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Emotional Outbursts and Their Effects on Peer Relations in the Preschool Classroom

Jordan Paris

University of Arkansas

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Abstract

Emotions and emotion regulation play a role in a child's interactions with their peers. This study uses observations collected in two preschool classrooms to address the questions of what causes emotional outbursts and how emotional outbursts affect the children involved. In this study, an emotional outburst is defined as an occurrence in which the child is making loud noises and having a physical reaction to an event that has just occurred. Participants were 22 children from the ages of three to five years old. Observational data were collected, and analyzed through categorization and interpretation, and results from this study suggest that there are many common causes of emotional outbursts in the children observed. The findings do not indicate obvious effects of emotional outbursts on children in the vicinity of the outburst.

Introduction

There has been a large quantity of research conducted on the emotions of young children. We know that peer interactions are critical in preschool. Studies show that children need to learn to manage peer conflict because it is an essential task for childhood, especially during the preschool years (Miller & Olson, 2000). It has also been shown in research that children's negative emotions may cause them to be perceived differently by those around them. In a study by Miller, Fine, Kiely Gouley, Seifer, Dickstein, and Shields, the authors found that children who showed more expression of negative emotions were perceived as less emotionally regulated by their teachers (2006). Cole, Zahn-Waxler, and Smith (1994) suggest that children who are less able to maintain control of their emotions and have frequent outbursts could be perceived as less well-adjusted socially. When children experience rejection at such an early age this plays a role in their perceptions by others. Heinze, Miller, Seifer, Dickstein, and Locke (2015) show a relation between the child reported victimization/rejection and the negative peer nominations. Together, these studies help to show the importance of the emotions of young children and how they affect the perceptions of other children.

The ability to establish and maintain a healthy peer relationship is an important element of psychological well-being and adjustment for a person of any age (Szewczyk-Sokolowski, Bost, & Wainwright, 2005). We know that children at a young age are still learning how to regulate their emotions and are prone to emotional outbursts. For instance, one study specifically talks about how a simple dispute over a toy in preschool can quickly escalate into both physical and verbal aggression (Ramani, Brownell, & Campbell, 2010). It is seen that in a preschool setting, children that have poor emotional knowledge skills could be more reluctant to enter into peer play situations if they are not able to read cues that provide information about the

interaction. These actions that are based on misreading emotion cues can result in peer rejection (Heinze et al., 2015). It is also known that early peer interactions are typically highly emotional, both positively and negatively (Ramani et al., 2010).

Emotional competence can be seen in many different ways in a child's daily life. Emotional competence refers to many emotion-related skills and behaviors that relate in predicted ways to positive child outcomes (Miller et al., 2006). Children's emotions are important to study and Ramani et al. (2010) underscore this importance, suggesting that a child's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors may be considered critical for successful and competent interactions with peers during this period of early childhood. It also may set a precedent for developing their peer social competence for later stages of life (Ramani et al., 2010). In particular, research on emotion regulation has shown the preschool years to be of critical importance. This is because during this age, children acquire emotion regulation strategies and begin learning to use them to manage their emotions (Sala, Pons, & Molina, 2014). Although it is clear that preschool age children are particularly important to study when considering emotional outbursts, there is very little research in this area. More data is needed, so that we can understand how the emotional outburst correlates to peer interactions and opinions in preschool classrooms. The two research questions that will be addressed in this study are:

1. What is the immediate cause of children's emotional outbursts in select preschool classrooms in a lab school setting?
2. What are peer reactions to emotional outbursts near them in select preschool classrooms in a lab school setting?

Literature Review

The Importance of Emotions in Young Children

In several studies, it has been seen that early aggressive behavior in children that remains stable can cause the child to experience peer rejection and other peer problems in childhood (as cited in Ramani, Brownell, & Campbell, 2010, p. 219). The Ramani et al. (2010) study examines children's emotions and behaviors but does not look specifically at emotional outbursts, either positive or negative, and how they impact peer relations. They showed that negative emotional dysregulation resulted in negative peer behavior (Ramani et al., 2010). Therefore, negative emotional behavior has a negative impact on peer relations. Although there is a gap in the literature on emotional outbursts and the relationship with peer relations, there is research that addresses temperament and peer relations.

