Socio-emotional development during childhood: theories and research trends

Desarrollo socio-emocional durante la niñez: teorías y tendencias en investigación

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RESUMEN

En el artículo se describe cuatro modelos sobre el desarrollo de la competencia social, también se discute respecto a la definición de la capacidad emocional. A pesar del rápido crecimiento de la investigación sobre capacidad emocional, hay menos consenso en la definición de competencia emocional, versus competencia social. Sin embargo, la regulación emocional es un componente clave tanto para la capacidad social como la emocional. Los estudios sobre el papel de la socialización de la emociones desde la etapa preescolar hasta la adolescencia temprana, revelan que la socialización emocional parental está asociada al desarrollo de la capacidad social de los niños, directamente y a través de la regulación de las emociones y el desarrollo de habilidades de proceso cognoscitivo. Entender la capacidad social y emocional, es particularmente importante en poblaciones vulnerables, para orientar la socialización de las emociones en desarrollo de las intervenciones y para fomentar el desarrollo de estas capacidades. Se discute, lo importante que es particularmente entender, el papel de la socialización y de la regulación de las emociones dentro de la familia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Capacidad social
Capacidad emocional
Emociones
Regulación de las emociones
Socialización de las emociones

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, four models for the development of social competence are described, and issues regarding the definition of emotional competence are discussed. Although research on emotional competence is growing, there is less consensus on the definition of emotional, versus social, competence. However, emotion regulation is a key component of both social and emotional competence. Studies of the role of emotion socialization spanning preschool through early adolescence, reveal that parental emotion socialization is associated with children's social competence, both directly and through emotion regulation and cognitive processing skills. Understanding social and emotional competence, particularly among vulnerable populations, is important as we develop interventions that foster competence. We argue that it is particularly important to understand the role of emotion socialization and regulation within the family.

KEY WORDS

Social competence
Emotional competence
Emotions
Emotion regulation
Emotion socialization

Research on children's socio-emotional development has received considerable attention in the last 10 years due to the relevance for individual- and family-level interventions, and for policy. This body of research mainly has focused on identifying developmental correlates of children's social and emotional competence. In this review, we provide a conceptual framework of social and emotional competence from theories of child development. We briefly review studies that address socio-emotional development during childhood and provide insights about tailoring interventions that promote competent outcomes.

Different models have been described to explain the development of social competence. These include contextual-ecological, transactional, social learning, and information-processing models of human development. From an ecological systems approach (1), competence is defined as a set of stage-salient organizational tasks that are immersed in proximal and distal networks of family, peer, and community systems. For example, activities and social relations that occur in the child's family or peer group may influence competent outcomes. External settings (i.e., mesosystems) such as school or day care centers (e.g., interactions between child's parent and child's teacher) also influence social competence. Environments external to the child (i.e., exosystems) indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting, in which the person lives (e.g., parent's work place). Beliefs, values, customs embedded in cultural systems could also influence the child's microsystem. Advantages of this model include a holistic view of expected competent outcomes by the family and society. Thus, adaptation and competence depend upon proximal and distal forces during development (2,3).

The transactional model proposed by Sameroff (4), defines the development of competence as a product of an ongoing dynamic interplay between the developing child and the experience provided by the child's family and social context. Competent outcomes (e.g., positive social relationships, prosocial behavior within the peer group, school achievement) are the result of complex interactions between the environtype (i.e., situational demands), phenotype (i.e., child's behavior), and genotype (i.e., genes). For example, acceptance by peers (environtype) may bring positive feelings to the child and increase the sense of self-worth and security. If peers are rejecting of a child, and interactions with peers lead to expression of negative emotions or aggressive behavior from the child, family functioning can be impaired. Hence, the new social cognitive knowledge provided by the peer group is correlated with the child's genotype, but disturbs family interactions. This is an example of evocative and active types of gene-environment transactions (5), in which, failure to display competent outcomes are the response triggered by individuals from others

(e.g., family dysfunction) or through the selection of different environment by individuals (e.g., peer nominations). The transactional model offers great flexibility in explaining transactions between the genotype, and the phenotype and patterns of adaptation in response to contextual demands.

