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Emotional Regulation in Preschool Age Children

Esmeralda Mendez

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

This capstone focuses on teaching preschool students about emotional regulation and emotional understanding. Many preschool students have not developed the appropriate language to express their emotions making it difficult to regulate emotions. Poor emotional regulation at a young age can have negative effects on a child's life. For example, it can affect their behavior at school, their ability to deal with transitions during the school day, and their social relationships (Loomis, 2023). Young children have a difficult time regulating emotions because they are not sure of the feelings that they have and have not developed the skills to control their negative emotions nor the way to calm themselves down. It is important for children to learn techniques to regulate those emotions so they have the ability to calm down when feeling overwhelmed. Because of this need, I developed three lessons that can help young children become more aware of their emotions and how to regulate them. The first lesson will help children learn about their own emotions when it comes to feeling sad, happy, calm, afraid, and angry. In the second lesson they will be able to identify the causes of their peers' negative emotions. In the last lesson they will be able to learn and demonstrate strategies to calm down. The three lessons that will be conducted over 3 weeks at Northminster Daycare Center in Salinas, California. My target participants being English and Spanish speaking preschoolers aged three through four.

Needs Statement

As we grow we must learn a lot of new things but as a preschooler it can become difficult and overwhelming. Something that is important yet complicated for a child to learn is to be able to self regulate their emotions. This process can be difficult social-emotional skills to understand when not yet having full language and cognitive development. It is important to have an

understanding of the way we feel as well as how others around us might be feeling. If children have poor self-regulation at a young age it could affect them as they grow up, as well as the type of interactions they might have with others around them.

When children are around other children there could be many times where they feel a lot of different emotions. “Classrooms are inherently places where children experience happiness, frustration, sadness, and other emotions as they interact with others” (Bailey et al., 2016). This would not only affect their interactions but their days in school and the way that they will act when being around others. This can also lead to behavior problems because they will not be able to know how to communicate what they are feeling. Therefore its important to help preschoolers understand what emotions they are feeling and how to regulate them.

Being able to regulate emotions is important for preschoolers but it does require developing a few skills that must be learned before achieving this. Many of the skills that are needed to achieve emotional regulation include attention, planning, cognitive development, and language development (Graziano et al., 2007). In the preschool years, children start to be more curious about what is happening around them. Children start to become more affectionate towards others and start to develop a sense of humor as well as easily being encouraged or discouraged with certain things. They also start to demonstrate feelings, for example, fear, happiness, anger, and more. As they grow older in their preschool years, they start to develop self control, as well as learning how to share and take turns, developing friendships, as well as showing respect towards others. Preschool children have to learn many different things in the process so they are able to demonstrate good emotional regulation. It takes a lot for these children to actually develop good emotional regulation and they have a hard time especially because they do not always know exactly what emotion they are feeling and do not know how to regulate themselves (Loomis,

2023). Preschoolers still do not quite know how to control their impulsive feelings therefore, if they feel a certain way they will act on it without thinking about it. Older children on the other hand are more aware of their emotions and know how to control those emotions before acting upon them. They also know how to communicate about their feelings with others instead of just simply crying or screaming about something that they dislike. Older children have also gotten better at controlling their impulses and are able to have patience towards others. Overtime preschool children will be able to learn how to regulate their emotions successfully but in the meanwhile it is extremely important for children to get the help that they need to learn how to regulate those emotions appropriately.

It is important to remember that adults play an important role in young children's emotional development. It is important to have conversations about children's emotions because this can help them learn their feelings over time (Li et al., 2023). When parents are sensitive and respond to what a child is feeling and their emotional needs, the child is able to manage his or her emotions properly (Thummler et al., 2022). It is also important for parents to remember that children learn by observing their every move. Therefore, being able to regulate their own emotions will allow their child to see how they react to those emotions allowing them to see what they should do when having those emotions. On the other hand, teachers also play a special role when helping children develop emotion regulation by giving children a safe space where emotions can be experienced as well as discussed. Teachers are able to show children affection through love and emotions. Therefore children will feel comfortable communicating and able to ask for help when needed.

