Understanding emotion

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Introduction: Awareness of emotion

In this chapter, I discuss children’s developing awareness and understanding of emotions – both the emotions that they themselves feel and the emotions felt by other people. I first describe children’s changing ability to put their feelings – and those of other people – into words. Next, I consider how children’s understanding of emotion changes with development. First, I emphasize that children cannot rely on a script-based conceptualization but must attend to the relation between appraisal processes and ensuing emotion. More specifically, to understand how individuals may react differently to the same situation, children need to understand how people interpret a given situation. Second, by way of a detailed illustration of this claim, I consider children’s emerging understanding of a relatively complex but central emotion, namely guilt. On the one hand, there are signs that children express guilt even in the preschool period. On the other hand, it is only in middle childhood that children systematically recognize when a person might be prone to guilty feelings. I discuss possible reasons for this lag between the expression and the attribution of guilt. Finally, I turn to a discussion of individual differences in children’s understanding of emotion. In that connection, I review the increasingly solid evidence that children who are given opportunities to engage in family conversation about emotion end up with a more accurate and comprehensive understanding.

Talking about emotion

Psychological theories of emotion, whether focused on children or adults, have been influenced by Darwin’s emphasis on the continuities between human beings and non-human primates with respect to both the function and the communication of
emotions (Darwin, 1998). However, human beings, unlike other primates can put their emotions into words. It could be argued that this capacity only serves to amplify a pre-existing mode of non-verbal communication. However, it is more likely that it produces a psychological revolution. After all, it allows human beings to communicate what they feel not just about ongoing situations but also about past, future, recurrent, or hypothetical situations. These conversations – which begin in early childhood – provide our species with a unique opportunity to share, understand and re-constitute emotional experience.

To document young children’s emerging ability to talk about emotion, Wellman, Harris, Banerjee and Sinclair (1995) studied a small group of children whose language production had been recorded on an intensive longitudinal basis from 2-5 years. Wellman et al. (1995) concentrated on all those utterances in which children referred to either an emotion or, for comparison purposes, to a mental state that is not an emotion, namely pain. The findings revealed that even two-year-olds talk systematically about emotion. They refer to a small set of emotional states – both positive states (feeling happy or good; laughing; and feeling love or loving) and negative states (feeling angry or mad; feeling frightened, scared or afraid; and feeling sad or crying). Although children talk most often about their own feelings, they also talk about the feelings of other people. Moreover, children’s attributions of emotion are not triggered simply by the recognition of animate, expressive displays because they readily attribute various emotions to dolls, stuffed animals and made-up characters. In sum, almost as soon as they are able to talk, children begin to report on their own feelings, on those of other people, and they project such feelings onto non-humans.
Despite this emerging communicative capacity, it could be argued that when children start to put their own feelings into words, they are not engaged in any self-conscious reporting of their experience. Thus, Wittgenstein (1953) suggested that early emotion utterances should be seen not as reports of emotion but as vocal expressions of emotion, on a par with exclamations such as “Ouch” or “Ow.” A close examination of 2-year-olds’ utterances shows that this proposal is ill founded. If children’s references to emotion were simply a supplement to, or a substitute for, the ordinary facial and behavioral indices of emotion, we would expect them to be triggered more or less exclusively by ongoing or current emotions. However, about half of 2-year-olds’ references to emotion are concerned with past, future, and recurrent feelings, and the distribution of references is similar among 3- and 4-year-olds.

This stable pattern shows that, from their earliest emergence, we can think of children’s utterances about emotion as referential reports and not as lexical substitutes for scowls and smiles. Indeed, Wittgenstein’s analysis is not even appropriate for children’s pain utterances. Here too, children talk not only about current pains. They also refer to pains that they might experience in the future or have experienced in the past. More generally, analysis of children’s references to emotion shows that these references can be mainly categorized as descriptive statements, even if they are sometimes used in an instrumental fashion – to obtain sympathy, or to influence the emotional state of another person (Dunn, Brown & Beardsall, 1991; Wellman et al., 1995). Indeed, this bias toward commentary is evident even below 2 years of age. Dunn, Bretherton and Munn (1987) found that children between 18 and 24 months used conversation about feelings primarily to comment on their own feelings or those
of another person even though their mothers – to whom most of these comments were
directed – used such conversations in a more didactic or pragmatic fashion.

