

The Effect of Emotion Regulation on Pupils' Peer Relationships

Zichan Liu*

Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

*Corresponding author: 15030440101@xs.hnit.edu.cn

Abstract. Peer relationships are one of the irreplaceable interpersonal relationships in the development of children's socialisation. What happens in children's peer interactions affects the development and functioning of other aspects of children's lives, such as family, school and community. The competence to deal with emotions, especially the skills to manage emotions like anger and control impulses, is an essential social competence for children and is important for peer interaction and social adjustment. This study aims to explore how primary school students' emotion management skills influence their peer relationships, to provide a scientific basis for intervention in problems that arise in primary school students' peer interactions (e.g. aggressive behaviour, school bullying, etc.), to try to control and reduce the frequency of these problems, to lay the foundation for developing and exercising students' future abilities to enter society, and to provide a reference for subsequent mental health education work by schools, teachers and parents. According to the study results, it is argued that young people who have a correct knowledge of the rules of emotional expression and a higher understanding of their own and others' emotions are less likely to be rejected by their peers and are more popular in larger peer network interactions. Children's access to effective emotion regulation strategies positively predicted and positively influenced their peer relationships.

Keywords: emotion regulation, children, peer relationships, peer interaction, primary school.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, children and their peers have been studied extensively for developmental psychologist. Peer relationships change systematically as children get older and they play different roles in children's lives at different ages [1]. Over 30% of children's social interactions in the middle years are with their peers¹. What occurs in children's friendship and peer groups also affects other aspects of children's development, such as school, family and community. On the other hand, children's development and functioning in school, family and community can, in turn, influence children's interactions in friendship and peer groups. Having and developing good peer relationships facilitates children's cognitive and social competence development, the acquisition of correct social values and the formation of a sound personality [2] Whereas those who have poor peer relationships can make it difficult for children to adapt to school life, affect academic performance, lack recognition and support, and even have a profoundly negative impact on social adjustment in adulthood.

How to manage emotions is one of the important social competencies of individuals and is important for social adjustment, especially how to moderate anger and limit impulses [3]. It has been noted that students with poor emotion management skills show more depression, anxiety, anger, etc. Negative emotions play an essential role in causing aggression and the negative effects once the aggression has occurred can further lead to the reinforcement of negative emotions.

More recently, there has been a greater focus placed upon the vital link between children's peer interaction and their emotion management. The ability to talk kindly and play harmoniously with peers during the pre-school years helps students to be accepted, supported and trusted by a wider range of people in their age group and to adapt better to school life and learning [4]. Such children will have greater emotional stability as a result of a relatively smooth school life and excellent academic achievement. Children who are unable to be friendly with their peers, on the other hand, may cause resentment among their peers and lead to more peer rejection, which in turn affects adjustment to school life and may also be emotionally challenging.

However, several studies explored how children's emotion regulation affects their peer relationships such as peer status and friendship quality [5]. Moreover, extensive studies have observed

middle school, high school and college students' emotions and peer relationships [6]. So far, there has been little review summarizing how emotion management could influence pupils' peer interactions.

The present study aimed to review research on how pupils' emotion regulation affects their peer relationships, to provide a scientific basis for intervention in problems that arise in primary school students' peer interactions (e.g. aggressive behaviours, school bullying, etc.), and to provide a reference for subsequent mental health education work by schools, teachers and parents.

In this paper, section 2 will outline the definition of core concepts, including emotion regulation and peer relationships. Section 3 will discuss what aspects of emotion regulation affects peer relationships and the ways in which emotion management affects peer interactions. Section 4 will summarize the research findings and provide educational suggestions for children's peer interaction, social adjustment and emotional management based on the results. In addition, the limitations of this essay will be investigated in this section.

2. Definition of core concepts

2.1 Emotion regulation

2.1.1 Definition of emotion regulation

In Psychology, emotional management is more generally discussed in terms of emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman first introduced the concept of Emotion Quotient in his book *Emotional Intelligence* [7]. Goleman defines emotion intelligence in five dimensions: self-awareness skills, self-management skills, self-motivation skills, empathy skills and the management of interpersonal relationships [7]. Self-management of emotions is the regulation of one's emotions to the appropriate level at the suitable time and in the appropriate place.

Salovey and Mayer first considered emotional intelligence to be a component of intelligence, which is independent, and proposed a three-component model of emotional intelligence [8]. After several revisions, emotional intelligence has been defined as a mental ability related to cognitive functioning, and four competencies of emotional intelligence have been identified. These four competencies are sensing and conveying emotions, facilitating thinking through emotions, interpreting emotions and regulating emotions [8]. Of these four dimensions, emotion regulation is probably the most fundamental ability for social interaction, as it directly affects emotional expression and actions [9].