Understanding our emotions can be extremely difficult for children at a young age. It is important for infants and young children to learn what someone's facial and vocal expressions

mean to be able to develop emotional knowledge (LoBue & Ogren, 2021). This can require a lot of practice but over time children learn how they feel as well as using the appropriate words to describe their feelings and new techniques on how to calm down when being upset. When being able to achieve this children will not be overwhelmed and confused with how they feel. They will also be able to interact with their classmates in a positive way when having conflict that can cause strong emotions. This can take some time and it can be really challenging but at the end of the day this will help young children become better when feeling strong emotions that can lead to conflict.

As children enter preschool it can be extremely difficult for them to recognize as well as understand their emotions. It is important to remember that preschoolers might not have the vocabulary to identify when feeling angry or frustrated. Therefore it is important for children to get support from adults to learn how they might be feeling when experiencing conflict. When preschoolers learn how to understand their emotions it will become much easier for them to self regulate. When children have a better emotional understanding, this is more likely that they are more socially skilled by their teachers, as well as being more likable by their peers, and they are able to handle aggressive interactions better (LoBue & Ogren, 2021). When children learn about emotions and how they feel that will be able to help them have a smoother day. Young children will also be able to let people around them know what they need as well as what they want or even things that they do not want. This will also allow children to build better relationships with their classmates, as well as with their teachers and parents. Being aware of their emotions will help them talk about it more clearly and can allow them to avoid different types of conflicts as well as being able to resolve them on their own. Just because children learn about their emotions

it does not mean that it will always be easy for them to move past them, but it does allow them to understand them more as well as work through them without having meltdowns.

When children understand how they feel they are able to understand how others feel as well. In life, children need to develop different types of strategies to be able to manage their emotions so they are able to build social emotional skills. As children become more social and more aware of others emotions they are able to understand the different strategies on how to work through emotions. They will also be able to know how to calm down when there is a problem that has to be solved. It is important to remember that when wanting to teach different strategies to a child we should start off by labeling an emotion for the child when we see that they are showing that particular emotion. When parents encourage their children to use their language to try to deal with distress, it can allow them to build what they need to self-regulate their emotions (Cole et al., 2009). A great way to teach about emotion can be through play or books. After understanding the emotion it is important to work together on different ways to calm down when feeling that emotion. This can allow the child to know how they feel as well as what to do on their own if they ever feel like that.

Learning to regulate your emotions can be a really complicated process for preschoolers. Children end up developing those skills at different times as they grow in their preschool years. The ability to manage negative feelings can depend on genetics, natural temperament, and the environment that children grow up in. When parents, teachers and other caregivers help children through this process it can allow children to learn to manage their emotions and responses in a healthy way. It is important for parents and teachers to communicate with their children about the emotions that they are feeling because that will allow children to express their emotions and understand what those emotions are. When children see adults having different emotions for

different situations children are able to see what type of emotions they could have in certain situations (Denham et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important for parents and teachers to allow themselves to feel their emotions around children so they could have an example of what emotions look like for certain situations. As adults show the children what emotions they are feeling it is important for adults to also show how they cope with each emotion and how to regulate.

Emotional regulation is important for children to learn during the early developmental years. It could be extremely difficult for preschoolers to be able to recognize and understand emotions, as well as what actions cause certain emotions. Children at this age do not understand what they are feeling therefore they act upon their emotions, without even thinking of any consequences or what those emotions truly mean. In order for children to be able to understand emotional regulation I was able to implement three lessons within three days for preschool children. My first lesson was focused on recognizing the emotions of being happy, sad, angry, afraid, calm, or in love. The second lesson focused on recognizing what was causing a certain emotion and different scenarios. Lastly, the third lesson focuses on learning different coping skills to help regulate emotions. All of these lessons are done with children ages 3 to 4 in a preschool classroom at Northminister preschool.

Theory

Jean Piaget's theory of development focuses on cognitive development from birth through the end of adolescence. According to Piaget, there are four stages of development that children go through, in which each stage has its own unique characteristics and abilities. Cognition is when children's thinking process and cognitive development is happening. In this

stage children think, explore and figure things out. This theory focuses on the understanding of how children obtain knowledge and the understanding of the nature of intelligence. Jean Piaget's preoperational stage is the second stage of cognitive development in this stage children use symbols to represent words, images, and ideas. Children in this stage are the age of 2 to 7 years old. In the stage children start to think about things symbolically. Children start to get better with language as well as thinking. Even though there are a lot of things that children are learning through the stage they still struggle with logic and understanding the point of you or others.