In a follow-up analysis of children’s everyday conversations about emotion,
Lagattuta and Wellman (2002) examined how children talk about negative as
compared to positive emotions. Like Wellman et al. (1995), they looked at the
utterances produced by a small group of children whose language production had
been studied on an intensive longitudinal basis from 2-5 years. Overall, children and
their parents discussed positive and negative emotions at about the same rate.
Nevertheless, when past emotions were discussed, there was a tendency to focus on
negative rather than positive emotions. This bias toward the negative was true for both
children and adults. Talk about negative emotions also included about three times as
many causal elaborations as compared to talk about positive emotions and again this
bias emerged among both children and adults. Moreover, when children and adults
posed an open ended (as opposed to a closed question) about emotion, such questions
were about three times more frequent for negative than positive emotions. Overall,
then, Lagattuta and Wellman (2002) found that conversations about past emotional
experiences are especially frequent, elaborate and open-ended in the case of negative
emotions.

It seems plausible that conversations about past emotions would help children
to understand how an emotion can be reactivated long after the precipitating situation
is over. This facilitation might occur in two ways. First, children might be drawn into
conversation about past events and thereby experience a reactivation of the emotion
that they felt earlier. To the extent that elaborate conversations about the past focus on
negative events, children might be especially alert to the reactivation of negative
emotion. Second, when ruminating about a past event children might display the
emotion associated with that event and thereby puzzle their parents with a demeanor 
that is not consonant with present circumstances. Parental questioning might prompt 
children to think about their emotional state and its cause. Such questioning (“What’s 
the matter?”) is especially likely to occur when the child’s appears upset in otherwise 
positive circumstances. Thus, if either of these speculations is correct, we might 
expect children to be especially aware of the way in which rumination about the past 
can evoke negative feelings.

Lagattuta and Wellman (2001) examined this issue with children ranging from 
3-5 years. Children listened to stories in which the protagonist experienced an 
emotion that was either positive or negative and either did or did not match the 
current situation. Consider, for example, the following story about a negative emotion 
that did not match the current situation: “Suzie feels sad when the neighbor’s black 
spotted dog scares away her rabbit. Many days later, the neighbor’s dog slowly walks 
over, sits down and wags his tail “real friendly”. Suzie starts to feel sad….Why does 
Suzie start to feel sad right now?” Children were scored for the frequency with which 
they produced so-called cognitive cuing explanations, involving references to a cue in 
the present situation that made the protagonist think about a past event, for example: 
“The dog makes her think about the lost rabbit.” Lagattuta and Wellman (2001) found 
that children were especially likely to produce such cognitive cuing explanations for 
stories involving a negative mismatch – as exemplified by the story about Suzie’s 
dog. For stories involving a positive emotion such cognitive cuing explanations were 
less frequent.

Overall, the findings on children’s conversation about emotion highlight the 
extent to which children’s emotional experience and emotional reflection is not tied to 
the current moment. Language does, of course, allow children to put their ongoing
feelings into words. In addition, however, it allows them to talk about future emotions and to revisit past emotions. Probably by virtue of such conversations, children are especially aware of the fact that past negative emotions can be reactivated by reminders.

**Beyond scripts: desires, beliefs and emotion**

In the previous section, I talked in global terms about the child’s ability to report on and to understand emotion. In this section, I consider in more detail the nature of that understanding and the way that it changes in the course of development. One simple and attractive proposal is that children develop an increasingly elaborate set of scripts for various emotions. Thus, they identify the type of situations that elicit various emotions - fear, sadness, happiness, guilt and so forth (Barden, Zelco, Duncan & Masters, 1980; Harris, Olthof, Meerum Terwogt & Hardman, 1987) and they identify the typical actions and expressions that accompany a particular emotional state (Trabasso, Stein & Johnson, 1981).

