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Child Care Teachers’ Response to Children’s Emotional Expression

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This observational study examined practices through which child care teachers socialize children’s emotion. A specific aim was to describe strategies of teacher intervention in response to emotion displayed by children in child care centers, and to answer the question of differential interactions based on children’s age and gender.

The results of this study were as follows: (a) toddler teachers matched and encouraged children’s positive emotion expression more often than did preschool teachers; (b) in response to children’s negative emotion, toddler teachers used physical comfort and distraction more often than did preschool teachers who relied more on verbal mediation; (c) in response to girls’ negative emotional expressions, teachers provided more physical comfort and distraction whereas they were more likely to provide boys with constructive ways to express negative emotion.

The results of this study also revealed relatively infrequent teaching about constructive ways of expressing negative emotion and very few occurrences of teacher’s empathy, two developmentally appropriate methods for socializing emotion. Teachers may benefit from a training program focusing on facilitating emotional competence.

Young children’s emotional competence has been investigated as an important aspect of their early success (Raver, 2002). Research indicates that adult, specifically parent, socialization attempts affect children’s emotional competence; their ability...
to identify their own and others’ emotion expressions as well as use emotion words (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Research on emotion socialization has been concerned with the communicative interactions between individuals within family contexts (Lewis & Saarni, 1985). However, other social contexts such as schools and child care centers provide important socialization opportunities and their role in the development of emotion has been sorely neglected. This study was conducted to begin to fill this gap.

In addressing how parents contribute to young children’s emotional competence, three mechanisms of emotion socialization have been proposed: modeling, contingency, and coaching (Denham, 1998). First, displays of positive and negative emotion within the family provide children with opportunities to learn about emotional expressions, regulation, and display rules. Children’s emotion expressiveness may reflect both their parents’ overall expressiveness and the patterns of particular emotion expression, for example, the prevalence of happiness, anger, and sadness (Denham, 1993). Negative emotional climates of the family, for example, have been linked with decreases in knowledge about emotions and less prosocial behavior with siblings (Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997). Second, there is evidence that supportive parental reactions to children’s emotion expressions are associated with positive outcomes for children. In general, findings from parenting studies suggest that parents who are responsive, warm, and accepting of children’s emotional reactions tend to have children who are emotionally well regulated and responsive themselves. In contrast, nonsupportive parental responses to children’s negative emotions such as punitive, minimizing, and parental distress have been associated with negative outcomes for children (Eisenberg et al., 1998). The third way in which parents socialize children’s emotion is through coaching or discussion of emotion. Parent-led conversations about the names, causes, and consequences of emotions may help children in understanding why emotions occur and how they are to be expressed. Understanding of causes and consequences of emotions, in turn, help children communicate their feelings and regulate them. For instance, 3-year-olds who grew up in families in which feelings were frequently discussed were better than their peers at making judgments about others’ emotions at age 6 (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991).

Despite the interest in children’s socialization of emotion by their own parents, social contexts outside the family still lack the attention of researchers. The family is the first but not the only social context in which children become socialized (Denham, 2001). Teachers, like parents, are managing the emotional climate in which children learn about emotions (Mill & Romano-White, 1999) and it is expected that caregivers and teachers are functioning as socializing agents of children’s emotions. Denham (1998) suggests that teachers have varied qualities that make them excellent socializers. They show new skills, provide interesting materials, and develop emotional bonds with children in their classrooms. Teachers are also powerful role models for young children. When teachers express interest in
children’s feelings and show respect for children’s emotional experiences, children’s emotional development can be profoundly impacted.

The importance of teachers’ role in emotion socialization is underscored by the number of children experiencing nonparental care. With more mothers of young children entering the work force, a parallel number of young children have enrolled in child care centers. In 1999, 61% of mothers with children under 6 years of age were in the labor force (National Research Council and Institute for Medicine, 2000). Consequent to these demographic trends, researchers have conducted studies to address the question of the effects of child care experiences on children’s socioemotional development. The results from these studies are controversial. For instance, Vandell and Corasaniti (1990) reported that children with more extensive child care experiences since infancy were rated as having poorer peer relationships and emotional health by their teachers. More recently, it was found that more time in nonparental care across the first 4 years of life predicted less social competence rated by mothers and caregivers and more externalizing problems reported by mothers and kindergarten teachers (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). In contrast, other researchers have documented positive effects of early care experiences. For example, Crockenberg and Litman (1991) found that longer work hours by mothers, and therefore, more hours of nonparental care, were associated with greater child compliance at home and in the lab. Another study found that children who attended child care were more self-confident, outgoing, verbally expressive, self-sufficient, and comfortable, while acting less fearful, distressed, and timid in new situations (Clarke-Stewart, Gruber, & Fitzgerald, 1994).