Piaget's preoperational stage applies to my project participants whose age range from 3 to 4 years old. In this stage children should start to use more language when naming their emotions that they feel but have a difficult time understanding the logic behind each word and feeling. Children are also able to think about the things that are happening around them symbolically and give them a meaning. Even though children are thinking and seeing what is happening around them they have a difficult time understanding things from another person's perspective than their own. In Piaget theory, this would be called the preoperational stage called egocentric meaning that children do not really think about how others may feel or what they see but only what they feel themselves as well as thinking that their way of thinking is the only way to think (Hammond 2014). Piaget's theory also influenced my lessons, because I was able to understand and put together activities that will help children understand these emotions by learning how to incorporate them into each lesson. Being able to understand this theory made me understand the way that children think through this age allowing me to see things in a different perspective.

Consideration of Diversity

This project was conducted at Northminster Daycare/Preschool Center in Salinas California. This center offers infant care, toddler care, and the pre-K program. It was shown that an estimated 60% of California children ages 3-5 were enrolled in preschool or kindergarten in 2016-2020 (Kids Data, 2020). At Northminster Daycare/Preschool there are 36 children attending. There are 22 (61%) that are white, 12 (33%) that are Mexican and 2 (5%) that are black. I had six participants in which four were girls and two (33%) were boys. Two (33%) of my participants were Hispanic and four (66%) white. All of my activities were given in English because all of my participants spoke and understood English.

My project involves children who are learning how to develop skills to regulate their emotions in the classroom. This project is targeted for children, ages 3 to 4 years old preschool students. Preschool students are able to understand curriculum concepts when we demonstrate them with images. The reason why children are able to understand things with images is because as Piaget states, children do use symbols to represent different types of words, images, and ideas, allowing them to engage and pretend to play and learn different things in their surroundings. With this in mind I had to remember to keep the lessons short, vocabulary appropriate and with lots of images. The images with facial expressions shown had both girls and boys and different ethnicities so the children know that that relates to both genders and not just one. It's important for children to know that no matter what gender or race we are, we all have emotions whether it's being happy, mad, sad or excited.

Learning Outcomes

I created 30 minute lesson plans on emotions and strategies to help regulate emotions across three days for preschool children. This project has three learning outcomes:

1. Children will be able to label the emotion (mad, sad, happy, angry, calm or afraid) that go with pictures of facial expressions.
2. Children will be able to identify the causes of their peers' negative emotions.
3. Children will be able to identify 2 strategies to help regulate negative emotions.

Methods

Location and Participants

The emotional regulation lessons took place at Northminster Daycare Center in Salinas, California. I have been working at the center for over three years as a daycare provider; therefore, I recruited the six participants from the center. My participants were 3 to 4 years old and they attended both the daycare and preschool. Out of the six participants, there were two girls and four boys. Five of the participants who were involved spoke English, and the other participant spoke both English and Spanish.

Procedures and Materials

The emotional regulation lessons were presented to the six students within a three day period. I had three lessons that took place during three days in the same week. Before starting any of my lessons I spoke with the Director of the preschool/daycare and asked if I could give the lessons in the morning while the children had free play. I was able to have 30 minutes for each lesson with the six children each morning. I was also able to take the children in a quiet room to give each lesson.

The first lesson focused on labeling an emotion that goes with a picture of facial expressions of mad, sad, happy, excited or frustrated. I started preparing my materials while the children played indoors with other teachers. When I finished setting everything up I was able to

bring the six children to the classroom at 9 o'clock. I then asked them to sit around the table where three children could be on my left side and three other children to be on my right. I started off the lesson by reading *The Color Monster (appendix A)* to the children. After each emotion that was shown in the book, I paused and discussed the emotion as well as demonstrated each emotion by acting it out. I then asked them to copy my facial expressions and repeat what emotion that was. Lastly, to assess each child when it came to recognizing their motions I used a flash card activity. For this activity, each child picked out three of the emotions that were used in the book and demonstrated the emotion and what it was called.

