



RESEARCH BRIEF

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“How Would You Feel? What Would You Do?”

Development and Underpinnings of Preschoolers’ Social Information Processing

Purpose

Social information processing (SIP) describes a series of steps by which young children make sense of their social encounters. An example of SIP is when a child sees his mother crying the child understand his mother feels sad and decides to hug her because he knows that makes him feel better when he is sad. SIP explains how children make behavioral and emotional decisions during social interactions, taking into account one’s social goals, the perceived intentions of a social partner, and the range of options available. Children who are better able to process social information have more success in social interactions, attract and retain friendships, and are more likely to enjoy school.

Although SIP is widely studied, there is a lack of practical tools for assessing SIP in young children, particularly preschoolers. To this end, a preschool SIP measure was developed to enable researchers to measure preschoolers’ SIP and its potential foundations. This investigation is among the first of its kind to examine feasibility of direct assessment including emotional and behavioral aspects of SIP in early childhood, highlighting its development and self-regulatory/emotion knowledge underpinnings.

Method

Preschoolers from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds participated in the study ($N=316$). Participants were assessed on their SIP, emotion knowledge, and self-regulation skills at the beginning and end of the preschool year. SIP was assessed using the new Challenging Situation Task (CST), a forced choice pictorial measure.

In the CST, children are presented with an unambiguous peer provocation situation through images and a short story told by the assessor (see Figure 1). Then children are asked to choose how they would feel if that happened to them using four emotion face cards (Happy, Sad, Angry, or Just Ok; see Figure 2). Next children were asked what they would do and were asked to choose among four behavior cards (socially competent, aggressive, passive, and manipulative/crying).



Figure 1. During the CST children were presented with a peer provocation scenario via pictures and short scenarios. For example the top scenario reads as follows “Taylor was building a very tall tower of blocks. Bobby knocked it down”

Key Points

- Children’s expression, management, and understanding of emotions are crucial to processing information about social interactions.
- The Challenging Situation Task (CST) is a brand new assessment measuring social information processing using pictorial images to assess children’s ability to predict their own behavior and emotions.
- The CST may be used by researchers and educators to assess preschoolers emotion knowledge.
- Age differences in emotion and behavior choices showed that younger preschoolers were more prone to choose happy responses, whereas older preschoolers chose more adaptive behavior responses.



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Results

Results from this study indicate that the CST is a valid and reliable direct assessment of SIP for preschool aged children. Younger preschoolers were more likely to choose happy responses in peer provocation situations, whereas older preschoolers tended to indicate they would feel sad or angry when provoked and chose more socially competent behavior responses. Preschoolers who were more knowledgeable about emotions overall often chose more adaptive emotion and behavior choices. Similarly, children's self-regulation and executive control were positively associated with CST emotion and behavior response choices.

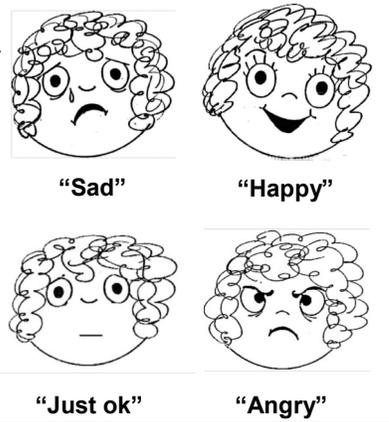


Figure 2. During the CST children were asked to choose how they would feel about each situation using these schematics.

Implications

Parents and Educators

The study found that children's own expression and understanding of emotions is vital to healthy social interactions. Parents and educators can play a critical role in helping preschoolers develop adaptive social-information processing by helping to label feelings and scaffold decision making. It is possible that assessments like the CST could be used in preschool classrooms to identify children who need additional support developing their social information processing abilities.

Researchers

Researchers should consider adopting the CST for assessing young children's emerging social information processing skills. Even within this short longitudinal design, our results imply that preschoolers, like their grade school-age counterparts, become more capable at inhibiting their prepotent responses and making relationship-enhancing decisions as they develop. The CST is a viable option when there is a need for a brief, easy to administer, and relatively enjoyable assessment of children's SIP. More research is needed to understand the potential indirect pathways from executive control and emotion knowledge to social decision making.

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