What About The Children?

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'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of the under-threes in our ever-changing society'

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Caregiver speech predicts the emergence of children's emotion vocabulary.

Throughout life, humans use language to communicate rich and dynamic mental experiences. This communication allows us to capture our experiences and share them with others. Children's ability to verbally label emotions is an important part of their socioemotional development. Those able to do so have more effective emotion regulation, better peer integration in kindergarten, and greater socio-emotional readiness for school.

From a very early age children have the ability to connect emotional experiences and emotion language at the same time. A child may observe a happy facial expression and hear the emotion label 'happy'. Caregivers can help to support children's simultaneous emotion and language learning This group of five studies by Nencheva *et al* explored how children develop emotion labels and how this relates to caregivers' use of 'valenced' language – that is to say, whether the emotion associated with the word was negative, positive, or neutral. Early childhood in particular may be an important time for children's development of valence-based representations. A child's first five years of life is a particular period where children's non-linguistic emotion cues and emotional experiences develop alongside their expanding vocabularies.

When children observe that a new emotion has occurred alongside another positive emotion for example, this gives them key information about the meaning of the new emotion. Infants may track how often 'emotion' words co-occur so they can understand the meaning of a particular emotion concept. Very young children learn what a label refers to, based on the information in surrounding sentences. By the age of two, toddlers can work out that two words are similar if they both occur with the same related words.

Caregivers may group connected words together around the introduction of unfamiliar emotion labels. For example, connecting the word 'happy' with 'wonderful' and 'enjoyable' enables children to learn to group these concepts together and to consider them separately from concepts such as 'yucky' or 'sad'. This helps to give children meaning to emotion labels of a cluster of words as well as building up a network of word similarity over the course of their development. And research shows that young children appear to learn more quickly words which have positive, rather than negative, connotations.

Study 1 showed that children's early semantic networks start off with relatively few highly positive or highly negative words, but a much higher bank of neutral words. Over time, children learn more valenced words and their networks are represented by a much greater range of positive and negative words, with this developmental change leading to important consequences for their ability to learn and express emotion-related information. The second study showed that children were more likely to produce an emotion label if they already knew words with a similar amount of emotionality, both positive and negative. Furthermore, the third study showed that caregivers tend to provide a valenced context to their speech both preceding and following the production of emotion labels or of mental state labels.

Study four examined how related words surrounding an emotion label may help children to construct the label's complex meaning. Early production of an emotion label may produce opportunities for introducing related valenced words in close proximity. However, because only a small number of emotion labels were tested, the researchers found it difficult to establish whether there were other confounding factors, such as the valence of the label itself. The fifth and final study which investigators reported on suggested that there is only weak evidence for the effects of caregiver valenced context on child valenced context within the labelling sentence. This may potentially result from the fact that child speech is still quite short in length at this young age.

These results suggest that caregivers who use more valenced language around emotion labels provide opportunities for the child to create greater semantic connections between the label and words, therefore giving a more successful use of the label in appropriate contexts. Further to this, children who have a better understanding of emotion labels may extract greater contextual elaboration from their caregivers. There is likely to be a two-way reinforcement between the caregiver and child's valenced speech so that they co-create learning moments which activate and expand a network of valenced concepts around emotion labels.

The investigators conclude that this research offers an important way forward in understanding the context of how young children learn novel labels. Future work could use the same approaches to examine the roles of different contextual caregiver cues in shaping children's learning of different kinds of words. Patterns of words and context have been shown to support the emergence of emotion labels and similarly valenced words by children. This will enable other researchers to quantify how caregivers can use words dynamically to support children's acquisition and understanding of complex, abstract vocabulary, particularly those connected with emotions.

Dr Clare Cunningham

Policy implications:
This research demonstrates the importance of caregiver language in the early years, and that discussing emotions is as important as aspects of language designed to increase vocabulary or cognitive skills.

Prof J Barnes