

Study highlights new strategies for helping children process negative emotions

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A recent study of indigenous people in southern Chile challenges some Western assumptions about children's emotional capabilities and highlights the potential value of spending time outdoors to help children regulate their emotions.

"I think many people, particularly in Western cultures, think children are less capable than they actually are," says Amy Halberstadt, a professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and corresponding author of a paper on the work. "Our study shows that this is not universal.

"For example, our work with the Mapuche people makes clear that they have different expectations about their children's ability to manage fear. And the role they feel nature plays in helping children maintain their emotional equilibrium is also distinct."

For the study, researchers conducted a survey of 271 parents and teachers in southern Chile. One hundred six of the study participants were Mapuche, an indigenous people of the region. The remaining 165 were non-Mapuche.

Survey questions were developed based on interviews and focus groups. The questions were aimed at gaining a better understanding of cultural differences regarding the beliefs that adults have about children and children's emotions.

One finding was that Mapuche parents and teachers were significantly more likely than non-Mapuche to expect their children to be able to control fear.

"To be clear, we're not talking about children being stoic about their fear," Halberstadt says. "We're talking about an expectation that children understand a situation and either take action or accept the situation without becoming afraid."

"The Mapuche believe that part of growing up is learning not to be afraid, and this is something that is actively fostered," says Dejah Oertwig, co-author of the paper and a Ph.D. student at NC State.

"Mapuche parents support the development of emotional skills like this

one through the way they help children interpret the world around them."

The study found that Mapuche also place a great deal of value on a child's relationship with nature.

"The Mapuche believe children should respect, but not fear, nature," Halberstadt says. "They also believe nature can help children become calm, cope with sadness in a positive way and otherwise regulate negative emotions.

"Parents here in the U.S. may want to view these approaches as possible strategies they can use at home," Halberstadt says. "I don't think there are necessarily prescriptions for success in any one approach, but broadening our appreciation of what's possible for kids could yield positive outcomes for young people. It might be a good idea to see if spending more time outside, and respecting and appreciating nature, do help us regulate our own emotions or help our [children](#) find balance."

The paper, "Beliefs About Children's Emotions in Chile," is published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

More information: Amy G. Halberstadt et al, Beliefs About Children's Emotions in Chile, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00034](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00034)

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