



# How pre-service early childhood teachers respond to children's negative emotions

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## Abstract

Teachers, like parents, have important roles in socializing children's emotions by providing experiences that affect the emotional competence of children. The aim of this study is to examine pre-service early childhood teachers' response preferences to children's negative emotions. Data was collected using the Teachers' Attitudes/Behaviors Questionnaire administered to 393 senior early childhood education students from six universities in Turkey, all of whom had registered to attend a teaching application course starting in the fall semester of 2013. We found that pre-service teachers mostly prefer to use problem focus, emotion regulation, label feelings, and behavior focus responses towards children's emotions. Those who prefer to use punishment responses towards children's negative emotions were less likely to label feelings and refer to emotions responses, and most likely to prefer a minimization response. Overall, pre-service early childhood teachers' responses to children's negative emotions are seen to be generally shaped by their education and educational experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

Emotional competence gained at early age has long-term implication in terms of social competence (Denham, Blair, DeMulder, Levitas, Sawyer, Auerbach Mayor & Queenan, 2003; Schultz, Izard, Ackerman, & Youngstrom, 2001). Research indicates that young children's social and emotional competence is related to their school adjustments (Shields, Dicstein, Seifer, Giusti, Magee & Spritz, 2001) and their learning and school success (Blair, 2002; Denham, 2006).

Parents' emotion socialization and its relation to young children's emotional competence have been well documented (Denham & Kochanoff, 2008; Denham, Mitchell Copeland, Standberg, Auerbach & Blair, 1997). In the literature, three mechanisms, commonly, have been accepted to socialize children's emotions: a) parents' reactions to children's expressions and experiences of their emotions, b) parental discussion of emotion, and c) parents' way to express their own emotions (Eisenberg, Cumberland & Spinrad, 1998), and the means by which they handle their own emotions also known as "modelling" (Denham, 1998).

If parents' responses to children's emotions include teaching their children how to deal with emotions and how to appropriately express them, children can acquire a high level of emotional competence. On the other hand, when parents punish, humiliate, or discourage their children's emotions, their children tend to have low level emotional competence and more often negative emotions (Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001). In addition, parents'

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attention, acceptance, and support towards their children's emotional states appear to be important for children's learning and understanding of their own and others' emotions (Denham et al., 1997).

Early childhood teachers are important emotion socialization agents for the children in their care (Morris, Denham, Bassett, & Curby, 2013) and teachers also socialize their students' emotions with the same mechanisms as parents do (Brenner & Salovey, 1997). Unfortunately, only a few studies have examined teachers' emotion socialization practices (Swartz & McElwain, 2012). Ahn (2005) indicated that early childhood teachers showed similar emotion socialization practices to parents. Teachers sometimes taught children how to express emotion, sometimes use distraction, punishment, or minimization toward children's emotions. In Ersay's study (2007), preschool teachers in the USA, who labeled feelings as a response to young children's negative emotions were less likely to choose to use punishment and minimizing responses. Furthermore, preschool teachers who preferred to control children's behavior in case of negative emotion expression, also reported preferences for punishment and to minimize responses to children's negative emotions. In addition, Ersay's (2014) study with Turkish preschool teachers revealed that use of labeling feelings and emotion regulation responses to children's negative emotions were negatively correlated to a punishment response. Preschool teachers also preferred to use punishment and behavior focus responses more often for children's anger than sadness.

There are few studies that help us to understand pre-service teachers' preferences when responding to children's emotions (Swartz & McElwain, 2012). Further documented research is therefore warranted.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants and procedure*

The sample comprised 393 undergraduate students (339 female and 53 male) from six Turkish universities, ranging in age from 18 to 27 years, with a mean age of 21.51 years ( $SD= 1.21$ ). All participants were senior students attending an early childhood education program and had registered for a teaching application course in fall 2013 semester.

### *2.2. Instruments*

#### *2.2.1. Demographic Information*

The following demographic information was obtained from study participants: age; sex; GPA; type of high school they graduated from; level of parents' education; parents' employment status; type of accommodation where they reside; monthly family income; monthly personal income.

#### *2.2.2. Teachers' Attitudes/Behaviors Questionnaire (TBQ)*

The Teachers' Attitudes/Behaviors Questionnaire (TBQ) (Ersay, 2007) was developed to estimate preschool teachers' response preferences towards young children's emotions of anger and sadness. This questionnaire has six items in total. Preschoolers' emotional states of sadness and anger are represented in short scenarios. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely".

For each scenario, teachers rated the likelihood of responding in each of eight possible ways when exposed to their students' sadness and anger. These eight possible ways to respond children's anger and sadness reflect conceptually two distinct categories: 1-Refer to Emotions and 2-Not Refer to Emotions.