From Bandura's social learning perspective, competence could be defined as the learning of social rules and normative behaviors through imitation of adult or peers behaviors. As an example, teachers can reward prosocial behaviors in the classroom that encourage the same pattern of behaviors to other students; thus, students learn from observed responses in this setting. This model offers educational opportunities and development of social competence. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (i.e., the distance between a child's actual developmental level and the higher level of potential development under adult or peer guidance) is an example of what children can learn from others to develop social and cognitive competence. Strategies to enhance competence from this view may include building self-efficacy and adapting to new challenges. In this regard, self-efficacy theory is useful in understanding the role of personal control within affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains (6). The perception that one has the skills necessary to behave in a particular way or that one has the skills to control his/her thoughts may be helpful to promote competence by teaching social skills (e.g., communication skills, control of negative affectivity, and self-efficacy).

From an information-processing perspective, recent advances in social-cognitive models allow us to define social competence as the degree to which children engage in adaptive and competent social behavior, and to what extent they inhibit incompetent behavior when social situations challenge the child. Crick and Dodge (7) reformulated a previous model of social information processing of children's social adjustment. This information-processing model proposes that a child has a limited set of biological capabilities based on past experiences or a limited database of social schemas and social knowledge. Cues from the environment (inputs) trigger a behavioral response that reflects how the child processes those cues. Six steps were proposed from this model. First, internal and external cues are encoded. Second, an interpretation emerges from past schemas (memory) and new knowledge from the situation. Third, interpreting the social situation involves the clarification of goals. Goals act as arousal states; for example, children bring previous goal orientations as well as formulate new ones depending upon the social stimuli. Fourth, response access or construction, for example, previous successful coping strategies as well as new cues, favor future adaptive cognitive and behavioral responses. The fifth and sixth steps include response decisions and behavioral enactment that allow the child to reframe the situation and evaluate the efficacy of his/her responses.

In summary, definitions of social competence from four major developmental models were provided. Competent outcomes are a complex interplay among societal and family values and beliefs, appropriate behaviors in the family, and knowledge structures and information processes within the child.

Definitions of emotional competence, on the other hand, have been more challenging for developmental scientists. Emotional competence is a complex phenomenon consisting of distinct but interrelated skills including emotion understanding and emotion regulation.

Emotion understanding is defined as a child's capacity to understand that internal emotional experience and external affect expression do not necessarily correspond to each other. This is evident by research on display rules (8). The extent of display rules depend on social and family conventions. Common display rules involve intensifying emotional displays that are sociably desired, but not internally felt (e.g., receiving a disappointing gift), or minimizing the emotional display when is socially inappropriate (e.g., minimizing the facial expressi-

veness or the joy of getting and "A" on a test when the majority of classmates have failed). Emotion regulation includes both a child's ability to manage emotional expression (i.e., display rules), and emotional arousal (9). Saarni distinguished a variety of social skills required for emotion regulation: awareness of one's emotional states, capacity to identify other's people emotions, skills to bring cultural conventions into emotional responses, ability to appreciate other's emotional states, display rules understanding, and understanding that our emotions influence others. In order to understand how emotional competence skills influence interpersonal relationships, we describe the theoretical frameworks of children's socio-emotional development and empirical findings that support these processes from preschool to middle childhood.

To begin with, the theory of mind points to the emergence of children's understanding of other's intentions (e.g., selective attention to certain objects ignoring others). This theory seems to explain the emergence of children's social-emotional skills by their second birthday. As those perceptions evolve, the child engages in what is called joint attention. Joint attention is a social cognitive phenomenon, in which, even though the child and the adult attend something in common, the child has developed the ability to monitor the other person's attention and intentions to any particular object (10).