A child's temperament also plays a role in their peer relations. The Szewczyk-Sokolowski, et al. study draws a link between temperament and the child's ability to regulate their emotions in appropriate ways (2005). They also address that successful peer interaction requires the ability to regulate the different emotional states. The researchers in this study assessed the children's peer acceptance by presenting the child with photos of their classmates. Then the researchers asked the child to pick three children they especially liked and three children that they especially did not like (Szewczyk-Sokolowski et al., 2005). This allowed the researchers to assess the children's positive judgments of their peers. Their results concluded that in regard to children's negative peer nominations, the analysis revealed that a child's difficult temperament was a somewhat strong predictor (Szewczyk-Sokolowski et al., 2005). This suggests that children's temperaments affect peer's opinions and interactions with one another,

especially in the case of negative temperaments. A child's temperament can influence the way they express their emotions.

The Importance of Healthy Peer Relationships

Miller and Olson's study focuses on whether or not intense displays of emotions, both positive and negative, during peer conflict can predict a child's social adjustment (2000). It is known that intense displays of emotion are typically noticed by those around the person displaying the emotions, with both positive and negative emotions. This is common among people of all ages and in all walks of life. Children who are less able to maintain control of their emotions and have frequent outbursts could be perceived as less well-adjusted socially (Miller & Olson, 2000). Research has shown that there are links between peer competence and emotional expressiveness in a variety of situations and that this link suggests a correlation between high emotional intensity and negative peer relations (Miller & Olson, 2000). This study focuses specifically on "gleeful taunting" as the display of emotion that they measure against the child's social adjustment. They found that gleeful taunting is associated with ratings of disruptive behavior given by teachers and negative social status nominations given by the child's peers (Miller & Olson, 2000). However, this study did not address the long-term effects of being viewed negatively by one's peers. They seem to suggest that negative behavior has a negative impact on a child's social status. It leaves unanswered the question of the impacts of a negative social status and how much this would affect peer relationships.

Hartup examined the concept of peer interactions and how much friends can influence one another (2005). For example, one specific aspect they look at is the mix of individuals in a small intervention group where some of the children in the group have conduct issues and some do not. Then they see that the mix of individuals affects the behavior changes among each other

(Hartup, 2005). This article mainly references the research done on adults. It also reveals that individuals who have contact with deviant peers increases their deviance beyond what would be expected if they had no contact (Hartup, 2005). Overall, this indicates that people can influence one another, and a deviant person can cause their friends to become more deviant. This is relevant to the research being done in the current study because it shows the possibility of children's friends impacting the way they view the child that is having an emotional outburst.

Together, these articles show the importance of having healthy peer relationships for children. The Hanish et al. (2004) study looks at the risk factors for peer victimization and the effects of being victimized in preschool. They go on to say, "early childhood marks a critical age for studying affect because a primary developmental task for young children involves learning how to regulate expressions of negative emotions" (Hanish et al., 2004). This shows why it is so important to study the preschool age group. Victimization could possibly increase the chances that children approach social situations negatively in their future. This is why it is so important to make sure that the children are having healthy peer interactions. The results of this study, "combined with the findings of many other studies demonstrating risk associated with peer victimization in relatively advantaged samples, suggest that being victimized by peers is a serious problem for many children" (Hanish et al., 2004). Overall, this article shows how serious peer victimization is and the importance of having healthy peer relationships in early childhood.

