris, 2015). They also found out that when parents seldom used the minimization reaction, children with poor emotion regulation displayed stronger attachment to their parents than children with effective emotion regulation (Ahmetoglu, Ilhan Ildiz, Acar, & Encinger, 2018).

Empirical evidence indicates that the child-parent relationships in Russian adoptive and birth families have similarities in the degree of parental care for children, and differences in the quality of positive emotions, their direction and parenting empathy channels (Yashkova et al., 2019).

Studies on the introduction of social skills training programmes in the UAE (Dubai) revealed that children usually improved at least to some extent in their level of socio-emotional competence with the specialized training. The developmental progress became more significant as time in intervention increased (e.g. attending more than one programme term). Parents were often very pleased with the social growth they saw in their children, especially within the groups, and they began to better understand and appreciate how an individual's strengths and weaknesses in terms of social development plays out in life (Rios-Habib, 2015).

In this study, the age disparity regarding gender patterns in emotional development and socio-emotional problems may be a result of various factors (Eurenius et al., 2019). The early and preschool years are the most productive period for emotional development, since it is the period during which the personality foundations are laid down (Maksimova, 2013). At an early age, children's mental health is mainly assessed through parental observations and questionnaires, while older children's mental health is usually self-reported (Salisch, 2001). Boys' expressions of emotional-psychological

Table 4. ASQ:SE mean total scores (SD) for boys and girls at age four in relation to family structure.

	Nuclear family		Single-parent family	
	Boys (n = 68)	Girls (n = 51)	Boys (n = 41)	Girls (n = 36)
	33.1(18)	25.2(19.1)	42.5(21.3)	35(22.1)

problems are easier to observe, as these are more externalized and therefore to a larger extent reported by parents (Kato, Yanagawa, Fujiwara, & Morawska, 2015). Internalized psychological symptoms are more common among girls and demand more developed communication skills to be verbalized, and thus could easily be missed in reports by parents of younger children (Song & Trommsdorff, 2016). A qualitative analysis of data regarding the measures of emotional competence revealed that children recognize no more than seven emotions but this ability is heterogeneous: preschool children find it easier to match emotions with their corresponding word-names than to identify them by photographs and reproduce (Kilic, 2015; Scrimgeour et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study shows that emotion knowledge in children needs to be developed from an early age, as it is connected with later social adaptation. Findings reveal that emotion knowledge is positively associated with social competence and negatively with the measure of internalizing behaviour. Gender and age turned out to be important in social development, as evidenced by statistically significant differences that were found for these variables ($p < 0.001$). Children in single-parent families had more socio-emotional problems. A negative correlation was found between the pro-social behaviour and anxiety.

The research results may be utilized for the creation of emotional development programmes for Sudan kindergartens. These findings allow preventing the development of abnormal behavioural tendencies, which are linked to the emotional intelligence, social adaptation, and anxiety in preschoolers.

Disclosure statement

Q6 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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