On the second day, the lesson focused on identifying the cause of their peers' negative emotions. I started off by talking about the emotions we learned the day before to refresh their memories. We then talked about scenarios that could cause a child to be sad or mad. As we talked about the scenarios, I showed them images of each action, so they are able to see it themselves and see how that looks. As we discussed the four scenarios, we talked about them to see if any child has ever felt that way. The first scenario is a child screaming at a friend, the second scenario is a child taking a toy away, the third scenario is a child destroying a friend building lastly, the last scenario is a child hitting another child (*appendix B*). To assess each child on recognizing scenarios of negative emotions, I asked each child to identify two actions that caused the emotion of being sad or angry.

On my third day, the lesson focused on coping skills for negative emotions. On this day, I began to set up at 8:50am. I started off by getting the book called *Teach Your Dragon (appendix C)* about feelings and having my flashcards on three different strategies. At 9 o'clock I asked the six students to come with me and we sat on the same table with three children on my ride and three children on my left. I started off by reading *Teach Your Dragon* about feelings, focusing on

the emotions angry and sad. We talked about the emotions that were heard and what the dragon did to help regulate that emotion. After reading the story, I introduced them to three techniques to help regulate any negative emotion that they are having throughout the day. The first emotion was to take a deep breath, count to 10 or the teddy bear technique. I spoke to them and explained how these coping techniques would help their body relieve the tension that they are feeling when being angry. I also explained how one of the techniques allows our body to relax and makes us feel less sad. After introducing the techniques, I ask them if they have ever felt mad or sad either at school or at home. To assess each student at the end of the lesson I had them demonstrate strategies that they could use when feeling sad and mad.

Results

Learning outcome one was that preschool children will be able to label three emotions when being mad, sad, happy, excited or frustrated. To assess the children's learning I had them tell me three of their favorite emotions from the book *The Color Monster Feels* (appendix A). When they picked their favorite emotion I would then ask them to show me that face expression. Each child was able to get three points with this activity. If they were able to tell me their favorite expression and what it was called as well as them showing me the expression themselves. For learning outcome 1, 5 out of the 6 (83%) preschool students were able to name 3 out of 3 facial expressions and show the facial expressions themselves. On the other hand, 1 out of the 6 students got 2 out of 3 when naming and expressing that facial expression. After the assessment was completed, it became clear that the learning outcome 1 was fully met. Even though one child did not get it a passing score the student was able to name and show the facial expression themselves.

In learning outcomes two preschoolers will be able to identify the cause of their peers' negative emotions used in flash cards in (*appendix B*). To assess the children's learning I asked them to pick out one of their favorite pictures and tell me what is happening and what is causing the negative emotion. I calculated a passing score for the assessment as one point per student and those who did not pass would get a zero. For learning outcome 2, 6 out of 6 students (100%) were able to explain what was happening in each picture and tell me the emotion that the child was feeling and what caused that negative emotion. After that assessment was completed, it became clear that learning outcome 2 was fully met. All of the preschool students were able to make the connection between what emotion was being shown and what caused that emotion in each scenario.

Learning outcome three was that preschool students would be able to identify two strategies to help regulate negative emotions. To assess the preschool children's learning I asked each one of them at the end of my lesson which coping strategy they would use when they felt the emotion of sadness or anger. For learning outcome 3, 4 out of 6 children (66%) were able to demonstrate 2 coping strategies and 2 out of 6 children (33%) demonstrated 1 out of 2 coping strategies that they would use when feeling angry or sad. After the assessment, I concluded that learning outcome three was fully met. Most of the preschool children were able to identify and demonstrate different coping strategies that could be used to regulate their negative emotions.

Discussion

This capstone project focuses on preschoolers' development of emotional regulation. My project was successful, because students learned about emotional regulation and different strategies on how to self regulate when feeling those emotions. My first learning outcome was

for preschoolers to be able to identify the emotions, mad, sad, happy, excited or frustrated. The second learning outcome was for preschool children to be able to identify the cause of their friends' negative emotion. The last learning outcome was for preschool children to be able to identify two strategies to help regulate negative emotions. After each lesson I have concluded that this project was a success. Out of my three learning outcomes they were all fully met. I feel that for the first two learning outcomes all of the six participants showed interest in learning about emotions and what they can look like. I feel that they really enjoyed learning about how each facial expression could look and doing it themselves. For my second learning outcome, the children really enjoyed being able to see different scenarios when it came to a certain emotion. I feel that most of these children can relate to this because these are things that they either have done or children have done to them making a connection to the subject. Besides that I feel that my project was a success because I was able to be with the children alone for 30 minutes making it easier for them to pay attention and for me to give out the information that I needed to give out.