"Refer to Emotions" category was composed of two subscales: (a) Label feelings and (b) Emotional regulation. "Not refer to emotions" category included five subscales: (a) Distraction, (b) Behavior focus (composed of two items), (c) Punishment, (d) Problem focus, and (e) Minimize. The researcher also created each category for sadness and anger emotions.

Ersay (2007) found the following internal reliability coefficients for the two main categories: .62 for “Refer to emotions” subscale and .77 for “Not refer to emotions” subscale. For the current study, the internal reliability coefficients for refer to emotions and not refer to emotions categories were .83 and .83, respectively.

### 3. Results and Discussions

Pre-service teachers’ average GPA was 3.02 (SD=.36). Most had graduated from an Anatolian high school (34%) followed by an Anatolian teacher high school (25%). In terms of type of residence, 35% of participants lived at home with roommates and 41% in a dormitory. Participant pre-service teachers’ mothers mostly (58%) graduated from primary school or did not graduate from any school but can read and write. Monthly personal income ranged from 50 to 1500TL (M=521.21, SD=254.35).

As seen in table 1, pre-service early childhood teachers preferred to use “label feelings”, “refer to emotions”, and “distraction” responses more often for children’s sadness than their anger. Furthermore, pre-service teachers indicated to use “emotion regulation”, “behavior focus”, “punishment”, “minimize”, and “not refer to emotions” responses more often towards children’s anger than for their sadness.

Table 1. Findings for subscales of TBQ for sadness and anger

	$\alpha$		M		SD	
	Sadness	Anger	Sadness	Anger	Sadness	Anger
Label Feelings (LF)	.68	.64	3.43	2.91	.51	.60
Emotional regulation (ER)	.55	.67	3.01	3.28	.52	.52
Refer to Emotions	.72	.70	3.26	3.09	.44	.46
Distraction (DS)	.70	.77	2.59	1.84	.68	.69
Behavior Focus (BF)	.75	.77	2.52	3.36	.56	.46
Punishment (P)	.60	.76	1.32	2.12	.47	.76
Problem focus (PF)	.66	.64	3.36	3.37	.51	.50
Minimize (M)	.65	.74	1.73	2.61	.59	.78
Not Refer to Emotions	.75	.71	2.34	2.78	.34	.33

Table 2. Findings for subscales of TBQ

	$\alpha$ (Num. of item)	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Label Feeling	.76 (6)	1.67	4.00	3.17	.49
Emotional Regulation	.75 (6)	1.83	4.00	3.19	.47
Refer To Emotions	.83 (12)	1.83	4.00	3.18	.42
Distract	.78 (6)	1.00	4.00	2.22	.58
Behavior Focus	.78 (12)	1.67	4.00	2.94	.42
Punishment	.73 (6)	1.00	3.50	1.72	.52
Problem Focus	.79 (6)	1.33	4.00	3.37	.45
Minimize	.75 (6)	1.00	3.67	2.17	.58
No Refer to Emotions	.83 (36)	1.77	3.44	2.56	.29

Pre-service early childhood teachers indicated to use “refer to emotions” responses more often than “not refer to emotions” responses towards children’s negative emotions. When we examine the results in detail, pre-service teachers mostly preferred to use problem focus, emotion regulation, label feelings, and behavior focus responses towards children’s emotions. As seen in table 2, punishment was the lowest preferred response towards children’s negative emotions.

As seen in table 3, pre-service teachers who preferred to use the “punishment” response towards children’s negative emotions were less likely to indicate the use of “label feelings” and “refer to emotions” responses, and most likely preferred the “minimize” response.

Table 3. Bivariate correlation among the subscales of TBQ

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Label Feeling	-	.555**	.887**	.129*	.382**	<b>-.135**</b>	.495**	-.073	.274**
2.Emo.Regulation		-	.873**	.083	.578**	-.093	.620**	.107*	.455**
3.Refer. to Emo.			-	.116*	.536**	<b>-.148**</b>	.632**	.011	.412**
4.Distract				-	.168**	.090	.008	.126*	.473**
5.Behavior Focus					-	.067	.551**	.286**	.775**
6.Punishment						-	-.081	<b>.448**</b>	.471**
7.Problem Focus							-	.086	.518**
8.Minimize								-	.652**
9.Not Refer. Emo.									-

In order to examine whether demographic information accounted for variance in each response of pre-service teachers to children’s negative emotions, stepwise multiple regression analyses were performed (see Table 4). For the analyses, the following entry format was used: gender, age, GPA, university, type of high school, level of mother’s education, monthly family income, monthly personal income, and residence type.