More recently, child care research has evolved from simple questions about good or bad effects of child care into more detailed questions about the quality of child care. Quality of child care, that is, better trained teachers, lower teacher–child ratio, has been identified as an important factor in emotional development of children. Higher quality is associated with socioemotional outcomes in children, such as lower rates of negative emotional expressions, and higher levels of compliance, attention regulation, and sociability (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1998, 2000, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Votruba-Drazal, Colety, & Chase–Lansdale, 2004). Vandell, Henderson, and Wilson (1988) found that children in higher quality child care were rated as more socially competent, had fewer unfriendly peer interactions, were happier, and received fewer shy nominations from peers. In particular, high-quality child care experiences are beneficial to low-income children’s socioemotional functioning (Votruba-Drazal et al., 2004). Indeed, the consensus is that the effects of early child care are strikingly positive, especially when children, of either low or high risk, are placed in quality child care centers (National Research Council and Institute for Medicine, 2000).

A component of high quality child care is the teacher’s role in facilitating children’s affect and achievement For example, Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, and Carrol...
(2004) reported that children in child care exhibited stronger cognitive growth when child care teachers were more responsive and sensitive. Similarly, results from the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study and the NICHD Study of Early Child Care indicated that children from all ethnic groups showed higher levels of social skills on standardized assessments shown to predict school success when caregivers were sensitive and stimulating (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003).

Pianta (1999) asserts that child–teacher relationships also play a formative role in emotional development and that a negative developmental history (i.e., depressed mother) of the child can be overcome by positive teacher–child interactions. Howes and Ritchie (2002) emphasized the roles of teacher in construction of secure attachment relationships and emotional coaching. In fact, children who were assessed as having more secure child–teacher attachments were observed and rated to be more socially competent with peers (Howes, Hamilton, & Phillipsen, 1998). Likewise, Hestenes, Kontos, and Bryan (1993) found that children whose teachers showed high levels of classroom engagement displayed more intense positive affect whereas low levels of classroom engagement by teachers predicted more intense negative affect among children.

Given the importance of teachers’ role in children’s emotional development, it is surprising that so little is known about the socialization of emotion by professional caregivers. Very few studies have investigated teachers’ socialization of emotion and majority of them are case studies using qualitative methodology. For instance, Pollak and Thoits (1989) studied the emotion socialization of disturbed 3- to 5-year-olds in a therapeutic child care center and found that the teachers explained and identified children’s feelings most frequently by associating emotion words with a situational cause. Teachers also taught children to identify emotional states in others, explained and validated children’s emotions, and helped children to learn appropriate displays and emotion management. More recently, DeMorat (1998) found that kindergarten children learned appropriate ways of displaying and discussing emotions from their teacher. A contingent analysis examined how students responded to teachers’ displays of emotion. Students as a group matched the emotion of the teacher 42% of the time. Students often seemed to interpret the teacher’s affective state through his or her facial expression, voice, and gestures.

As mentioned earlier, previous studies have not addressed how teachers in child care centers respond to children’s emotional expressions using systematic observation. Given that the increasing number of dual-career families has resulted in much of the socialization process being shared with substitute caregivers, it is important to examine the emotion socialization process that occurs in the context of a child care center. That is, increased understanding is needed about how child care teachers serve as emotion socializing agents that facilitate the emotional development of young children. By observing systematically how the teachers respond to children’s negative and positive emotional expressions and how they teach emotion, important information would be gained that may inform educational practice.
This study aimed to observe teachers’ emotion socialization practices and to answer the question of differential interactions based on children’s age and gender. Previous studies on parental emotion socialization have found that parents socialized their children differently based on children’s ages. For example, as a child develops the responsibility of emotion regulation moves from the parent to the child (Kopp, 1989). That is, as children come to have more effective regulatory abilities, parents decrease the frequency and intensity of their intervention. For example, Grolnick, Kurowski, McMenamy, Rivkin, and Bridges (1998) found that there was an age-related decrease in children’s dependency on mother for emotion regulation and mothers initiated less active engagement with their older compared to younger toddlers.