This notion of script-based knowledge has several advantages. It assimilates children’s understanding of emotion to a wider body of research on children's recall and understanding of sequentially organized events (c.f. Nelson & Gruendel, 1979). It highlights the fact that an understanding of emotion calls for a causal understanding of the connections among its sequential components. It is sufficiently flexible to be of service if we look outside of the Western world to children's understanding of emotion in cultures where different emotional themes are prominent; for example, Lutz (1987) has used this approach in her analysis of the emotion concepts of children on the island of Ifaluk in the Western Pacific. Finally, the notion of an emotion script fits comfortably with the possibility, raised in the previous section, that children’s understanding might be elaborated not just in the context of emotionally
charged encounters but in the context of family discussions, discussions in which past episodes are likely to be rehearsed and organized into a coherent narrative sequence.

However, closer scrutiny of the script concept reveals a conceptual difficulty. The same situation can elicit different emotions depending on the appraisal that the actor makes of the situation. This means that if the child attempts to store a list of scripts for emotion, it will be necessary to store different scripts for different people. An alternative, and more economical solution is to define the eliciting situation in more abstract terms. For example, it is possible to define situations that provoke happiness as "situations that are judged to by an actor to bring about the fulfillment of his or her goals." A move in this direction, however, tacitly acknowledges that emotions are very special kinds of scripts. They do not begin with the kind of objective event that we normally associate with scripts (e.g., the action of sitting down at a table might be seen as the first move in the dinner script). Rather, they begin with an event that is inherently psychological, namely a person appraising a situation. A more fruitful approach to children’s understanding of emotion, therefore, is to acknowledge that children may indeed construct scripts for given emotions but key elements of those scripts will include a diagnosis not of the objective situation that faces the actor, but rather an analysis of how the actor appraises that situation. Making the same point differently, it is not just psychologists who have to recognize the role of appraisal processes in emotion. Young children must do the same.

The limitations of the script-based approach can be highlighted in another way. Children with autism are often good at remembering recurrent sequences of events. Indeed, part of the clinical picture of autism is a disposition to become upset at an unexpected departure from a routine sequence. Their script-sensitive memory appears to serve children with autism quite well with respect to emotion. Thus, they
readily judge that certain situations (getting nice things to eat, birthday parties) make people happy whereas other situations (having to go to bed early, falling over) make people unhappy (Baron-Cohen, 1991; Tan & Harris, 1991). Using a different technique, Ozonoff, Pennington and Rogers (1990) showed that autistic children could select the appropriate facial expression to go with various emotionally charged pictures. For example, they chose a sad face for a picture of a child looking a broken toy and an angry face for a picture of two children fighting. Despite this apparent familiarity with routine emotions scripts, children with autism perform poorly, in comparison to non-autistic controls, when a correct attribution of emotion requires them to go beyond the objective situation and consider how a protagonist’s beliefs influence his or her appraisal of that objective situation (Baron-Cohen, 1991; Harris, 1991). The clear implication is that normal children do go beyond a script-based analysis and take into account the protagonist’s appraisal of the situation.

Accepting this argument, we can ask in more detail how children make sense of the process of appraisal. First, 2- and 3-year-olds appreciate the role that desires or goals play in determining a protagonist’s appraisal and ensuing emotion. For example, they understand that an elephant might feel happy to be given milk if she wants milk, whereas another animal may feel upset, if he preferred juice instead (Harris, Johnson, Hutton, Andrews & Cooke, 1989; Yuill, 1984). By 4- and 5-years of age this simple desire-based concept of emotion is elaborated to include beliefs and expectations. Children realize that it is not the match between desire and actual outcome that triggers emotion but the match between desire and expected outcome. Suppose, for example, that the elephant wants some milk and is about to get it, so that if the match between desire and actual outcome is the only factor taken into consideration she should feel happy. Suppose further, however, that the elephant wrongly expects to get
something other than milk. In that case, four- and 5-year-olds realize that the elephant will feel upset rather than happy (Harris et al, 1989). They appreciate that her appraisal of the situation, and her ensuing emotion, is based on the mismatch between her desire and the expected outcome, even when the expectation is ill founded.

