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# Preschool Teachers' Emotional Socialization Responses To 4-6 Year-Old Turkish Preschoolers' Emotional Expressions

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## Abstract

The goal of the present study was to investigate preschool teachers' emotion socialization responses to Turkish preschoolers' emotional expressions based on children's age and gender. The participants in the current study were 12 preschool full time teachers from 4 preschool and 288 preschoolers ranging in age from 4 to 6 years in Aksaray. In order to perform naturalistic observation a coding system was created by researcher based on previous studies. The results indicated that preschool teachers were more likely encouraged children to show empathy to others, taught positive emotions, encouraged expressing positive emotions, matched positive emotions, responded psychical affection in 4 year old age children more than 5 and 6 year old age children. Preschool teachers were more often minimized negative responses, distracted, labeled negative emotion in 4 year old age children than 5 and 6 year old children. Results also revealed that there was a significant but low relationship between children's gender and teacher's responses to negative emotional expressions and a modest relationship between children's gender and teacher's responses to positive emotional expressions.

*Keywords: Preschool teachers' emotional socialization responses, Turkish Preschoolers, emotional expressions*

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## **1. Introduction**

Family, especially the parents play a critical role on the emotional development of children (Eisenberg, Cumberland and Spinrad, 1998). Research mainly concentrating on the effect of parents show that emotion socialization is an important element of emotional development in children (Saarni, 1999). According to Denham (1998), parents have an effect on emotion socialization of children in family atmosphere via three ways; first of all, their style of expressing emotions to their children (modeling), secondly, their response to the children's emotions (contingency) and lastly, the way parents teach their children about emotions (coaching). Although the role of social contexts other than family -such as child care centers- has been ignored, teachers provide substantial opportunities of socialization (Ahn and Stifter, 2010). Teachers especially working in early childhood programs show new skills, present exciting materials and establish emotional bonds with students within classroom environment and as a result, they become key socializers for children (Denham, 1998). Teachers, like parents, have an important role in establishment of secure attachment relationships and in emotinal guiding and managing (Mill and Romano-White, 1999; Howes and Ritchie, 2002).

Ashiabi (2000) expands the notion of three mechanisms for emotion socialization from parents to teachers and emphasizes their role in improving preschoolers' emotional development by the ways of modeling, contingency and coaching. Teachers, intentionally or unintentionally introduce children ways to label, express and regulate their emotions whether negative or positive and by this way enable a guide for expressing and regulating emotions. Via responding contingently to a child's negative emotions in a given context by proper behavioral and emotional responses, teachers improve the child's emotional progress (Gottman, Katz and Hooven,1997). At last, by coaching or defining the meaning of their senses and by presenting information about various emotions for regulating the actions of children in emotional circumstances, teachers improve children's comprehension of their emotions. Although the relationship of preschool teachers and children is different from parent-child relationships in terms of closeness and components of context, teachers' emotion socialization have an important role in functionality of children.

The aim of this study is to understand preschool teachers' emotion socialization responses through their daily communication with children. By the way of naturalistic observation, this research investigated responses of teachers to Turkish preschool children's positive and negative emotional responses according to their age and gender.

## **2. Method**

12 full time preschool teachers from 4 preschools and 288 preschoolers attending to these schools who were ranging in ages from 4 to 6 years in Aksaray were included in the study. 4 classrooms were included in the study from each age groups. All female teachers' mean age was 36 years. In selecting participants, purposeful sampling was employed for information-rich cases. Data was collected through the Fall 2013-2014 school semester. A coding system was generated based on the theoretical background and previous emotion socialization coding systems (e.g., Ahn and Stifter, 2006; Swartz and McElwain, 2012). Values observed ranged from 0 (response never observed) to 1 (response observed for every emotion episode). Teachers' responses to children's positive emotional expressions were coded as follows; 1) *encouragement of showing empathy to others*-the teacher encourages the child to understand others' emotions and help others in a difficult manner, 2) *labeling positive emotion*-the teacher uses emotion vocabulary, 3) *physical affection and comfort*-the teacher hugs or touches the child in a comforting manner, 4) *verbal support*-the teacher speaks with the child in response to the emotional display but does not specifically use emotion vocabulary in the dialogue, 5) *teaching positive emotion*- the teacher starts to a conversation when h/she is happy or talks about a happy moment h/she experiences, 6) *encouragement of expressing positive emotion*-the teacher encourages children's positive emotional displays, 7) *matching the emotion*-the teacher shows the same negative emotion display, 8) *ignoring positive emotion display*-the teacher intentionally or unintentionally does not attend to child's emotion display. Teachers' responses to children's negative emotional expressions were coded as follows; 1) *showing empathy to children's negative emotion*-the teacher validates the child's negative emotion, 2) *physical affection*-the teacher gives a hug or touches a child's face or body in a comforting manner, 3) *labeling negative emotion*-the teacher uses emotion vocabulary, 4) *problem focused responses*-the teacher speaks with the child about possible ways to change or respond to the situation causing the emotion, 5) *negative response/minimizing*-the teacher restricts, threatens, forbids, minimizes the seriousness of the situation such as scolding a crying of a child with the comment "stop crying like a baby", 6) *distraction*-the teacher draws the child's attention to other activities, 7) *no response/ignoring*-the teacher ignores the child or does not acknowledge the child's emotional expression, 8) *matching the emotion*-the teacher shows the same negative emotional display, 9) *emotion regulation*-the teacher shows alternative ways to express emotion such as guiding angry child to use his/her own words instead of screaming to a friend, 10) *encouragement of expressing negative emotion*-the teacher encourages children's negative emotion displays. Children's expression of negative emotions