Like parents, teachers have children of different ages under their care. To facilitate children’s emotion development, teachers need to consider children’s developmental level. Thus, we expected teachers of toddlers to have different behavioral and verbal responses toward children’s emotion expressions than teachers of preschoolers. By observing different classrooms, age-appropriateness of teachers’ emotion socialization practices was investigated.

There is some evidence that adults have different expectations with regards to boys’ and girls’ emotional expressions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Several studies have demonstrated differences in parents’ socialization behaviors as a function of gender. Parents reported that they encourage their sons, more than their daughters, to control their emotions (Block, 1979), but that mothers discuss sadness more with daughters, whereas they discuss anger and disgust more with their sons (Fivush, 1989).

Unclear, however, is how gender influences teachers’ socialization of children’s emotion. Wittmer and Honig (1988) reported that 2-year-old male toddlers behaved more negatively and elicited more negative behaviors from their caregivers than did 2-year-old girls or 3-year-olds. Thus, it was expected that teachers would exhibit different socialization strategies for girls and boys.

The goal of this study was directed toward better understanding of teachers’ emotion socialization practices through their everyday interactions with children. Through systematic observations, this study examined teachers’ responses to children’s emotional expressions, as well as, their strategies for intervening depending on the emotion displayed. Finally, difference in teachers’ interactions with regard to children’s age and gender was investigated.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The participants in the study were 12 primary full-time teachers from three private child care centers in a semirural area of Pennsylvania. Two teachers in each toddler and preschool room were observed. One among 12 teachers was male. The mean
teachers’ level of education was 15.8 years and they averaged 7.3 years of experience in child care settings. The teachers’ mean age was 34 years.

Child care center A was a university-affiliated center located on the campus of a large university. This center is also accredited by NAEYC (the National Association for the Education of Young Children). Child care centers B and C are private-for-profit child care centers, and both are nationally franchised. The number of children ranged from 8 to 12 in the toddler room and 14 to 18 in the preschool room. Two classrooms at each center, one toddler (ages 2–3) and one preschool (ages 4–5), were observed. The ratio of teacher to child in the three toddler rooms is approximately 2:10, and 2:16 for the preschool rooms.

Child care center directors were contacted by telephone or in person and were asked if they would be willing to receive information on a study designed to examine teacher–child interactions. If the director agreed to receive information, a description of the study was mailed to him or her. He or she was then given a follow-up telephone call and asked if any of the eligible teachers at the center agreed to participate.

Measures

**Emotion socialization coding.** Because previous studies have not used a measurement system specifically designed to record different types of emotion socialization practices, it was necessary to create a coding system to address the goals of this study. The coding of teachers’ reactions to children’s emotional expressions was based on extensive pilot observations as well as existing parents’ emotion socialization coding systems (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997; Honig & Wittmer, 1985; Roberts & Strayer, 1987). The coding scheme was then reviewed by several experienced educators and their feedback was incorporated into the final coding system.

Teachers’ responses to children’s negative emotion were coded as follows: (a) ignoring—the teacher intentionally or unintentionally does not attend to child’s emotional display; (b) physical comforting—the teacher gives a hug or touches a child’s face or body; (c) negative response—the teacher restricts, threatens, ridicules, frowns, forbids, punishes, or minimizes the seriousness of the situation such as scolding a crying child with the comment “Stop crying! You’re driving me crazy;” (d) teaching constructive means of emotion regulation or alternative ways to express emotion such as guiding angry child to use her words instead of screaming to her friend; (e) intervening in the cause of negative emotion—the teacher tries to help the child to solve the source of the problem; (f) showing empathy with or validating the child’s emotion; (g) distraction—the teacher draws the child’s attention to other activities; and (h) other. Teachers’ responses to children’s positive emotion expressions were also coded as follows: (a) ignoring—the teacher intentionally or unintentionally does not attend to child’s emotion display, (b) matching...
the emotion—the teacher shows the same emotion display, (c) encouragement of emotion display—the teacher praises or encourages children’s positive emotion displays, (d) discouragement of emotion display—the teacher bans or discourages child to express positive emotion, and (e) other. Examples of teachers’ responses can be found in Ahn (2005).