The shift from a desire to a belief-desire conception of mind and emotion is now well established. Emotion judgment tasks, such as the one just described, are a useful source of evidence because whether children are asked to take only desires into account or beliefs and desires, they can still be asked to make the same simple binary judgment, namely whether the animal is happy rather than sad. Another important source of evidence is children’s spontaneous talk about psychological states. In the previous section, I described the way that children report on emotional states (Wellman et al., 1995). Using a similar database, Bartsch and Wellman (1995) have examined children’s references to other mental states. Their analysis reveals that children talk systematically about desires and goals throughout most of the third year – chiefly using the term want. Then, starting at around the third birthday, children also begin to make reference to beliefs, mainly using the terms know or think. Eventually, around the fifth birthday, talk about beliefs becomes as frequent as talk about desires.

This developmental pattern is probably universal. Tardif and Wellman (2000) report that children learning to speak Cantonese and Mandarin display a similar progression: talk about goals and desires emerges early; talk about beliefs and expectations shows a later increment. These data help to rule out various possible interpretations of the lag between talk about desires and talk about knowledge and belief. For example, it might be argued that it arises because in English the predicate complement structure is simpler for the verb want than for the verbs think and know. However, in Mandarin and Cantonese, the predicate complement structure is
relatively simple across references to both desires and thoughts. Indeed, it is worth noting that in both Mandarin and Cantonese some polysemous mental verbs can be used to indicate either desire or thought. Yet, despite the availability of the same lexical item for both meanings, the lag between references to desires and thoughts still emerged. In sum, whether we focus on children’s emotion judgments using experimental tasks involving a simple binary judgment, or on children’s spontaneous references to mental processes in the course of their everyday conversation be it in English, in Mandarin, or in Cantonese, the evidence is robust that children focus initially on an agent’s goals, but increasingly take into account his or her thoughts and beliefs.

It is worth noting that in the context of emotion judgments children’s acknowledgement of the role of thoughts and beliefs is quite protracted. Children of 4-5 years are generally quite accurate in recognizing the impact of thoughts and beliefs on action (Wellman, Cross & Watson, 2001). However it is only around 5-6 years that children recognize the impact of beliefs on emotion. Several studies support this interesting conclusion. For example, Hadwin and Perner (1991) found that virtually all 5-year-olds could appreciate a story character’s mistaken belief but only at 6 years of age did a significant majority make correct attributions of surprise that were consistent with the story character’s mistaken belief. Bradmetz and Schneider (1999) replicated the same lag between belief and emotion attributions across a series of five experiments. For example, when given a version of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, children frequently realized that Little Red Riding Hood mistakenly thinks it is her grandmother in the bed but then went on to say that she was afraid – and invoked the wolf to explain her fear, for example, “Because it is a wolf!” or “Because the wolf wants to eat her.” On the other hand, no child made a correct
emotion attribution but failed the false-belief test. Finally, de Rosnay and Harris (2002) compared children’s performance two types of a nasty-surprise task (involving a protagonist mistakenly expecting a positive outcome that turns out to be negative). Children frequently erred by incorrectly identifying the protagonist’s emotion as negative, despite correctly identifying the protagonist’s positive belief.

How should we explain this pattern of development? Most commentators acknowledge that it reflects children’s developing appreciation of the way that an agent entertains an attitude to a given target – for example an attitude of liking or fearing – and also construes that target in a particular way, whether the construal is accurate or not. To that extent, most commentators see the child as becoming increasingly sensitive to the role of various appraisal processes. Nevertheless, beyond that consensus, there is a healthy disagreement about how that increased sensitivity comes about. Some have argued that a key development is children’s developing understanding of the way that the appraisal of a target comes to include a mental representation of that target (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Flavell, 1988; Astington & Gopnik, 1988; Perner, 1991). Others have argued that children might get better, not at understanding the representational nature of appraisal processes, but rather at simulating or mimicking the appraisal that someone else might make of a target when given partial or biased information about it (Gordon, 1986; Harris, 1989; 1992).

