

Personality Moderates the Relation Between Mother's Emotional Intelligence and Young Children's Emotion Situation Knowledge

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Abstract : From the very first years of their life, children are confronted with situations in which they need to deal with emotions. The family provides the first emotional experiences, and it is in the family context that children usually take their first steps towards acquiring emotion knowledge. Parents play a key role in this important task, helping their children develop emotional skills that they will need in challenging situations throughout their lives. Specifically, mothers are models imitated by their children. They create specific spatial and temporal contexts in which children learn about emotions, their causes, consequences, and complexity. This occurs not only through what mothers say or do directly to the child. Rather, it occurs, to a large extent, through the example that they set using their own emotional skills. The aim of the current study was to analyze how maternal abilities to perceive and to manage emotions influence children's emotion knowledge, specifically, their emotion situation knowledge, taking into account the role played by the mother's personality, the time spent together, and controlling the effect of age, sex and the child's verbal abilities. Participants were 153 children from 4 schools in Spain, and their mothers. Children (41.8% girls) age range was 35 - 72 months. Mothers (N = 140) age (M = 38.7; R = 27-49). Twelve mothers had more than one child participating in the study. Main variables were the child's emotion situation knowledge (ESK), measured by the Emotion Matching Task (EMT), and receptive language, using the Picture Vocabulary Test. Also, their mothers' Emotional Intelligence (EI), through the Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) and personality, with The Big Five Inventory were analyzed. The results showed that the predictive power of maternal emotional skills on ESK was moderated by the mother's personality, affecting both the direction and size of the relationships detected: low neuroticism and low openness to experience lead to a positive influence of maternal EI on children's ESK, while high levels in these personality dimensions resulted in a negative influence on child's ESK. The time that the mother and the child spend together was revealed as a positive predictor of this EK, while it did not moderate the influence of the mother's EI on child's ESK. In light of the results, we can infer that maternal EI is linked to children's emotional skills, though high level of maternal EI does not necessarily predict a greater degree of emotion knowledge in children, which seems rather to depend on specific personality profiles. The results of the current study indicate that a good level of maternal EI does not guarantee that children will learn the emotional skills that foster prosocial adaptation. Rather, EI must be accompanied by certain psychological characteristics (personality traits in this case).

Keywords : emotional intelligence, emotion situation knowledge, mothers, personality, young children

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