Emotional Competence

Most child research on peers focuses predominantly on the broad topic of emotional competence or more specifically on things such as taunting or negative behaviors. The Miller et al. study (2006) focuses on the emotional competence of low-income preschoolers. This study focused on the different facets of emotional competence. These different areas were negative

emotion expression, emotion knowledge, and emotion regulation (Miller et al., 2006). They found that children who showed more expression of negative emotions were perceived as less emotionally regulated by their teachers (Miller et al., 2006). The Miller et al. (2006) study did not look as closely at the peer reactions to negative emotions shown by their classmates. The current study plans to extend this research by evaluating how an emotional outburst affects the peers as well.

The Spinard et al. study “examines the relations of effortful control and impulsivity to children’s resiliency, adult-rated popularity, and socially appropriate behavior in early childhood and 2 years later” (2006, p. 499). Overall, this research looks at emotions and the child’s ability to control them and how this affects them. As has been discussed in other studies, it is very important to be able to understand social competence in young school children because early problems with peers predict later problems (Spinard et al., 2006). One can see why examining the emotions of young children and how they interact with their peers is crucial to their development and future. This study found that children’s temperamental characteristics are very important to use for predicting resiliency, and also that temperament and personality play important roles in understanding a child’s positive social functioning (Spinard et al., 2006). The temperament plays a role in how the child processes their emotions and interacts with their peers. However, the study did not go in depth on how exactly the temperament of a child plays out in their social interactions.

Emotional Outbursts

An article written by Thompson (2009) talks about the relations of emotional outbursts and self-regulation. It also discusses many other aspects of a young child’s emotional development. Thompson says, “Self-regulatory limitations are typical of young children, whose

impulsiveness, distractibility, and emotional outbursts can amuse and frustrate parents and practitioners” (Thompson, 2009). This suggests that emotional outbursts are a part of self-regulation of a child’s emotions. However, Thompson never defines what exactly an emotional outburst is.

Overall, there is difficulty in finding studies that address or look at emotional outbursts. The one study (Moses, Baldwin, Rosicky, & Tidball) examined looks into twelve to eighteen-month old infants and their ability to read emotions through emotion outbursts (2001). This study did not define what an emotional outburst is but does refer to them as being positive or negative. They found that these infants are able to read emotional messages at an early age, through video and then interpreting the video (Moses et al., 2001). Overall, it is very difficult for an operational definition of what an emotional outburst exactly is. In the current study, an emotional outburst will be defined as an occurrence in which the child is making loud noises and having a physical reaction to an event that has just occurred.

In all of the research reviewed, emotional competence, peer interactions and perceptions of each other are related. However, there is not much evidence of research being done specifically on emotional outbursts and how it affects the peer relations and opinions in the preschool classroom. There is also not much evidence of what causes children’s emotional outbursts. There is also not a definition that could be found of what exactly an emotional outburst is. This study will attempt to provide more information on these subjects.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 22 children from the ages of three years old to five years old. There were 13 boys and 9 girls who were observed for this study. These children

are students in two of the preschool classrooms at a university-affiliated early childcare center in a university town in a southern state. This location was chosen due to the convenience for the researcher. The center was also chosen because it is a lab school and was already supplied with observation rooms for data collection. These children were chosen from two random classrooms. Their parents were given brief information about the study and consent forms for their children to participate. The researcher observed only the children in each classroom whose parents had given their consent for the study. Each child was then assigned a random number so that the observations collected about each child remained confidential and anonymous.

Procedures

The children participating in this study were observed over the course of two months. Data collection began in November and ended in January and ceased for about three weeks during the holidays. Each classroom was observed each week for a maximum of four hours per week. The researcher collected data through observational notes. The researcher sat either in the classroom, out of the way, or observed from an observation room with a two-way mirror and audio equipment linked to microphones in the classroom. The researcher would also stand out of the way on the playground when the children were outside. The notes were taken on a laptop. The researcher observed the children's behavior, particularly noting any emotional outbursts and the reactions these caused the other children in the classroom to have, if any. For this study an emotional outburst was defined as *an occurrence in which the child is making loud noises and having a physical reaction to an event that has just occurred*. The events leading up to the outburst and following the outburst are described in the data collection. The children were given random numbers and were identified by these numbers in the data collection and analyzation, and their names were never used.