Coding of children’s emotion. How the teacher responded to each child’s emotion with another child or the teacher was coded using codes from a study by DeMorat (1998). Children’s display of sadness, anger, fear, and generalized crying was noted and then teacher responses coded. Children’s positive emotions of happiness, pride, interest, affection, and overexcitement were also noted and the teachers’ responses coded.

Procedures

Because the emotion socialization practices by the teachers were the focus of this study, teachers’ responses to child emotion were observed in an unmanipulated context with no constraints. Observations of the teacher and children were conducted during free play, teacher-led activities (both a large group and small group activity), transitions (i.e., clean up time, getting ready to go outside, etc.), and snack hours. Individual teachers were observed continuously for 120 to 180 min, depending on the length of the free play period, structured activity, and outdoor activity on that day. Each teacher was observed for 30 hr. It usually took 2 weeks to obtain the minimum 30 hr of observation. Coding was done in real time using a coding grid.

This study used the event sampling method. After an emotion was displayed by a child or the teacher noticed a child’s emotion expression, then, behaviors and verbalizations of the teacher were recorded with the contextual information on the coding sheet. In addition, the time, child gender, and the type of emotion expressed were noted. If there was no response from the teacher within 15 sec of a child’s emotion expression, the teacher was coded as “ignoring” the child’s emotion expression. Once the teacher responded to an individual child’s emotion expressions in either a positive or negative manner, the researcher recorded the teacher’s response, class event (e.g., circle time), and verbalizations of the teacher. In cases where the teacher showed more than one response, all strategies or behavioral responses were coded. If two children were expressing the same or different emotions, the child to whom the teacher directed his or her attention became the target child and the quality of the teacher’s behavior was coded.

Prior to coding, the researcher (HJA) was present in the child care center for a minimum of 2 weeks (25 hr) prior to formal data collection, so that the teacher and children would be accustomed to her presence during the study.
Interobserver reliability. A second observer observed 10% of the total observations. Interobserver agreement for coding of teachers’ responses to children’s emotional expressions ranged from .84 to .96, which reflects fairly high interobserver agreement. The Cohen’s kappa levels were .84 for children’s positive emotion expression, .87 for teachers’ responses to children’s positive emotion, .92 for children’s negative emotional expressions, and .96 for teachers’ responses to children’s negative emotion expressions.

RESULTS

Data Analysis

Analyses of the data were conducted by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 10.0). In all of the statistical analyses, the conventional 0.05 alpha level of significance was utilized. To examine the association between variables, the Crosstabs procedure of the SPSS program was used. A nonparametric correlation coefficient, Cramer’s V, was used because the variables to be correlated were nominal. The Cramer’s V was used because there were three child care centers and the other variables had more than three levels.

Children’s Emotional Expressions

Analyses were carried out to examine the effects of gender and age on the frequency of children’s expressions of positive and negative emotion. Children’s positive emotional expressions included smiling, happiness, pride, affection seeking behavior, and excitement. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentages of children’s positive emotion expressions by gender and age of the child.

There was a statistically significant moderate relationship between age group (toddler, preschool) and children’s positive emotion expression (Cramer’s V = .38, \( p \leq .05 \)). In general, toddlers in the child care centers expressed more positive emotion than did preschoolers. Toddlers expressed happiness almost twice as many times as preschoolers. However, affection seeking behaviors and excitement were more prevalent among preschoolers.

Girls expressed more positive emotion than did the boys (see Table 1). There was a statistically significant although low relationship between gender and children’s positive emotional expressions (Cramer’s V = .20, \( p \leq .05 \)). Girls displayed a substantially larger proportion of affection seeking behaviors toward their teachers than did boys. Moreover, girls smiled almost twice as many times as boys. Excitement, on the other hand, was seen more in boys than in girls.