The child’s developing appreciation of appraisal processes can be further highlighted by taking a closer look at children’s attributions of an important and complex social emotion, namely guilt. In a pioneering study, Nunner-Winkler and Sodian (1988) found a surprising age change. Four- and 5-year-olds consistently claimed that a story protagonist who had committed a serious transgression (e.g., deliberately lied, pushed another child, or stolen something) would feel happy. The
children justified this by noting that the outcome of the protagonist’s transgression had produced positive results – he or she had successfully stolen something or had managed to displace another child on the swing. Older children around the age of 8 years were more likely to claim that the protagonist would feel bad and in explaining that attribution they referred to the story character’s transgression.

One plausible explanation of this age change is that older children increasingly expect that a transgression will provoke a bad conscience – they have an understanding of what it means to feel guilty. Still, before focusing in more detail on that interpretation it is worth considering various alternatives. First, it is conceivable that younger children regard the transgressions as trivial. However, a long tradition of research on moral development shows that preschoolers actually think of lying, hitting and stealing as serious transgressions (Smetana, 1981). Not surprisingly, therefore, Keller, Lourenco, Malti and Saalbach (2003) could find no age change in children’s castigation of such basic transgressions.

A second possibility is that older children expect the protagonist to feel bad because they are more alert to the risk of punishment. Indeed, being older and arguably expected to “know better”, older children might expect more severe punishment for such transgressions than younger children. However, children’s justifications lend little support to this explanation. They rarely refer to punishment or fear of punishment when explaining why the perpetrator feels bad.

A third possibility is that older children are more likely to interpret the question in terms of the emotion that the perpetrator should feel whereas the younger children focus on what the perpetrator does feel. However, when Keller et al. (2003) asked children how they themselves would feel after such a transgression – a question
format that should presumably prompt children to focus on socially desirable feelings – the familiar age change re-emerged.

A fourth possibility is that older children have greater empathy. They more readily acknowledge the suffering experienced by the victims of the transgressions, and they attribute bad feelings to the person who has caused that distress. However, when Arsenio and Kramer (1992) explicitly asked children of various ages about the feelings of the victim, all age groups acknowledged his or her distress. A further problem for the empathy hypothesis is that a similar age change in children’s emotion attributions emerges when they are asked about transgressions that do not involve any suffering by a victim. Lagattuta (2005) presented children from 4-7 years with stories involving a conflict between the protagonist’s desire and various non-moral rules concerning, for example, safety (‘don’t run into the street’) or nutrition (‘don’t eat cookies before dinner’). Older children were more likely to acknowledge that the protagonist could feel bad after breaking the rule. Equally important, they were also more likely to acknowledge that the protagonist could feel good about resisting the temptation to break the rule. Clearly, in neither of these cases is it feasible to explain the age change in terms of increased empathy for a victim. In these episodes, there is no third party in the role of victim.

The most plausible explanation of the findings is that older children increasingly conceive of agents as engaging in a particular kind of appraisal process. Whereas the younger child is inclined to think that agents focus mainly on their goals and feel happy or sad depending on whether those goals are fulfilled or not, older children increasingly acknowledge an additional appraisal process in which the agent appraises his or her actions in terms of whether or not they conform to various rules and obligations. In probing children’s explanations for the emotion felt by the story
characters, Lagattuta obtained firm support for this interpretation. Older children were more likely to focus on rules and obligations than younger children. They said, for example: “She feels a little bad because she shouldn’t have done that” or “…Because his Mom said he had to stay out of the street”).

If the above analysis is correct, children come to attribute guilt only in middle childhood. Yet recent evidence suggests that even preschool children feel and express guilt. For example, Kochanska, Gross, Lin and Nichols (2002) report that preschoolers show a fairly stable tendency toward displays of discomfort following a mishap; these display correlate moderately with maternal ratings of the child’s tendency to feel guilt; and children who display more discomfort are more likely to conform to adult-imposed rules. Taken together, these results suggest that even preschoolers do feel guilt. If that is the case, why is it that children only start to attribute guilt several years later?

