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Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 45(45)

Authors

Ogren, Marissa
Sandhofer, Catherine

Publication Date

2023

Peer reviewed

How Do Emotion Labels Help Emotion Learning? The Role of Novelty Versus Familiarity

Marissa Ogren

Rutgers University, Newark, Newark, New Jersey, United States

Catherine Sandhofer

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, United States

Abstract

Emotion words help children to learn about emotions, yet the mechanism behind this remains unclear. These words may be helpful to children because they are novel, but this emotion learning may also be driven by familiarity. To address this, we conducted a pre-test post-test examination of emotion learning (matching faces to scenarios) with 3-year-olds ($N=72$). Between pre- and post-test, children either heard explicit emotion labels (“she feels annoyed”), novel labels (“she feels wuggy”), or irrelevant information (“she sits down”). Results revealed that children’s change score (post-test – pre-test) significantly differed by condition ($F(2,69)=4.51$, $p=.014$). The most positive change occurred in the explicit label condition ($M=0.96$, $SD=1.57$) followed by novel labels ($M=0.08$, $SD=1.69$) and irrelevant information ($M=-0.38$, $SD=1.41$). Children learned when provided with explicit emotion labels, but not novel labels. This suggests that familiarity (e.g., from previous experience), and not novelty, may best explain how emotion words influence children’s learning about emotions.