of *sadness* (e.g., lips-corners drawn), *anger* (e.g., scowling), *fear* (e.g., inhale/brows up) was noted and then teachers' emotional socialization responses were coded. Children's positive emotions of *happiness* (e.g., smiling), *interest* (e.g., looking attentively) and *excitement* (e.g., children's efforts to show their affection) were also noted. The observed values ranged from 0 (emotion never observed) to 1 (observed for every emotion). Participants were observed in a variety of interactive contexts (e.g., free play, group play and outdoor play). Each teacher was observed for 120 min. in an unmanipulated context. A second observer, a graduate student, was trained to describe children's emotional expressions, body posture and vocal expressions. The Cohen's kappa levels for interobserver agreement were .89 for children's positive emotional expressions, .86 for teachers' responses to children's positive emotional expressions, and .97 for children's negative emotional expressions, and .95 for teachers' responses to children's negative emotion expressions. Crosstabs analysis was performed because children's emotional expressions and teachers' responses had more than two levels. Non parametric correlation coefficient Cramer's V analysis was conducted to test whether there is a meaningful relationship between two and more classified variable.

### 3. Findings

There was a statistically significant but modest relationship between children's age and teachers' responses (Cramer's  $V=.18$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Preschool teachers were found to be likely to show physical affection (%59,1), teach positive emotions (%57,9) in 4 year old children more than 5 and 6 year olds. Table 1 indicates detailed results.

Table 1. Preschool teachers' responses to children's positive emotional expressions

Teacher responses	Age			Total
	4 years	5 years	6 years	
Encouraging children to show empathy to others	%41.2 (7)	%35.3 (6)	%23.5 (4)	17 (%5.9)
Labeling positive emotion	%38.9 (7)	%38.9 (7)	%22.2 (4)	18 (%6.2)
Verbal support	%28.7 (25)	%37.9 (33)	%33.3 (29)	87 %30.2)
Teaching positive emotion	%57.9 (11)	%31.6 (6)	%10.5 (2)	19 (%6.6)
Encouraging children to express positive emotion	%34.7 (17)	%32.7 (16)	%32.7 (16)	49 (%17)
Matching positive emotion	%40.4 (21)	%36.5 (19)	%23.1 (12)	52(%18.1)

Physical affection comfort and comfort	%59.1 (13)	%22.7 (5)	%18.2 (4)	22 (%7.6)
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Analyses show that there is a significant but weak relationship between teachers' responses and children's negative emotional expressions according to the age group (Cramer's  $V=.15$ ,  $p\leq .05$ ). Preschool teachers more often minimize negative responses (%66,7), distract (%66,7), label negative emotion (%47,4) in 4 year olds than 5 and 6 year old children. Table 2 indicates detailed results.

Table 2. Preschool teachers' responses to children's negative emotional expressions

Teacher responses	Age			
	4 years	5 years	6 years	Total
Showing empathy to negative emotion	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)	14.3 (1)	7 (%2.4)
Physical affection and comfort	41.7 (5)	33.3 (4)	25.0 (3)	12 (4.26%)
Labeling	47.4 (9)	31.6 (6)	21.1 (4)	19 (%6.6)
Problem focused responses	20.4 (10)	38.8 (19)	40.8 (20)	49 (%17)
Negative responses- Minimizing	66.7 (6)	33.3 (3)	0 (0)	9 (%3.1)
Distraction	66.7 (2)	33.3 (1)	0 (0)	3 (%1)
No response-ignoring	13.6 (3)	31.8 (7)	55 (12)	22 (%7.6)
Matching	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	33.3 (1)	3 (%1)
Helping to regulate negative emotion	27.6 (8)	37.9(11)	35 (10)	29 (%10.1)
Encouraging to express negative emotions	33.3 (3)	22.2 (2)	44.4 (4)	9 (%3.1)

As shown in Table 3, teachers responded to girls' and boys' positive emotional expression in significantly different ways. There was a statistically significant but modest relationship between teachers' responses and children's gender (Cramer's  $V= .20$   $p\leq .05$ ). The frequency of labeling positive emotions (%66.7), responding physical affection and comfort (%72.7), teaching positive emotion (%57.9), encouragement of showing empathy to others (%52.9), encouragement of expressing positive emotion (%53.1) to girls was higher than boys. Teachers responded more verbal support (%57.5) to boys than girls.