Data Analysis

The researcher began to analyze the data by reading and re-reading through the observations collected throughout the study. Common themes were identified, such as time of emotional outbursts, and these themes were then categorized. The observations were organized by their causes and the results of the outburst. The researcher then analyzed and counted the observations. The outbursts from the two different classrooms were compared and contrasted to analyze the results. Once the results were analyzed, they were interpreted to see what was found in the observations and what the observations were lacking in.

Results

A total of 34 emotional outbursts were observed and recorded during this study. This number was lower than what the researcher expected for the study. The researcher did observe many more emotional outbursts, but they were not able to be included in the study due to the children in the outbursts not having permission to participate. The research conducted helped to answer the first research question, which asks what causes emotional outbursts. There appeared to be many different causes of the emotional outbursts observed in this study. These consisted of a child not getting something that they wanted, a child not being allowed to continue something that they were doing, and a child not liking what another child was doing. Some of the emotional outbursts appeared to have no clear cause. The two classrooms that were observed had different causes for the majority of the emotional outbursts seen. In one of the classrooms observed, the outbursts appeared to mostly be caused by a child not getting what they wanted. In the other classroom, the outbursts were mostly caused by other peers and their interactions.

There was a common theme of repetition, in which the same children exhibited emotional outbursts in this study. In both classrooms, it appeared to be the same individual children that

were the child having an emotional outburst. These individual children were involved in more than three emotional outbursts where they were the main child that was having the emotional outburst. This shows that the observations revealed a theme of the same children repeatedly being the children who had an emotional outburst.

The emotional outbursts that were observed can be divided into three different categories in terms of when they occurred during the day. These categories for when emotional outbursts occurred are during circle time, during area time, and during the other time. The other time category includes times such as snack time and outside play time. In this study, area time is defined as when the children are having free play at the different centers around the room. Circle time is defined as when the children are sitting, all gathered around the teacher, and listening to the teacher talk or read a book. Nineteen of the emotional outbursts (56%) occurred during area time. Five of the emotional outbursts (15%) recorded happened during circle time. Ten of the emotional outbursts (29%) occurred during the other time category. This shows that most of the emotional outbursts that were observed happened when children were in area time and they were playing in centers around the classroom, either individually or with friends.

