Infants look to caregivers for facial cues for the appropriate reaction to unfamiliar adults. If the stranger is a trusted friend of the caregiver, the infant is more likely to respond favorably, whereas if the stranger is unknown to the caregiver, the infant may respond with anxiety and distress. Another factor is the infant’s temperament.

A second fear of this stage is called separation anxiety. Infants seven to twelve months old may cry in fear if the mother or caregiver leaves them in an unfamiliar place.

Many studies have been conducted to assess the type and quality of emotional communication between caregivers and infants. Parents are one of the primary sources that socialize children to communicate emotional experience in culturally specific ways. That is, through such processes as modeling, direct instruction, and imitation, parents teach their children which emotional expressions are appropriate to express within their specific sub-culture and the broader social context.

Socialization of emotion begins in infancy. Research indicates that when mothers interact with their infants they demonstrate emotional displays in an exaggerated slow motion, and that these types of display are highly interesting to infants. It is thought that this process is significant in the infant’s acquisition of cultural and social codes for emotional display, teaching them how to express their emotions, and the degree of acceptability associated with different types of emotional behaviors.

Another process that emerges during this stage is social referencing. Infants begin to recognize the emotions of others, and use this information when reacting to novel situations and people. As infants explore their world, they generally rely on the emotional expressions of their mothers or caregivers to determine the safety or appropriateness of a particular endeavor. Although this process has been established by several studies, there is some debate about the intentions of the infant; are infants simply imitating their mother’s emotional responses, or do they actually experience a change in mood purely from the expressive visual cues of the mother? What is known, however, is that as infants explore their environment, their immediate emotional responses to what they encounter are based on cues portrayed by their mother or primary caregiver, to whom they repeatedly reference as they explore.

**Toddlerhood (1-2 years)**

**Emotional expressivity**

During the second year, infants express emotions of shame or embarrassment and pride. These emotions mature in all children and adults contribute to their development. However, the reason for the shame or pride is learned. Different cultures value different actions. One culture may teach its children to express pride upon winning a competitive event, whereas another may teach children to dampen their cheer, or even to feel shame at another person’s loss.

**Emotional understanding**

During this stage of development, toddlers acquire language and are learning to verbally express their feelings. In 1986, Inge Bretherton and colleagues found that 30% of American 20-month-olds correctly labeled a series of emotional and physiological states, including sleep-fatigue, pain, distress, disgust, and affection. This ability, rudimentary as it is during early toddlerhood, is the first step in the development of emotional self-regulation skills.

Although there is debate concerning an acceptable definition of emotion regulation, it is generally thought to involve the ability to recognize and label emotions, and to control emotional expression in ways that are consistent with cultural expectations. In infancy, children largely rely on adults to help them regulate their emotional states. If they are uncomfortable they may be able to communicate this state by crying, but have little hope of alleviating the discomfort on their own. In toddlerhood, however, children begin to develop skills to regulate their emotions with the emergence of language providing an important tool to assist in this process. Being able to articulate an emotional state in itself has a regulatory effect in that it enables children to communicate their feelings to a person capable of helping them manage their emotional state. Speech also enables children to self-regulate, using soothing language to talk themselves through difficult situations.

**Empathy,** a complex emotional response to a situation, also appears in toddlerhood, usually by age two. The development of empathy requires that children read others’ emotional cues, understand that other people are entities distinct from themselves, and take the perspective of another person (put themselves in the position of another). These cognitive advances typically are not evident before the first birthday. The first sign of empathy in children occurs when they try to alleviate the distress of another using methods that they have observed or experienced themselves. Toddlers will use comforting language and initiate physical contact with their mothers if they are distressed, supposedly modeling their own early experiences when feeling upset.