Even though my project was a success, there were some challenges when giving out my third learning outcome. For my last activity, I feel that the children were distracted because the book that I had selected was not the most interesting and engaging for them. There were a few children who paid attention but as the book went on they started to lose interest since their other friends were not paying attention. I had one child that could not sit still throughout the whole lesson. He would try to get on top of the table and sit on his chair on his knees as well as going under the table. At that point, some of the children saw him doing that and were not really interested in what I was saying which made it really difficult for them to listen to the different types of strategies that they could use when feeling angry or sad.

For future directions of this project some thing that I would change would be the materials and the procedure for learning outcome three. Although learning outcome three was fully met I do believe that this activity could be more interesting and appropriate for the children if I were to change the book as well as have a different way to teach the calming techniques in a more fun and interesting way. Something else that I would do would be to have a curriculum that includes emotional regulation activities and lessons for all of the children in the center for the school year. It is important to be able to have lessons and curriculum to see what we could do to help these children learn their emotions and how to have self soothing strategies to help themselves. As well as be able to see what is working as well as what is not working and how to change it. I believe that expanding this in a preschool setting can be extremely helpful for the children as they grow and develop.

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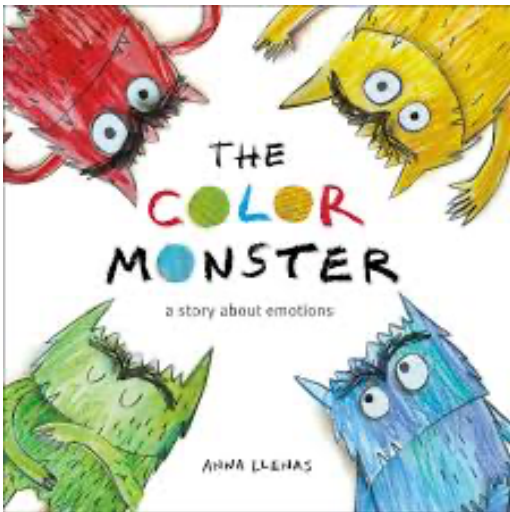
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Appendix A




Lesson 1



THE COLOR MONSTER FEELS




SIMON SAYS WITH THE COLOR MONSTER
 Help the Color Monster figure out what he's feeling! When the leader says an emotion, you show us what that emotion looks like. So, if the leader says, "The Color Monster feels HAPPY," you jump around for joy. But if the leader says, "The Color Monster feels SAD," you need to cry your loudest, saddest tears.

HAPPY **SAD** **ANGRY**

Jump and clap! Cry lots of tears! Growl and stomp around!

AFRAID **CALM** **IN LOVE**

Hide behind your hands! Close your eyes and breathe deep! Hug yourself and say "I LOVE YOU!"

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	Happy	Sad	Angry	Afraid	Calm	In Love
Child 1	name/expression	name/expression	name/expression			
Child 2	name/expression	name/expression	name/expression			
Child 3	name/expression	name/expression	name/expression			
Child 4	name/expression	name/expression	name/expression			
Child 5	name/expression		name/expression		name/expression	
Child 6		name/expression		name/expression		

Appendix B

Lesson 2



	Push friend	Take toy away	Kick blocks	Scream at friend	Cant play with a toy	
Child 1				X		
Child 2	x					
Child 3			x			
Child 4				X		
Child 5		x				
Child 6		x				

Appendix C

Lesson 3

CALMING STRATEGIES

When I feel upset, I can choose to..



take deep
breaths



read a book



hug a stuffed
animal



count to 10

	Count to 10	Breath in and out	Teddy bear	Read a book
Child 1	x			x
Child 2		x	x	
Child 3		x		x
Child 4	x			
Child 5	x			
Child 6			x	x