This study argues that emotion management and emotional intelligence are two different concepts, not different ways of expressing the same concept, and are not to be used as substitutes for each other. However, emotional regulation can be considered as a dimension of emotional intelligence, and individuals with high emotional intelligence are able to manage their emotions in a form that facilitates intellectual activity [10]. In addition, it is noted that emotional regulation training is a good way to improve emotional intelligence. Therefore, to consider more fully the impact of emotions on children's peer relationships, this paper will discuss the different roles and effects of the four dimensions of emotional intelligence on children's peer interaction.

2.1.2 Classification of emotional intelligence

The Emotional Intelligence Model can be seen as a hierarchical model⁸. The ability of perceiving and expressing emotions is at the bottom of the hierarchy and provides the basis for the other competencies. It shows how people recognise and convey emotions from their own physical state, emotional experiences and thoughts; and to identify emotions from others' language and behaviour⁸. The competence of emotions to facilitate thinking refers to the ability of how emotions guide thinking⁸. For example, positive emotions promote cognitive behaviour and enable people to make more rational decisions and think about effective solutions. Understanding emotions refers to the ability to accurately sense emotional experiences and verbalise them accurately. Emotion regulation specifically refers to the ability to be aware of information and to access or exclude certain emotions

appropriately based on the information received; to be aware of one's own and others' emotions and to regulate them⁸. Eliminating and controlling emotions is not the best form of emotion regulation; it is the ability to use the emotions that arise and regulate them that is considered effective emotion regulation.

Therefore, children manage their emotions by first being able to accurately identify them from their own emotional experiences and the words or actions of others, and to express them precisely. Having a correct perception of their own emotions leads to positive thinking and further to problem solving. Being able to engage in positive thinking, as well as facilitating problem solving, is necessary to properly understand the meaning conveyed by emotions. After this range of processing of emotions based on the information available, it is then possible to use and regulate the emotions generated.

2.2 Peer relationship

2.2.1 Definition of peer relationship

Peer relationships are relationships in which children of the same or similar age engage in cooperative activities, or relationships between peers or individuals of similar psychological development [11]. Primary school students spend a large amount of time with people of their own age every day. All children are faced with living with, working with and making friends with their peers. The process of interacting with other children enables children to experience the intimacy and conflict inherent in human relationships and to acquire socially significant skills in this process and culture.

It is argued that peer relationships change systematically as children get older [1]. Peer relationships can represent different meanings at different stages of children's development. Several studies claim that children who develop successful relationships with their peers during the preschool years may become advantaged in terms of school adjustment, academic achievement, and social and emotional competence. During primary school, children's peer interactions almost exclusively take place at school. Therefore, this article will focus on emotion regulation and peer relationships that occur at school.

2.2.2 Research area of peer relationship

In this study, three areas of contemporary pupils' peer relationships will be discussed with the effect of children's emotion regulation, which includes peer acceptance, pupils' friendship and peer networks.

At the most basic level, peer acceptance represents the level of acceptance of the individual child in their peer group¹. In other words, the more a child is liked in his peer group, the more he is accepted by his peers. Several studies found that how children behave, what strategies they use to solve interaction problems, and what understanding of emotions they have can affect their acceptance by peers [12].

Friendship is a dynamic relationship between two children, a voluntary, intimate and dynamic relationship based on cooperation and trust¹. Researchers have found that by mid-childhood young kids are better able to find friends with whom they share common norms and similar personal qualities, and to establish and develop friendships with them in conversations, games and competitions.

Peer groups have been demonstrated to develop based on a number of factors, including affinity, familiarity and similarity, which is similar to the establishment and development of friendships [1]. Further studies aim to define characteristics of the social environment that may help facilitate or prevent the shaping and maintenance of groups, such as class size or teacher behaviour. For example, the larger the class size, the greater the number and variety of peer groups and social networks generated.

3. The effect of emotion competence on pupils' peer relationships

Peers can have a pervasive effect on children's emotional development, mainly because of the similarities between children and their peers, peers may understand the emotional lives of their peers better than parents or children of other age groups [13], so that they can form a group with their peers. Being with a group of like-minded peers adds depth to some of the emotions that children experience. For example, the feelings children experience when they are happy playing with their peers are more profound. When children's peers value and validate these shared emotions, children create a culture with their peers that has its own norms and values, which they share as part of this group, and they develop a shared evaluation. In mid and late childhood, children's social world experiences many significant changes with their peers that challenge their emotional competence.

