cues which serve to guide their decisions to express or control negative emotions. Several factors influence their emotion management decisions, including the type of emotion experienced, the nature of their relationship with the person involved in the emotional exchange, child age, and child gender. Moreover, it appears that children have developed a set of expectations concerning the likely outcome of expressing emotion to others. In general, children report regulating anger and sadness more to friends than mothers and fathers because they expect to receive a negative—such as teasing or belittling—from friends. With increasing age, however, older children report expressing negative emotions more often to their mothers than their fathers, expecting dads to respond negatively to an emotional display. These emotion regulation skills are considered to be adaptive and deemed essential to establishing, developing, and maintaining social relationships.

Children at this age also demonstrate that they possess rudimentary cognitive and behavioral coping skills that serve to lessen the impact of an emotional event and in so doing, may in fact alter their emotional experience. For example, when experiencing a negative emotional event, children may respond by employing rationalization or minimization cognitive coping strategies, in which they re-interpret or reconstruct the scenario to make it seem less threatening or upsetting. Upon having their bicycle stolen or being deprived of television for a weekend, they might tell themselves, “It’s only a bike, at least I didn’t get hurt” or “Maybe mom and dad will make up something fun to do instead of watching TV.”

**Emotional understanding**

During middle childhood, children begin to understand that the emotional states of others are not as simple as they imagined in earlier years, and that they are often the result of complex causes, some of which are not externally obvious. They also come to understand that it is possible to experience more than one emotion at a time, although this ability is somewhat restricted and evolves slowly. As Susan Harter and Nancy Whitsell demonstrated, seven-year-old children are able to understand that a person can feel two emotions simultaneously, even if the emotions are positive and negative. Children can feel happy and excited that their parents bought them a bicycle, or angry and sad that a friend had hurt them, but they deny the possibility of experiencing “mixed feelings.” It is not until age ten that children are capable of understanding that one can experience two seemingly contradictory emotions, such as feeling happy that they were chosen for a team but also nervous about their responsibility to play well.

Displays of empathy also increase in frequency during this stage. Children from families that regularly discuss the complexity of feelings will develop empathy more readily than those whose families avoid such topics. Furthermore, parents who set consistent behavioral limits and who themselves show high levels of concern for others are more likely to produce empathic children than parents who are punitive or particularly harsh in restricting behavior.

**Adolescence (12-18 years)**

**Emotional expressivity**

Adolescents have become sophisticated at regulating their emotions. They have developed a wide vocabulary with which to discuss, and thus influence, emotional states of themselves and others. Adolescents are adept at interpreting social situations as part of the process of managing emotional displays.

It is widely believed that by adolescence children have developed a set of expectations, referred to as scripts, about how various people will react to their emotional displays, and regulate their displays in accordance with these scripts. Research in this area has found that in early adolescence, children begin breaking the emotionally intimate ties with their parents and begin forming them with peers. In one study, for instance, eighth-grade students, particularly boys, reported regulating (hiding) their emotions to (from) their mothers more than did either fifth- or eleventh-grade adolescents. This dip in emotional expressivity towards mothers appeared to be due to the boys’ expectations of receiving less emotional support from their mothers. This particular finding demonstrates the validity of the script hypothesis of self-regulations; children’s expectations of receiving little emotional support from their mothers, perhaps based on past experience, guide their decisions to regulate emotions more strictly in their mothers’ presence.

Another factor that plays a significant role in the ways adolescents regulate emotional displays is their heightened sensitivity to others’ evaluations of them, a sensitivity which can result in acute self-awareness and self-consciousness as they try to blend into the dominant social structure. David Elkind has described adolescents as operating as if they were in front of an imaginary audience in which every action and detail is noted and evaluated by others. As such, adolescents become very aware of the impact of emotional expressivity on their social interactions and fundamentally, on obtaining peer approval. Because guidelines concerning the appropriateness of emotional displays is highly culture-specific, adolescents have the difficult task of learning when and how to express or regulate certain emotions.

As expected, gender plays a significant role in the types of emotions displayed by adolescents. Boys are
less likely than girls to disclose their fearful emotions during times of distress. This reluctance was similarly supported by boys’ belief that they would receive less understanding and, in fact, probably be belittled, for expressing both aggressive and vulnerable emotions.

Janice Zeman

Further Reading

Emotional intelligence

The ability to perceive and constructively act on both one’s own emotions and the feelings of others.

Origins

Emotional intelligence (EI) is sometimes referred to as emotional quotient or emotional literacy. Individuals with emotional intelligence are able to relate to others with compassion and empathy, have well-developed social skills, and use this emotional awareness to direct their actions and behavior. The term was coined in 1990 by psychologists John Mayer and Peter Salovey. In 1995, psychologist/journalist Daniel Goleman published the highly successful Emotional Intelligence, which built on Mayer and Salovey’s work and popularized the EI concept.

The four areas of emotional intelligence, as identified by Mayer and Salovey, are as follows:

• Identifying emotions. The ability to recognize one’s own feelings and the feelings of those around them.

• Using emotions. The ability to access an emotion and reason with it (use it to assist thought and decisions).

• Understanding emotions. Emotional knowledge; the ability to identify and comprehend what Mayer and Salovey term “emotional chains”—the transition of one emotion to another.

• Managing emotions. The ability to self-regulate emotions and manage them in others.

Characteristics

The brain and emotional learning

The amygdala, a structure of the limbic system (the behavioral center of the brain) located near the brainstem, is thought to be responsible for emotional learning and emotional memory. Studies have shown that damage to the amygdala can impair the ability to judge fear and other emotions in facial expressions (to “read” the emotions of others), a skill which is critical to effective social interaction. The amygdala serves as an emotional scrapbook that the brain refers to in interpreting and reacting to new experiences. It is also associated with emotional arousal.

The ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others is also regulated by the prefrontal cortex of the brain, sometimes called “the executive center.” This brain structure and its components store emotional memories that an individual draws on when interacting socially. Research studies have demonstrated that individuals with brain lesions in the prefrontal cortex area have difficulties in social interactions and problem-solving and tend to make poor choices, probably because they have lost the ability to access past experiences and emotions.

Applications

The concept of emotional intelligence has found a number of different applications outside of the psychological research and therapy arenas. Professional, educational, and community institutions have integrated different aspects of the emotional intelligence philosophy into their organizations to promote more productive working relationships, better outcomes, and enhanced personal satisfaction.

In the workplace and in other organizational settings, the concept of emotional intelligence has spawned an entire industry of EI consultants, testing materials, and workshops. “People skills,” another buzzword for emotional intelligence, has long been recognized as a valued attribute in employees. The popularity of the EI concept in business is easily explained—when employees, managers, and clients have mutually rewarding personal relationships, productivity increases and profits follow.

Educators and youth counselors who work with children try to help them develop emotional self-awareness and the ability to recognize and positively act on feelings. Emphasis on emotional intelligence in the classroom also focuses on problem solving, conflict res-