The frequency of children’s negative emotional expressions by gender and age of the child appear in Table 1. Although the older group expressed more anger and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Children’s Expression of Positive Emotion</th>
<th>Children’s Expression of Negative Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smile</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddler</td>
<td>55.3 (88)</td>
<td>66.6 (273)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschooler</td>
<td>44.7 (71)</td>
<td>33.4 (137)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>66.0 (105)</td>
<td>53.7 (220)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>34.0 (54)</td>
<td>46.3 (190)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cramer’s V = .38, p ≤ .05</td>
<td>Cramer’s V = .20, p ≤ .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Value in parentheses reflects frequency of occurrences.
whining or fussiness, toddlers expressed their sadness more often than did preschoolers. In particular, a substantially larger proportion of toddlers (67.3%) cried more often than did preschoolers (32.7%). Regarding gender and children’s negative emotion expression, boys were angrier and fussier than were girls. Boys also cried more than did girls. Conversely, girls expressed their sadness more often than did boys.

Toddler and Preschooler Teacher Responses to Children’s Emotional Expression

To examine the effect of age on teacher responses to children’s positive emotion, toddler teachers and preschooler teachers were compared. There was a statistically significant moderate relationship between children’s age and teachers’ responses (Cramer’s V = .34, \( p \leq .05 \)). Table 2 reports the results. Toddler teachers matched positive emotion more frequently (77.3%) than did preschool teachers (55.9%). Whereas toddler teachers encouraged children’s positive emotional expressions more often than did preschool teachers, preschool teachers were more likely to discourage children’s positive emotion expression (33.7%) than toddler teachers (7.7%).

Teachers’ responses to children’s negative emotional expression by age group were found to be significantly different for some behaviors (Cramer’s V = .31, \( p \leq .05 \)) and can be seen in Table 3. Compared to preschool teachers, toddler teachers used physical comfort and distraction more often in response to children’s expression of negative emotions. They also taught constructive or alternative ways of expressing negative emotion more often than did toddler teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Response</th>
<th>Toddler</th>
<th>Preschooler</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>16 (3.9%)</td>
<td>19 (5.1%)</td>
<td>35 (4.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match</td>
<td>320 (77.3%)</td>
<td>209 (55.9%)</td>
<td>529 (67.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>40 (9.7%)</td>
<td>14 (3.7%)</td>
<td>54 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouragement</td>
<td>32 (7.7%)</td>
<td>126 (33.7%)</td>
<td>158 (20.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6 (1.4%)</td>
<td>6 (1.6%)</td>
<td>12 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>414 (100%)</td>
<td>374 (100%)</td>
<td>788 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cramer’s V = .34, \( p \leq .05 \).
As can be seen in Table 4, teachers in all three child care centers responded to girls’ and boys’ positive emotional expression in significantly different ways (Cramer’s V = .22, p ≤ .05). Teachers matched girls’ positive emotion expression more (74.1%) than they did boys’ (59.1%). The frequency of encouragement to girls was also higher whereas discouragement of positive emotions was greater for boys than girls.

Table 5 reports how teachers responded to the negative emotional expressions of girls and boys. There was a statistically significant although modest relationship between children’s gender and teachers’ responses to negative emotional expres-
sion (Cramer’s V = .19, \( p \leq .05 \)). Teachers responded to girls with more physical comfort and distraction. Boys experienced more teacher indifference, empathy, and suggested constructive ways to express negative emotion.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate child care teachers’ socialization of emotion practices. Classroom observations generated data to describe teachers’ responses to emotional displays of toddler and preschool children and whether they take advantage of these situations to socialize emotions.

Toddler teachers matched and encouraged children’s positive emotion more frequently than did preschool teachers. It is difficult to tell whether toddler teachers’ use of more active strategies of emotion socialization induced toddlers’ more frequent positive emotion, or whether toddlers’ positive emotional expressions led to their teachers’ more active intervention with matching and encouragement of positive emotions.

On the other hand, although preschool teachers matched children’s positive emotion expression the majority of the time, they also discouraged these expressions more frequently than did toddler teachers. One possible explanation for this result is that preschoolers displayed much more overexcitement than did toddlers. To calm down overexcitement of preschoolers, their teachers may need to discourage their overly excited feelings. Teachers were often heard to say “Remember we are inside” or “Please use your inside voice. I can’t hear you.”