3.1 What aspects of children's peer relationships are influenced by emotional competence?

Social-emotional adjustment makes an important contribution to children in different aspects of peer relationships as well as school adjustment and academic achievement [13]. Children's different emotional capacities, such as different perceptions, expressions and regulation of emotions, enable them to build satisfying relationships with her or his peers.

3.1.1 Emotional competence and peer acceptance

It is demonstrated that the development of perceptions of emotional expression affects pupils' peer acceptance [14]. Children with higher levels of understanding of the rules for expressing emotions, in both positive and negative contexts, are more accepted by their peers. Children in the first year of primary school have a certain level of knowledge of the emotional expression rules but are not yet able to fully apply this knowledge in practice, and their ability to understand and apply the rules of emotional expression is related to their level of peer acceptance [15]. Young people who are able to correctly recognise the difference between internal and surface emotions and who are able to show more positive responses in negative situations were more likely to be accepted by their peers.

These results suggest a way to develop children's social interaction skills. Teachers and parents can explain more about the rules of emotional expression and teach students to correctly understand the difference between internal and surface emotions and how to show positive emotional responses in negative situations. At the same time, create more realistic situations to give students more opportunities to practice and give timely feedback to deepen their knowledge and skills in understanding and expressing emotions in different situations.

3.1.2 Emotional competence and friendship

Identifying emotional information is one of the most basic emotional competencies and is crucial for building and maintaining successful friendships [16]. Children who are able to accurately interpret these emotional signals are better able to understand their peers' feelings and adapt their behaviour accordingly. This is the basis for making a good impression and maintaining close friendships in two or more person friendships. For instance, children who are able to interpret the emotions of others correctly can show appropriate responses that maintain or even enhance friendships. However, those who cannot interpret others' emotions accurately may show inappropriate responses, such as being playful when a friend is upset or continuing a discussion when a peer does not want to discuss it, all of which may cause offense and affect friendships.

Therefore, learning to recognise and understand the emotions of others is essential to building and maintaining friendships. A proper understanding of a friend's emotions enables an appropriate response to be made at the right time. If the negative emotions of others are effectively mitigated, the quality of the friendship can be improved and maintained.

3.1.3 Emotional competence and peer network

The domain of emotion is one of the keys to exploring an individual's popularity in a group. It is shown that children with higher levels of emotional understanding also tend to have higher levels of popularity. Children who believe they are emotionally expressive are more likely to want to become

friends with others [17]. This early social advantage can facilitate the development of their social support network and may therefore have adaptive value [17]. Children who can correctly understand the emotions of others enjoy greater peer support and understanding in their peer group, helping them to adapt better to the peer group.

Some research suggests that children's likability constrains the larger social networks in which they participate [1]. Children who are liked and accepted by their peers usually join more loosely structured and larger peer networks. However, children who are disliked and not rejected by their peers will participate in peer networks that are denser and smaller. Also, rejected children are likely to participate in peer networks that are made up of other children with lower social status. Thus, children's perception, expression, understanding and regulation of emotions can influence not only the degree of peer acceptance but also their participation in larger peer networks. Acquiring the proper perception and expression of emotions, and positively understanding and regulating them, can help children to engage in larger peer networks.

3.2 How does emotion management affect peer relationships?

Emotional regulation can influence social interactions through several mechanisms, most notably, it colours the emotional tone of social encounters [6]. Expressing pleasant emotions tends to arouse good feelings in others and creates a desire to continue communication, while expressing negative emotions tends to drive others away and stops the desire to continue communication. Emotion management includes both the handling and adjustment of negative emotions as well as the containment and delivery of positive emotions.

Many scholars have examined the predictive effects of children's emotion regulation strategies on their peer relationships and found that emotion regulative techniques for young kids were predictive of variables such as social preference, aggression and coping with peer pressure [4]. For instance, kids who have access to productive emotion regulation skills are able to avoid aggressive behaviour and cope more constructively with the stress that arises from peer interactions. Similarly, using ineffective emotion adjustment strategies may result in them not being liked by their peers, displaying aggressive behaviour towards their peers, and not being able to cope with peer pressure. For example, children who are unable to control their anger may be perceived as negative by their peers, they are not easily accepted by their peers or, alternatively, they are rejected by their peers.