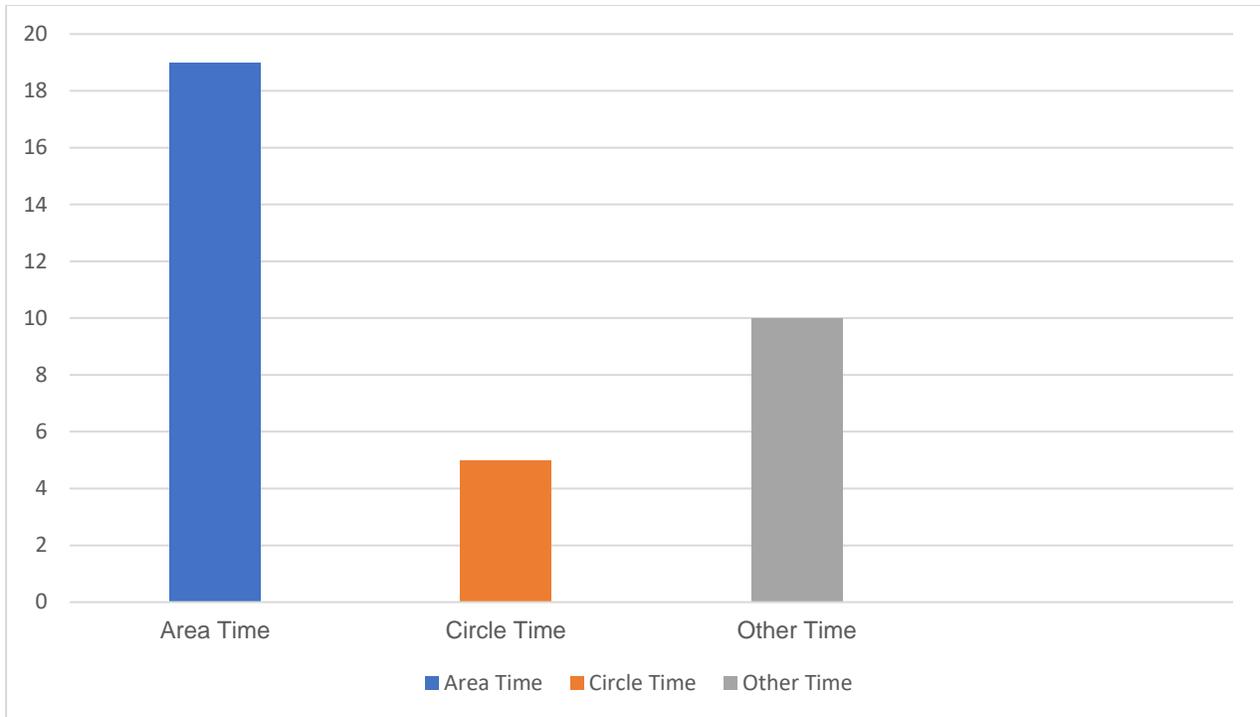


Figure 1. The number of emotional outbursts during the time which they occurred.

The second research question centered on how the emotional outbursts affected the children around the emotional outburst. The observations show that some children would stare at the child having the emotional outburst and some children would move away from the child having the emotional outburst. The most common theme, though, was for the children around the child having the emotional outburst to appear not to have any reaction. This was indicated when the children surrounding the emotional outburst did not look at the child or say anything about the child having the emotional outburst. In these cases, the children surrounding the emotional outburst would continue with whatever task they had been doing before the emotional outburst. However, there was one occurrence of what could be classified as taunting after an emotional outburst. This outburst can be seen in the anecdote included. A child had an emotional outburst and then two other children proceeded to make fun of the child having the emotional outburst by calling the child names. This was the most extreme occurrence observed

and it only happened one time during the data collection. Overall, this second research question, how the emotional outbursts affect the children in the vicinity, appeared to remain mostly unanswered by the study conducted.

Anecdote

This emotional outburst occurs when the children are playing outside on the playground. It only lasts about a total of five minutes. There was one teacher on the playground and one inside assisting children using the restroom when this emotional outburst occurred. They were in proper state teacher-child ratio, but the teacher outside was occupied with other students across the playground at the time of the outburst.

The scene begins when Child 13 walks up to two bikes that are on the playground. Child 6 is already on a bike and is holding the other bike. Child 13 wants to ride the bike, but Child 6 was saving the bike for Child 1. Then children 1 and 6 start riding the bikes around the bike path on the playground. Child 13 starts screaming and crying saying they want to ride a bike now. Then Child 13 lies down on the ground and cries. Child 13 screams, "I want to ride a bike!" Child 13 has been crying for at least 1 minute. Child 13 is laying on the ground crying about not being able to ride a bike. During this crying, children 1 and 6 are riding the bikes around the playground. They ride their bikes by Child 13 and yell "bad Child 13." Then Child 13 yells "I don't like that" and screams. They continue riding bikes around Child 13 yelling that phrase 3 times. Child 13 gets up and walks over to other part of playground. They continue yelling the "bad Child 13" even after Child 13 has moved to other part of playground.

Discussion

Findings

In this study, there was one example of the effects that an emotional outburst had on the children around the outburst. This was the example of the children making fun of the child on the playground that was screaming and crying when he didn't get what he wanted. This can be seen in the anecdote mentioned previously. The two children that were making fun of the other child who had the emotional outburst were seen together in many of the other observations about emotional outbursts. An adult did not intervene in the anecdote mentioned above. With adult help the children might have been able to handle the situation better. The Hartup (2005) study discusses the influences that peers have on one another. It looks specifically at how being associated with deviant peers cause people to increase their own deviance. This appears to play out specifically with the two children involved in the taunting occurrence on the playground. Although the Hartup (2005) study looks at the deviance between adults, the current study sees that it can trickle down to even very young children at the ages of three to five years old.