Table 3. Preschool teachers' responses to children's positive emotional expressions by gender

Teacher responses	Gender	
	Girl	Boy
Encouraging children to show empathy to others	%52.9 (9)	%47.1 (8)
Labeling	%66.7 (12)	%33.3 (6)
Verbal support	%42.5 (37)	%57.5 (50)
Teaching	%57.9 (11)	%42.1 (8)
Encouraging children to express positive emotion	%53.1 (26)	%46.9 (23)
Physical affection and comfort	%72.7 (16)	%27.3 (6)
Matching	%69.2 (36)	%30.8 (16)

Based on the results, there was a statistically significant but weak relationship between gender and children's negative emotional display (Cramer's  $V = .15, p \leq .05$ ). Teachers responded to girls with more physical affection (%61.5) and comfort (%61.5), labeling (%63.2) and matching negative emotion (%66.7). The frequency of showing empathy to negative emotion (%71.4), problem focused responses (%63.3), minimizing (%55.6), ignoring (%81.8), helping to regulate negative emotion (%72.4) and encouraging to express negative emotion (%55.6) to boys was higher than girls. Table 4 reflects detailed results.

Table 4. Preschool teachers' responses to children's negative emotional expressions by gender

Teachers responses	Gender	
	Girl	Boy
Showing empathy to negative emotion	%28.6 (2)	%71.4 (5)
Physical affection and comfort	%61.5 (8)	%38.5 (5)
Labeling negative emotions	%63.2 (12)	%36.8 (7)
Problem focused responses	%36.7 (18)	%63.3 (31)
Minimizing	%44.4 (4)	%55.6 (5)
Distraction	%2.3 (3)	%0 (0)
No response-ignoring	%18.2 (4)	%81.8 (18)

Matching negative emotions	%66.7 (2)	%33.3 (1)
Helping to regulate negative emotion	%27.6 (2)	%72.4 (21)
Encouraging to express negative emotions	%44.4 (4)	%55.6 (5)

#### **4. Discussion**

Observations of classrooms provided data that characterize responses of teachers to children's emotional expressions. In the present study, preschool teachers responded with physical affection and comfort, matching positive emotions more frequently in 4-year olds compared with 5-6 year olds. According to the findings, it can be predicted that teachers use more direct, quick responses like physical affection and comfort in young children. Physically comforting behaviors like hugging is usually together with other behaviors of teaching ways of expressing emotions. In the present study, teachers also labeled positive emotional expressions in 4-5 year olds much more than 6 year olds and they seem to help 4-5 year old children in labelling positive emotions in this study. This finding can be compared with Furman's results. Furman (1995) underlines the identification and verbalization of feelings and asserts that children may not know about "emotion words" and may not be able to verbalize their feelings. According to this finding of the study, teachers seem to help 4-5 year old children in labeling positive emotions. In addition, in this study, teachers encouraged 4 year olds more than 5-6 year olds in expressing positive emotions and teach positive emotions to them. This finding can be explained in the light of Ahn's suggestions. According to Ahn (2006) preschoolers need significant help to learn verbalizing their emotions rather than to physically hurt others. Teachers either encourage children in using words to express their emotional needs or present children with concrete suggestions to deal with feelings and teach social norms related to appropriate reactions by constructive way. Teachers also supported children's empathy toward others in 4-year olds more than 5-6 year olds. According to this, teachers seem to progress children's prosocial development for being involved to others' emotions. This finding of the current study can be supported by Hyson and Taylor's suggestions. Hyson and Taylor (2011) asserted that early childhood educators want to help children become empathic and starting early is crucial, because early prosocial tendencies often proceed into later years.