As the child acquires these perception skills, the social-communicative skills continue to evolve. The acquisition of language (e.g., lexical symbols, grammatical structures) and the continuum of joint attention episodes contribute to the development of emotional-competence (11). Pretend play interactions (12) may also account for an environment that foster early competent outcomes. During pretend play, 3-4 year-old children may pretend one thing to be other, or may pretend the real identity of the object in mind, or both (e.g., pretend that a car is an airplane). Nonetheless, outside of pretend situations, there is a bias to see one object as two things at once. These mental states during pretend play seem to be areas of special competence.

So far, we have distinguished the two main components of emotional competence by defining emotional understanding and emotion regulation. A brief overview of theories that contribute to the development of emotional competence also was provided. Theory of mind, joint attention and pretend play are important in explaining the underlie processes that drive competent outcomes from early childhood to middle childhood. Next, we briefly describe four empirical studies on socio-emotional development to explain competent outcomes in peer and family environments.

Garner, Carlson and Miner (13) conducted two studies to evaluate the effect of emotion socialization variables, social cognitive knowledge, and children's social competence. In the first study researchers hypothesized on a sample of 46 low-income preschoolers that family socialization practices would indirectly account for children's peer competence through the child's social cognitive knowledge. Measures of expression and situation knowledge were utilized to evaluate the unique contribution of child's emotional knowledge to peer competence. The second study looked for a direct relation between mother's emotion socialization practices and sibling competence in a sample of 41 low-income preschoolers. Results found an expected direct association between situation knowledge and peer competence. Findings from the second study revealed a significant positive relationship of gender and situation knowledge to the sibling caregiving behavior. Moreover, frequent expression of positive emotion was positively associated with sibling caregiving.

The quality of parent-child attachment seems to be important to acquiring social competence and emotion regulation skills. For example, Contreras, Kerns, Weimer, Gentzler and Tomich, (14) studied emotion regulation as a mediator between mother-child attachment, and peer competence in a sample

of 77 fifth graders. Constructive coping, which was a dimension of emotion regulation, mediated the relation between attachment and peer competence. Negative emotionality was correlated with peer competence, but was not correlated with attachment quality. More secure attachment was associated with constructive coping strategies and higher peer competence.

Additional research supports the view that parent emotion socialization practices seem to have implications for the development of emotion understanding and emotion regulation, which in turn affect child adjustment. For example, in a short-term longitudinal study with 69 low-income 9-13 year olds and their mothers, Cunningham, Kliewer, and Garner (15) found that mothers' emotion socialization practices – their awareness and acceptance of their own and their child's emotions, and their coaching of emotions – affected children's emotion understanding and emotion regulation. Emotion understanding and regulation, in turn, were associated with changes in grades, depression and anxiety, aggression and delinquency, and social skills. Emotional understanding mediated the relationship between mothers' emotional socialization and boys' internalizing behaviors and between mothers' emotional socialization and girls' social skills. In addition, emotion regulation mediated the relationships between emotional socialization and all four outcomes for boys.

In this review, we highlighted the importance of children's social and emotional competence from a developmental perspective. Understanding the socio-emotional context of a developing child seems warranted, mainly among vulnerable populations (e.g., low income preschoolers, maltreated children). To tailor interventions that foster competence, it is necessary to understand the role of emotion socialization and regulation within family, siblings, peers, and community contexts. For example, more research is needed that clearly identifies how parents in low-income communities socialize their children about emotion, and the implications of this socialization for children's adjustment. Understanding how socialization practices affect children's physiological responses also is needed. Future research also should focus on the role of socio-emotional processes (i.e., emotional understanding, display rules, theory of mind) among non-normative populations of children and the impact of these processes on competent outcomes and social skills.

One clear implication of the work that has been done is the important role parents play in the development of children's emotion understanding and emotion regulation. Thus, interventionists might begin by helping parents to recognize, accept, and cope with their own emotions more effectively, then move to assisting parents in communicating with their children about emotions.

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