**Preschool (3-6 years)**

**Emotional expressivity**

Children’s capacity to regulate their emotional behavior continues to advance during this stage of development.
Parents help preschoolers acquire skills to cope with negative emotional states by teaching and modeling use of verbal reasoning and explanation. For example, when preparing a child for a potentially emotionally evocative event, such as a trip to the doctor’s office or weekend at their grandparents’ house, parents will often offer comforting advice, such as “the doctor only wants to help” or “grandma and grandpa have all kinds of fun plans for the weekend.” This kind of emotional preparation is crucial for the child if he or she is to develop the skills necessary to regulate their own negative emotional states. Children who have trouble learning and/or enacting these types of coping skills often exhibit acting out types of behavior, or, conversely, can become withdrawn when confronted with fear or anxiety-provoking situations.

Beginning at about age four, children acquire the ability to alter their emotional expressions, a skill of high value in cultures that require frequent disingenuous social displays. Psychologists call these skills emotion display rules, culture-specific rules regarding the appropriateness of expressing in certain situations. As such, one’s external emotional expression need not match one’s internal emotional state. For example, in Western culture, we teach children that they should smile and say thank-you when receiving a gift, even if they really do not like the present. The ability to use display rules is complex. It requires that children understand the need to alter emotional displays, take the perspective of another, know that external states need not match internal states, have the muscular control to produce emotional expressions, be sensitive to social contextual cues that alert them to alter their expressivity, and have the motivation to enact such discrepant displays in a convincing manner.

It is thought that in the preschool years, parents are the primary socializing force, teaching appropriate emotional expression in children. Moreover, children learn at about age three that expressions of anger and aggression are to be controlled in the presence of adults. Around peers, however, children are much less likely to suppress negative emotional behavior. It appears that these differences arise as a result of the different consequences they have received for expressing negative emotions in front of adults as opposed to their peers. Further, this distinction made by children—as a function of social context—demonstrates that preschoolers have begun to internalize society’s rules governing the appropriate expression of emotions.

Carolyn Saarni, an innovator in the exploration of emotional development, has identified two types of emotional display rules, prosocial and self-protective. Prosocial display rules involve altering emotional displays in order to protect another’s feelings. For example, a child might not like the sweater she received from her aunt, but would appear happy because she did not want to make her aunt feel badly. On the other hand, self-protective display rules involve masking emotion in order to save face or to protect oneself from negative consequences. For instance, a child may feign toughness when he trips in front of his peers and scrapes his knee, in order to avoid teasing and further embarrassment. In 1986 research findings were mixed concerning the order in which prosocial and self-protective display rules are learned. Some studies demonstrate that knowledge of self-protective display rules emerges first, whereas other studies show the opposite effect.

There also has been research done examining how children alter their emotional displays. Researchers Jackie Gnepp and Debra Hess in 1986 found that there is greater pressure on children to modify their verbal rather than facial emotional expressions. It is easier for preschoolers to control their verbal utterances than their facial muscles.

Emotional understanding

Beginning at about age four or five, children develop a more sophisticated understanding of others’ emotional states. Although it has been demonstrated that empathy emerges at quite a young age, with rudimentary displays emerging during toddlerhood, increasing cognitive development enables preschoolers to arrive at a more complex understanding of emotions. Through repeated experiences, children begin to develop their own theories of others’ emotional states by referring to causes and consequences of emotions, and by observing and being sensitive to behavioral cues that indicate emotional distress. For instance, when asked why a playmate is upset, a child might respond “Because the teacher took his toy” or by reference to some other external cause, usually one that relates to an occurrence familiar to them. Children of this age are also beginning to make predictions about others’ experience and expression of emotions, such as predicting that a happy child will be more likely to share his or her toys.

Middle childhood (7-11 years)

Emotional expressivity

Children ages seven to eleven display a wider variety of self-regulation skills. Sophistication in understanding and enacting cultural display rules has increased dramatically by this stage, such that by now children begin to know when to control emotional expressivity as well as have a sufficient repertoire of behavioral regulation skills allowing them to effectively mask emotions in socially appropriate ways. Research has indicated that children at this age have become sensitive to the social contextual