Teachers' responses to children's negative emotion expressions also varied by age. In this study, teachers help 4-year olds regulate their emotions more than 5-6 year olds. This result is in line with preceding findings and it can be interpreted out of findings that the responsibility of regulating emotions pass

from parents to children as children grow up (Grolnick, Kurowski, McMenamy, Rivkin and Bridges, 1998; Ahn, 2006). The same interpretation be made for teachers' socialization responses. According to Hyson (1994), teachers' role is crucial for the child in terms of creating an environment in which the abilities of regulating emotions and appropriately reacting to others' feelings are supported. Ahn and Shifter (2010) also suggested that teachers help children in emotion regulation according to the developmental level of children. Teachers also minimized 4-year olds' negative emotional expressions by giving nonsupportive responses. Gottman's (1997) theory can help to explain this finding of the study; parents may try to punish or minimize negative emotions in children when they are disturbed by them and by this way, they may be trying to stop them immediately. This can be explained depending teachers' perception of the age of children and beliefs to their emotions. Teachers of younger children may perceive 4 year olds to be too young to discuss such emotions. Similar to positive emotional expressions, teachers responded with physical affection and comfort to 4 year olds' negative emotional expressions and encourage to express negative emotions in 6 year olds more often compared to other age groups in this study. According to Ahn (2005), children have a sense of security with teachers' physical affection and comfort, that is, they feel safe and feel that teachers are there to take care of them. Teachers labeled negative emotion expressions in 4-5 year olds more than in 6-year olds. Teachers become role models for expressing emotions by using "emotion words" appropriately and they meet developmental needs of children in labeling emotions in this study. Moreover, labeling negative emotions may be due to teacher's acceptance of emotions of children. Teachers are usually emphatic to negative feelings of 4-5 year olds. Based on Swartz and McElwain's (2012) findings, teachers attending to perspective taking at a higher level would allocate more cognitive resource to understand a child's emotion expressions and as a result would be encouraging in responding and reflect understanding and validation about child's emotion. As an interpretation, teachers may possibly perceive younger children to be more vulnerable to negative emotions (Ahn and Stifter, 2010). According to this study, teachers used problem-focused responses to negative emotional displays often in 5-6 year olds compared with 4-year olds. This finding is similar to Gottman, Katz and Hooven (1996)'s coaching theory that underlines parents as viewing children's negative emotions as intimate moments and as an opportunity to teach them ways to managing and expressing emotions.

Teachers responded differently to emotion expressions of girls and boys. They motivate girls to be emphatic more than boys, labeled and matched positive emotion expressions of girls more than that of boys. Teachers also encouraged expressing positive emotions and showed physical affection more

often to girls. These findings are similar to the findings Young (2005) reflect that mothers show encouraging emotion socialization towards girls more than boys. Because of discouragement of boys' excitement in the class, teachers may be unable to match or encourage their positive emotion expressions. Teachers showed physical affection and comfort more often to girls than boys as a response to negative emotional expressions. In addition, they labeled and matched negative emotion expressions of the girls more frequently than that of boys in the current study. This finding seems to parallel with Ahn and Stifter's (2010) study. They suggested that when boys express negative emotions, teachers' response more emphatically and present them constructive and intervening ways of expressing negative emotions. In addition, boys experienced more problem focused and emotion regulation responses than girls. This finding also consistent with study of Ahn and Stifter (2010) indicated that boys may get empathy, emotion regulation and problem focused responses more because they more easily cry and are angry. Appreciating children's social setting differences, social, emotional and cognitive capacity is very important in understanding emotion socialization depending on gender.

The present study helps understanding preschool teachers' responses of emotion socialization to 4-6 year old Turkish preschool children's emotional expressions. These findings of the study may highlight the importance to train preschool teacher about emotion socialization and preschool experience. Arnold, Ortiz, Curry, Stowe, Goldstein, Fisher, Zeljoja and Yershova (1999) stated that children aged 3-5 years spend more time in child care centers than they spend with their parents, so it is crucial to have preschool teachers trained to support children's emotional development. Teachers' knowledge of responding to children's emotions appropriately to their development process would be improved by training (Downer, Kraft-Sayre and Pianta, 2009). By this way, teachers' skills on emotion socialization behaviors will also guide parent and child interaction within the family. Implementation or laboratory preschools as an investigation area of teacher-child interaction system as well as being a learning center should be opened. Understanding responses of teachers to children's emotions better would help child-teacher interactions and assist in informing teacher training and professional development practices in implementation or laboratory preschools. Based on the findings it is recommended that a more detailed investigation of teachers' roles in children's emotional development and expression of emotions may be needed in the future. The data of the current study were collected during teacher-child interactions. In the future studies which about teacher emotion socialization data can be collected by using audiovisual records. Audiovisual recordings could supply a new way to engage in coding teachers' emotional socialization responses with

their conversations and reflections. In addition, it is possible that teachers' responses toward emotional expressions of preschoolers' may be examined in a wide range emotion such as pride and fussy in the classroom context.

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