The current study found commonalities among the emotional outbursts. One of these commonalities was that the same children seemed to be the ones that were having emotional outbursts. There are many reasons why the same children could be the ones that are having repeated emotional outbursts. This could have to do with the individual child and their ability to regulate their emotions. Every child has a different temperament that they are born with. Szewczyk-Sokolowski, et al. (2005) discuss the links between a child's temperament and their ability to regulate their emotions. If a child is not able to regulate their emotions, then they may struggle with interacting with their peers or having emotional outbursts. The study done by Szewczyk-Sokolowski et al. (2005) found that the ability to regulate different emotional states is

required to have successful peer interactions. The current study looked at the classroom as a whole and was not able to do a case study into each individual child. There could be even more research done into each individual child to determine if the number of outbursts a child has is correlated with their temperament or their ability to regulate emotions.

The other commonality found about emotional outbursts is that they all tended to occur at similar times in the schedule of the day. The majority of the emotional outbursts were seen at one time of day. These 19 emotional outbursts (56%) were observed during the area time in the schedule. This was when the children were playing, either alone or with others, in different centers of the room. The 15 other emotional outbursts (44%) occurred during either circle time or another time in the classroom schedule.

Most of the outbursts observed in this study occurred during area time. This could be for many reasons. One of these reasons very well could be the lack of structure compared to circle time. In circle time, the teachers are running the time and have it well planned and structured. There is not much peer interaction during circle time. However, during area time the children are allowed to play at whichever centers they would like. The children are also normally allowed to choose whoever they want to play at that center with. This “unstructured” time at centers could lead to more misunderstandings and high emotions in the children. It also provides more opportunities for children to navigate social situations, honing their social emotional skills. And this could ultimately lead to the higher number of emotional outbursts observed during that time.

Limitations

This study addressed the first research question of what causes emotional outbursts. However, the second research question was inconclusive; the research did not reveal how the emotional outbursts affected the peers around the child having the emotional outburst. There was

not enough data collected that provided observations on the peer's reactions to the emotional outbursts. Every behavior a person exhibits has antecedents and consequences. In order to find an answer to the second research question, the study would need to go much more in depth. In the future, this research could be built upon by doing case studies of children that were identified by teachers as children who tended to have more emotional outbursts. One could look into the many different factors of the child's life such as their socioeconomic status and if the child had any special needs or delays. There are many different things that affect how a child acts and regulates their emotions. The study could also go more in depth by observing for more time during each session and conducting the observations sessions for a longer amount of time. The reactions and attitudes of the peers might have become more observable to a researcher who spent longer amounts of time in the classroom.

Another way that this study could be extended is through teacher interviews. The researcher could interview the teachers to ask more in-depth questions about the child's behavior. The teacher would also be able to offer information on if the number of emotional outbursts observed was higher or lower than normal. Having the teachers input could just add another level to the current study and take the study even further.

Implications

The information gathered from this study can be applied in many different ways. This study can be helpful for teachers to consider. Since most of the emotional outbursts occurred during the area time, teachers could look at the way area time is organized in their classrooms and see if this is a similar issue. If so, many different strategies could be implemented to better provide emotional support for children. It would also be helpful for a teacher to know that in a classroom, the same children tend to be the ones having emotional outbursts. This could help

teachers to specifically focus on the children having the emotional outbursts. They could investigate the reasons for the outbursts further than a researcher might be able to.

Overall, this study concludes that the time of day and specific children seem to play a part in the frequency of emotional outbursts. There was no link between the child having the emotional outbursts and any peer interactions in this study. Further research is needed to investigate peer interactions and how they are affected by emotional outbursts in a preschool classroom.

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