

Emotion knowledge fosters attentiveness

July 6 2015

Young children, who possess a good understanding of their own emotions and of those of their fellow human beings early on, suffer fewer attention problems than their peers with a lower emotional understanding. Evidence of this phenomenon was found through a study of Leuphana University of Lüneburg and George Mason University, USA, under the auspices of Prof. Dr. Maria von Salisch, Professor of Developmental Psychology at Leuphana University of Lüneburg. The study was recently published in the journal *Kindheit & Entwicklung* (*Childhood & Development*).

The findings stem from the research project "Elefant - Emotionales Lernen ist fantastisch" (in English: "Emotional Learning is fantastic") funded by the Lower Saxony Research Network for Education and Development and the German League for the Child, Family, and Society. Their study on the development of social and emotional skills led the researchers from Lüneburg and Fairfax, VA, USA to survey 261 children from 33 kindergartens in Lower Saxony as well as their parents and educators. Two separate surveys intervalled by 14 months were conducted. The study started when the children's average age was five years. The capacity to understand emotions, behavioral self-regulation, complex memory span, and receptive language comprehension were tested. The children's sociodemographic background and gender were also taken into account.

The investigation focused on the question as to what factors facilitate or inhibit kindergarteners in learning to master their attention. The study shows that children, who possessed a comprehensive knowledge of

emotions at the time of the first survey, experienced fewer difficulties mastering their attention a good year later, compared to those who initially had a low knowledge of emotions. The decrease in [attention problems](#) in children with extensive emotion knowledge goes even beyond age-related decline. Emotion knowledge defines the ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others and verbalize them, as well as control one's own emotional behavioral expression. The findings of the study remain valid if the children's earlier attention problems at the time of the first survey are adjusted for known factors, such as gender, socio-economic status and language competency and included in the evaluation. "The predictability of one's individual experience and behavior and that of other people increases as capacity to understand emotion progresses; this ties less attention and promotes prosocial behavior" is Professor von Salisch's explanation of the findings. "Children with limited emotion knowledge, on the other hand, often seem distracted. Their attention is occupied by the explanation of their own confusing [emotional](#) states, the negative emotions of their fellow human beings and the regulation of their own resulting emotions".

The study expands previous research findings on the development of attention-deficit problems in children. "The previously common assumption in research was that a deficit in executive functions (EF) was especially crucial for the development of ADHD" says von Salisch. "EF develops in preschool at a fast pace, and includes - among others - the volitional control of attention, working memory and ability to suppress cognitive and motor impulses, also called interference control. With our study we can now prove that, in addition to EF, so too is emotion knowledge a key explanatory factor for the development of attention problems. Emotion knowledge, should, therefore, far more than previously, occupy a central role in future studies".

More information: von Salisch, Maria; Haenel, Martha; Denham, Susanne A. (2015). Emotionswissen, exekutive Funktionen und

Veränderungen bei Aufmerksamkeitsproblemen von Vorschulkindern (Emotion Knowledge, Executive Functions and Changes in Attention Problems of Preschoolers), in: Kindheit und Entwicklung 24 (2), 78-85.

Provided by Leuphana Universität Lüneburg

Citation: Emotion knowledge fosters attentiveness (2015, July 6) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-07-emotion-knowledge-fosters-attentiveness.html>

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