Another possibility is that teachers of toddlers and preschoolers differ in their expectations for children’s ability to control their excitement. According to Hyson

### TABLE 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Response</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>27 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical comfort</td>
<td>68 (21.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>27 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>32 (9.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening the cause</td>
<td>95 (29.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy or validation</td>
<td>11 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>46 (14.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>18 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>324 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Cramer’s V = .19, \( p \leq .05 \).
(1994), as toddlers grow into preschoolers, they developmentally move toward better coordination and control of emotions and exhibit more varied, complex, and flexible ways of expressing emotions. Consequently, preschool teachers might believe that children of this age group have a better ability or should have a better ability to control themselves than do younger children. As a result of these different expectations, preschool teachers might be more vigilant in tracking and controlling children’s high levels of excitement than toddler room teachers.

Teachers’ responses to children’s negative emotional expressions also differed by age. Teachers of toddlers were more frequently involved in children’s expressions of negative emotion than were teachers of preschoolers. Again, one possible explanation for this higher level of support for toddlers might be toddlers’ more frequent negative emotional expressions in comparison with preschoolers. For younger children, who might be perceived by teachers as more vulnerable to negative emotion, such supportive intervention would reflect age appropriate emotion socialization practices.

This result is consistent with previous studies of parent socialization which indicated that, as children develop, the responsibility of emotion regulation moves from parents to children. That is, as children come to have more effective regulatory abilities, their parents decrease the number of their interventions. An age-related decrease in children’s dependency on mother for emotion regulation, for instance, was found in the study of Grolnick et al. (1998). With age, the ability to regulate emotion is developing from more passive or other-directed regulatory behaviors to more active or self-directed regulatory behaviors. Bridges and Grolnick (1995) also found that 12- and 18-month-olds were less actively engaged with a mother, compared to 24- and 32-month-olds, during delay and separation situations. In fact, Grolnick et al. (1998) found that mothers of older toddlers initiated less active engagement with their children compared to mothers of the younger ones.

In this study, toddler teachers used physical comfort and distraction more often than did preschool teachers, whereas preschool teachers were more likely to intervene with the cause of the emotion. Moreover, preschoolers were taught constructive or alternative ways of expressing negative emotion more often than were toddlers. In short, teachers of younger children preferred more direct, quick responses such as physical comfort and distraction. Teachers may view younger children as less able to regulate negative emotion and chose their strategies accordingly. In contrast, teachers of older children, recognizing and expecting more mature forms of cognitive ability, took the opportunity to teach constructive ways of dealing with negative emotion.

The age-related differences found in teachers’ responses to children’s negative emotion suggest that teachers in this study tailored their role in helping children to regulate their emotion to the developmental level of the children. With age, children need to develop more sophisticated skills and to acquire a growing repertoire
of strategies in managing their emotional experience and expression. According to Sroufe (1989), the responsibility of managing emotions transfers from the caregiver to the child. At first, caregivers have primary responsibility for keeping emotional arousal tolerable. As the children grow, they play an active role in the process of emotion regulation by instigating regulatory assistance through deliberate efforts.

Gender also appeared to affect teacher responses to children’s expressions of emotion. Teachers responded differently to girls’ and boys’ expressions of positive emotion. Teachers matched the girls’ positive emotional expressions more often than they did the boys’ positive emotional expressions. The frequency of encouragement of positive emotion to girls was also higher than that given to boys. This result is inconsistent with earlier studies of parental socialization of positive emotion. Malatesta and Haviland (1982) reported that mothers seemed to be more contingent in responding to their sons’ emotional expressions during play than to their daughters’ emotional expressions. Mothers matched their sons’ emotional expressions and responded more contingently to their sons’ smiles than to their daughters’ smiles. Eisenberg and her colleagues (1998) suggested that the gender of the child has an effect on mothers’ responses to children’s emotional expression because mothers may perceive their boys to be more at-risk for dealing with emotions and they may try to alter this trend by encouraging more positive emotion expressions.