**Individual differences in understanding emotion**

So far, I have focused on age changes in children’s understanding of emotion. That emphasis reflects the research program that has dominated research for the past 20 years or more. Investigators have aimed to identify a succession of conceptual insights that children come to master in the course of development. However, more recently, attention has increasingly turned to individual differences in children’s mastery of those insights. Thus, on the one hand investigators have developed tools to measure variation in children’s understanding of emotion and on the other hand, they have begun to analyze the reasons why some children are advanced in their understanding whereas others are much slower.

Pons, Harris and de Rosnay (2004) report on a Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC) composed of nine different components: (1) the recognition of
facial expressions of emotion; (2) the understanding of situational causes; (3) understanding the effect of external reminders on emotion; (4) understanding of the link between desire and emotion; (5) understanding of the link between belief and emotion; (6) understanding the potential discrepancy between felt and expressed emotion; (7) understanding guilt; (8) understanding the regulation of emotion; and (9) understanding mixed or ambivalent emotions. They tested children between 3 and 11 years for their mastery of each component. The main findings were that children displayed a clear improvement with age on each component and the components themselves could be plausibly grouped into three developmental phases. The first period is characterized by the understanding of key public aspects of emotion – their mode of expression, their situational causes, and the effect of external reminders. The second period is characterized by mastery of the mentalistic nature of emotion – the role of desires and beliefs and the distinction between felt and expressed emotion. The third period is characterized by an understanding of how the same individual can reflect on a situation from different points of view or in terms of different criteria and thereby evoke different feelings – either at the same time or successively. Pons et al. (2004) observed a hierarchical relationship among these three phases. By implication, the understanding of key external aspects of emotion is a prerequisite for understanding the more mentalistic aspects. In turn, understanding these mentalistic aspects is a prerequisite for understanding the impact of reflection and rumination on emotion.

In a follow-up study, Pons and Harris (2005) looked at longitudinal change and stability in children’s performance on the TEC. Children aged 7, 9 and 11 years at Time 1 were retested 13 months later at Time 2. More than half of the 7- and 9-year-olds showed gains at re-test (although the majority of 11-year-olds remained the same
Individual differences were considerable at both Times 1 and 2 for all three age groups. Thus, children in the youngest group varied by as much as six components and children in the two older groups varied by as much as four components. Moreover, when adjacent age groups were compared, the highest scoring children in the younger group scored higher than the lowest scoring children in the older group (by 2 to 3 components depending on which two age groups were compared). Indeed, some of the 7-year-olds had an overall level of emotion understanding that was higher than some of the 11-year-olds. These individual differences remained quite stable over the 13-month period. Thus, despite the gains made by many children in their understanding of emotion, their level of understanding at Time 1 was a good predictor of their understanding at Time 2.

Do these marked and stable individual differences in children’s understanding of emotion have any implications for their behavior? In particular, we may ask whether children’s understanding of emotion has an impact on their social relationships when they move outside of the family and start to form relationships with peers. Several studies have explored this possibility. Denham, McKinley, Couchoud and Holt (1990) tested preschoolers (mean age = 44 months) for their emotion knowledge: children had to identify a puppet’s emotion (of happiness, sadness, anger or fear) both when it exhibited a prototypical reaction (e.g., fear during a nightmare) and an atypical reaction (e.g., sadness at going to preschool). In addition, using a sociometric measure, children were assessed for their acceptance as a playmate among their peers. Children with higher scores on the emotion test proved to be more popular among their peers, even when the contributions of age and gender were removed. Cassidy, Parke, Butkovsky and Braungart (1992) obtained very similar
results with first grade children. Children’s overall score in an interview about the causes, consequences, and associated expression of emotion was correlated with popularity. Finally, in a longitudinal study of 4- and 5-year-olds, Edwards, Manstead & MacDonald (1984) found that children who were accurate at identifying facial expressions of emotion proved to be more popular 1-2 years later (even when their initial popularity was taken into account). The consistency between these three studies is striking.