Gross experimentally explored that expressive inhibition has a negative impact on peer communication and interaction, while cognitive reappraisal has a positive impact [18]. Suppression not only reduces negative emotional expression practices, but also reduces positive emotional expression practices. Moreover, suppression seems to have minimal effect on negative emotional experiences, while its impact on positive emotional experiences is decreasing¹⁸. In contrast, the reappraisal emotion regulation strategy increased the experience of positive emotions and facilitated the expression of positive emotions [18]. The emotion regulation strategy of repression resulted in individuals sharing their positive and negative emotions with less frequency, leading to diminished peer support and even dislike.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that reappraisal is not always more desirable than suppression [18]. There are times when reappraisal is very difficult and suppression is the only solution to moderate the negative emotions that have been generated. Therefore, it is vital to learn and acquire a broad range of emotion regulation techniques and to be able to apply them flexibly, understanding which regulation strategy to use in each situation.

4. Discussion and Suggestions

4.1 Findings

Children who have a sound knowledge of the rules of emotional expression and a higher ability to understand their own and others' emotions are more likely to be accepted by their peers and to be more popular in their peer networks.

Children's access to effective emotion regulation strategies positively predicted and positively influenced their peer relationships. Children who are able to regulate their emotions are better liked by their peers and are better able to cope with peer pressure. Ineffective emotion regulation strategies may result in them not being liked by their peers, having difficulty coping with peer pressure, or even displaying aggressive behaviour towards their peers. Compared to suppression, cognitive reappraisal can have a positive impact on peer interaction when it comes to the choice of emotion regulation strategies. However, it is more important for children to acquire a variety of positive emotion regulation strategies and to be able to apply them flexibly in different contexts.

4.2 Educational suggestions

Based on the previous discussion, several improvements can be made to help students acquire and master good emotion management skills, increase emotional intelligence, enhance peer acceptance, effectively develop and build strong friendships, and improve their social status within a larger peer network.

At the course-based level, a systematic psychology programme can be designed and delivered for different audiences. The overall aim of the curriculum is to provide children with cognitive training in emotion regulation, to change irrational beliefs and to train in the use of various positive emotion regulation strategies. For example, a psychology programme for parents could focus on how to give students emotional support beyond their studies and how to help them develop a healthy personality; a psychology programme for teachers could focus on ways to guide students in acquiring emotion regulation strategies and friendship strategies; a psychology programme for students could focus on emotion regulation strategies in multiple contexts to help students interact well with their peers.

For instance, when anger or disgust is present, negative strategies such as avoidance, aggression towards others or self-suppression should be avoided in favour of positive coping strategies such as relaxation, cognitive reappraisal, emotional expression and emotional help-seeking.

At the school-based level, problems arising from emotional outbursts in peer interaction should be given adequate attention, such as aggressive behaviour and school bullying. It is also important to improve the professionalism and psychological expertise of teachers. Teachers should focus on students' emotion awareness, emotion understanding, emotion expression and emotion regulation strategies, encourage positive coping and practice flexibility in a variety of contexts. For instance, when anger or disgust is present, negative strategies such as avoidance, aggression towards others or self-suppression should be avoided in favour of positive coping strategies such as relaxation, cognitive reappraisal, emotional expression and emotional help-seeking.

At the system-based level, the issue of children's emotional management and peer interaction needs to be given adequate attention. Mental health education for children should be provided through a variety of channels and approaches, in order to create a healthy emotional environment for children.

4.3 Limitations

More variables could be considered to examine the impact of emotional competence on peer relationships, such as gender, size of peer network, region, cultural background, etc. Moreover, longitudinal studies were not considered in this study. It is argued that children's cognitive development is stage-specific, that the characteristics of students' emotion regulation vary at different ages, that the characteristics of peer relationships may also vary, and that children's peer interactions become more complex as they grow older. In future studies, it will be possible to look longitudinally at the peer relationships affected by the different emotional strategies used by children at different ages.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on exploring how emotion management affect pupils' peer relationships. Based on the above findings, it was concluded that children who have a correct knowledge of the rules of

emotional expression and a higher understanding of their own and others' emotions are more likely to be accepted by their peers and are more popular in their peer networks. Children's access to effective emotion regulation strategies positively predicted and positively influenced their peer relationships. Effective emotion regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal have a positive impact on peer interaction. More importantly, children should have the knowledge and flexibility to use a variety of positive regulation strategies. The limitations of this paper are that variables such as gender, peer network size and region are not considered, and the lack of analysis of longitudinal studies.

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