Why are the results of this study different from prior studies with parents? First, teachers at child care centers are interacting with children in a different setting than that of the home. Group dynamics at child care centers may affect teachers’ responses to children’s expressions of emotion in a different way from the parents at home. Another possibility is that because boys’ and girls’ different repertoires and intensity of positive emotion were not coded and thus statistically controlled for in this study, the higher frequency of boys’ overexcitement may have resulted in the teachers’ different reactions to them. That is, teachers may not have matched or encouraged boys’ positive emotional expression due to their discouragement of boys’ overexcitement.

In response to girls’ negative emotional expressions, teachers provided more physical comfort and distraction. In response to boys’ expressions of negative emotion, teachers expressed more empathy, and they also more frequently provided boys with constructive ways to express negative emotion. Teachers’ differential reactions to the negative emotions of boys and girls in this study may reflect differences in the children’s emotionality. There is evidence suggesting that adults’ reactions are associated with high levels of children’s negative emotions. Gronlnick, McMenamy, Kurowski, and Bridges (1998) found that mothers of 1- to 3-year-olds who used more reassurance and physical comforting had children who were more likely to be more distressed in a frustrating situation than were children of less reassuring mothers. Boys in this study, therefore, may be provided more
empathy and instruction of constructive ways of expressing negative emotion because they were more prone to cry and be angry.

It is interesting that the findings of this study are consistent with the evidence that adults have different expectations with regard to boys’ and girls’ emotional expressions, and that adults actually may reinforce these emotional expressions as a function of gender (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Several studies have reported differences in parents’ socialization behaviors with boys compared to girls. Parents reported that they encouraged their sons to control emotions more than their daughters (Block, 1979), which may explain why, in this study, teachers responded with physical comfort more frequently to girls’ rather than boys’ negative emotional expressions. Teachers’ more frequent teaching of constructive ways to express negative emotion with boys than with girls may also reflect their perception that boys need to learn to control their emotions.

Despite this initial evidence of the teachers’ role in the socialization of children’s emotion, it is interesting to note the relatively low frequency with which teachers taught children constructive ways in expressing negative emotion as well as the low frequency of expressed empathy. These data imply that teachers’ emotion socialization practices may need attention. Through validation of emotion, children learn that teachers acknowledge that they are having negative emotions and that it is okay to have such emotions. Although most teachers in this study encouraged children to verbalize their anger and sadness, two toddler room teachers seldom taught children to use constructive ways of emotional expression. Because children in child care centers may spend even more time with their teachers than they do with their own parents, teachers’ role in children’s emotion development should be emphasized.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of younger children used more direct and active strategies such as giving physical comfort and distraction, whereas preschool teachers tried to intervene in the cause of the emotion and to teach constructive ways of emotional expression. The differences found in teachers’ responses by gender and age may reflect children’s different emotional expressions, or it may be that teachers’ perceptions of children’s emotional vulnerability influences the way they react. That is, teachers of younger children may view them as more vulnerable and thus provide more physical comfort. In contrast, teachers of older children may perceive children as having the ability to learn to express negative emotion constructively. However, it does appear that teachers are sensitive to the developmental needs of their charges and that, in general, they respond appropriately to children’s expressions of both positive and negative emotions.
Because of the importance of emotional competence to social and academic success, and because young children are spending more and more time with teachers, it is recommended that a teacher training program focusing on facilitating emotional competence be developed to encourage ways of socializing emotion. For example, using puppets to model appropriate responses to emotion is one example of classroom activity that promotes children’s emotional development. With younger children, the teacher might use puppets to model the use of language rather than hitting to express anger. With older children, the teacher might model different responses to frustration such as not winning a game (Brewer, 2001). Preschool teachers may help children to express their feelings through writing by selecting examples from literature that illustrate how children have written about their negative feelings. Children may learn to cope more effectively with negative emotion through the writing process. As more and more children enter child care, the role of the teacher has expanded to include the socialization of emotion. Programs that facilitate this process will contribute significantly to positive child outcomes.

Limitation of the Study

Due to a small sample size and nonindependent sample, this descriptive study has inherent limitations of generalizability. Although the researcher is aware that the results from this study may not be generalized in other settings, these results may spur other researchers to look at how teachers socialize their students’ emotional competence. In addition, because positive or negative impacts on child outcomes were not measured in this study, it is impossible to pinpoint the importance of a particular response to children’s emotional expression.

REFERENCES