Nevertheless, caution is needed in interpreting the findings (Manstead, 1994). First, we do not yet understand the causal link between the understanding of emotion and peer relationships. Acceptance by peers might increase children’s opportunities for learning about emotion. Thus, rather than children’s understanding of emotion promoting their friendships the causal arrow might move in the reverse direction. Alternatively, a third variable such as intelligence or verbal ability might underpin both emotion understanding and popularity.

Second, it would be premature to draw the conclusion that children with good insight into emotion inevitably have healthy and positive relationships with their peers. Consider the following thought-provoking study of bullying carried out by Sutton, Smith and Swettenham (1999). Bullies are sometimes characterized as awkward children who resort to aggression because of their limited social skills. Yet, it is also conceivable that bullying calls for an astute analysis of whom to victimize and how bystanders will react. With this in mind, Sutton et al. (1999) administered a set of stories designed to assess the understanding of emotions and cognitions among 7- to 10-year-olds. Children who were “ringleader” bullies scored higher than several other groups. They scored higher than “follower” bullies (i.e., those who helped or supported the bully), victims, as well as defenders of the victim.
Summarizing across these studies, the implication is that insight into other children’s emotional and mental states is associated with social adroitness. Thus, it is linked to popularity and acceptance but also to leadership in the context of bullying. Although it is tempting to assume that a more advanced or precocious understanding of emotion invariably yields positive social outcomes, that assumption is probably too optimistic.

Turning now to the origins of such individual differences, recent evidence increasingly points to a key role for family conversation. Consider a child whose parent frequently discusses emotion, by drawing out the child’s own feelings, by calling attention to the way that his or her actions may have emotional implications for other members of the family, or by elaborating on the feelings of story characters. Consider, on the other hand, a parent who is more constrained in talking about emotion, whether with respect to the child, or other people. These two different conversation partners might be expected to have a differential impact on the extent to which the child understands how an emotion comes about, or is prepared to talk about emotion, or both.

Certainly, there is marked variation among families in the frequency with which emotions are discussed. Dunn et al., (1991) found that some children never made any mention of emotion during an hour-long home visit whereas others made more than 25 such references; variation among the mothers was equally great. Accumulating evidence indicates that the frequency with which pre-school children engage in family discussion about emotions and their causes is correlated with their later ability to identify how someone feels. The link has been found both over a relatively short period, straddling the third birthday, i.e. from 33 to 40 months (Dunn,
Brown, Slomkowski, Tesla & Youngblade, 1991) as well as a more extended period from 3 to 6 years (Dunn et al. 1991; Brown & Dunn, 1996).

Such correlational data are, of course, open to various interpretations. One possibility is that the correlation reflects some stable attribute of the child that manifests itself both in psychological talk and in sensitivity to emotion. For example, some children might be naturally empathic – they might seek out and elicit more conversations about emotion, and also display a keen ability to assess how other people feel, as measured by standard tests of emotion understanding. However, it is also plausible to suppose that the correlation reflects the didactic role that conversation can play for children. Frequent family discussion, particularly when parents are involved, might prompt children to talk about emotion and increase their understanding and perspective taking. One piece of evidence that fits this second proposal has been reported by Garner, Jones, Gaddy and Reddie (1997): they found that children’s perspective taking is correlated with family discussion of emotion that focuses not simply on what the person feel but rather on *why* someone feels a given emotion. A second piece of evidence consistent with the didactic role of family members was obtained by de Rosnay, Pons, Harris & Morrell (2004). They found that mothers’ use of mentalistic terms when describing their children (i.e., references to their children’s psychological characteristics rather than their physical characteristics or their behavior) were positively correlated with children’s correct emotion attributions to story protagonists. Thus, even when the mother was not engaged in conversation with her child, characteristic of her discourse style were nevertheless predictive of the child’s understanding of emotion.

Such an emphasis on the didactic role of parental conversation, especially by the mother, is consistent with a larger body of research that has investigated children’s
developing understanding of various mental states including beliefs as well as emotions. Three important conclusions have emerged from these studies. First, when longitudinal data are collected, they confirm that it is the mothers’ discourse that predicts children’s later understanding of mental states; there is no indication that children’s understanding of mental states predicts later patterns of discourse by the mother. Second, it is the mother’s focus on mental states that appears to be critical rather than any generalized disposition to engage children in conversation. Third, this influence appears to have a sustained impact. It is evident at among 3- and 6-year-olds alike (Harris, de Rosnay & Pons, 2005; Ruffman, Slade & Crowe, 2002).

