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Emotion Words May Connect Complex Emotional Events and Facial Expressions in Early Childhood

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Abstract

Recent theories suggest that emotion words may facilitate the development of emotion concepts. However, most research investigating this relation in early childhood has been correlational. To assess whether emotion words causally influence emotion concept development, we conducted a pre-test post-test study examining which facial configurations 3-year-olds associate with complex emotional scenarios (annoyed, disgusted, and nervous). Between pre- and post-test, children were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Children observed a facial configuration paired with a scenario while presented with either an explicit emotion label, a vague emotion label, or irrelevant information. Data from 54 children (36 female, mean age= 3.53) revealed that children's average change in number of correct responses from pre-test to post-test by condition were as follows: Explicit=1.00 (SD=1.68); Vague=0.11 (SD=1.45); Irrelevant=-0.28, (SD=1.71). These results hold implications for how specific emotion words may casually influence children's ability to learn new emotion concepts.