In the coming years, we may expect to see more research on the question of how children come to vary in their understanding of emotion, and the part that family talk might play in promoting that variation. In that regard, we can anticipate an increasing confluence of findings from research on early attachment, on children’s conversations about emotionally charged events – especially past negative events – and individual differences in children’s understanding of mental states including emotion. For the most part, these topics have been studied independently from one another but that is likely to change. Such a confluence is likely to yield practical as well as theoretical benefits. If we know more about how children’s understanding of emotion can be facilitated in the context of the family, especially family conversation, we may be able to reproduce some of those beneficial effects through deliberate and systematic therapeutic intervention.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have examined several inter-related aspects of children’s understanding of emotion: their ability to report emotion in words and to understand the way that past emotions can be reactivated; their sensitivity to key components of
the appraisal processes that modulate a person’s emotional response to a given situation, namely the person’s desires, the person’s beliefs and the person’s evaluation of their own standing in relation to various rules and obligation; individual differences in emotion understanding, their links with peer relationships, and the key role of family conversation in promoting children’s understanding of emotion.

At certain points, I have touched on a larger theme that deserves more attention in future research. Arguably, children’s developing understanding of emotion is simply an epi-phenomenon of the underlying process. Understanding might operate at a ‘meta’ level, sealed off from the underlying emotional process that is its subject matter. To take a concrete example, it is possible to assert that the child functions at two separate levels: on one level, there is the child’s experience and display of guilt; at a separate level, there is the child’s capacity for reporting on, attributing, and ruminating about that experience. Increased sophistication at the latter level might have few or no repercussions on processing at the former level.

Such a clear cut separation between levels of processing might simplify our scientific analysis but it probably distorts or ignores some important features of human emotion. It effectively predicts that a disruption or delay in the development of an understanding of emotion need have no repercussions on the basic emotional processes themselves. However, there are several reasons for thinking that such repercussions do exist. First, there is a therapeutic tradition suggesting that those intense emotional experiences that are re-worked in the context of communication and rumination have different sequelae from those that are not. Such re-working need not be in the context of discussion with a trained therapist; it can also occur in the context of a privately written narrative (Pennebaker, 1996). One plausible extrapolation of these findings is that the emotional lives of children who grow up in homes where
there is open discussion of emotionally charged encounters will be different from those where such discussion does not occur. They are likely to be prompted to engage in the type of insightful thinking about the causes of their emotions that has been shown to be beneficial for adults’ physical and mental health (Pennebaker, Barger & Tiebout, 1989).

Second, that capacity for communication and rumination dramatically alters the contexts in which children can seek support and reassurance. Attachment theorists have emphasized the way that a caretaker may or may not provide reassurance at moments of distress. Typically, they have focused on those moments when the precipitating factor is fairly easy for the caretaker to discern: the child is unnerved by a stranger, or distressed by the caretaker’s recent absence, or fretful about the caretaker’s imminent departure. However, the emotional horizon of the older child is much larger; he or she can be distressed or fearful of events that might happen in the future or happened in the more distant past. In such contexts, children who can articulate their anxieties and discuss their causes are clearly better placed to receive reassurance.

Finally, it is likely that children’s ability to understand and predict their own emotions has an effect on their decision-making about what course of action to take. In its turn, that chosen course of action will lead to – or avoid – certain emotional consequences. For example, the ability to anticipate guilt can serve as a brake or warning signal when a guilt-inducing transgression is contemplated (Lake, Lane & Harris, 1995). That warning signal is sufficient to help children to inhibit the transgression, and to avoid any subsequent guilt. Stated in more general terms, children’s insight into their emotional lives does not simply permit the child to expect
the inevitable; it allows the child to make choices about what his or her emotional life should be like.
References