The regression analysis for the *label feelings* response reveals that 9% variance is explained by monthly personal and family income, general point average (GPA), graduating from Anatolian high school (AHS), and attending University\_4. GPA and family income positively related to the label feelings response. In addition, pre-service teachers attending University\_6 tended to use the label feelings response more often than those attending University\_4. Participants who graduated from an Anatolian high school preferred to use label feelings response significantly more than those of graduating from a regular high school (see Table 4). Monthly personal income accounted alone for 5% of the variance in the label feelings response ( $R^2$  change = .045).

In the final regression equation for the *emotion regulation* response, monthly personal income, graduating from an Anatolian high school (AHS), and being female accounted for 6% of the variance in the emotion regulation response of pre-service teachers. Female pre-service teachers preferred to use emotion regulation response more than males (see Table 4).

As seen in Table 4, the final regression equation for the *refer to emotions for sadness* of children shows that monthly personal income, living with roommates at home, being female, graduating from an Anatolian high school (AHS) explained 8% of the variance in the refer to emotions for sadness response. Female pre-service teachers indicated that they would refer to emotions for children’s sadness more often than males.

For *children’s anger*, the variance in *refer to emotions* response was explained by monthly personal income, GPA, graduating from an Anatolian high school (AHS), and attending University\_4 (Adjusted  $R^2$ = .08). Pre-service early childhood teachers who had high GPA tended to use refer to emotions response for children’s anger (see Table 4).

According to the regression analysis, monthly personal income, GPA, and graduating from AHS explain 8% of the variance in pre-service early childhood teachers’ *refer to emotions* response (see Table 4).

The regression analysis for the *distraction* response reveals that being female, graduating from vocational high school (VHS), and attending University\_2 explain 8% of the variance in distraction response of pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers who currently attended University\_2 preferred to use distraction response for their students’ negative emotions more often than those attending University\_6. Furthermore, male pre-service teachers indicated to use distraction response for children’s negative emotions more than female ones (see Table 4).

In the final regression equation for the *behavior focus* response, graduating from vocational high school, attending University\_2, and monthly personal income accounted for 7% of the variance in the behavior focus response of pre-service teachers. Graduating from vocational high school accounted alone for 4% of the variance in

behavior focus response ( $R^2$  change = .039). In addition, pre-service teachers from University\_2 preferred to focus children's behavior as a response to children's negative emotions more often than ones from University\_6 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis of TBQ

		TBQ				
	<i>Predictor</i>	$R^2$	Adjusted $R^2$	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	$\beta$
<b>Label Feeling (LB)</b>	PI	.106	.093	-.237	.059	-.226*
	GPA			.195	.073	.140*
	FI			.141	.053	.150*
	H1			-.126	.054	-.123*
	U4			-.130	.065	-.105*
<b>Emo. Regulation (ER)</b>	PI	.064	.056	-.138	.054	-.138*
	H1			-.134	.052	-.136*
	Girls			.169	.073	.126*
<b>Refer to Emo. Sadness</b>	PI	.086	.075	-.138	.054	-.145*
	A2			-.115	.051	-.123*
	Girls			.157	.069	.122*
	H1			-.102	.049	-.108*
<b>Refer to Emo. Anger</b>	PI	.092	.081	-.141	.053	-.143*
	GPA			.189	.070	.144*
	H1			-.142	.051	-.147*
	U4			-.128	.061	-.109*
<b>Refer to Emotion</b>	PI	.083	.075	-.160	.048	-.180*
	GPA			.160	.063	.136*
	H1			-.116	.046	-.133*
<b>Distraction (D)</b>	Girls	.090	.082	-.358	.089	-.216*
	H3			.271	.080	.182*
	U2			.140	.071	.106*
<b>Behavior Focus (BF)</b>	H3	.076	.068	.166	.058	.155*
	U2			.128	.050	.134*
	PI			-.115	.048	-.129*
<b>Punishment (P)</b>	GPA	.061	.053	-.232	.080	-.158*
	PI			-.145	.053	-.147*
	U1			-.192	.090	-.118*
<b>Problem Focus (PF)</b>	H3	.071	.062	.157	.064	.133*
	Girls			.178	.071	.136*
	PI			-.112	.054	-.115*
<b>Minimize (M)</b>	U2	.129	.116	.411	.074	.304*
	U5			.412	.133	.163*
	U4			.173	.081	.116*
	PI			-.156	.060	-.138*
	ME2			.201	.081	.130*
<b>Not Refer to Emo. Sadness</b>	U2	.140	.127	.180	.042	.230*
	H3			.182	.048	.206*
	Girls			-.141	.053	-.144*
	H2			.101	.043	.128*
	PI			-.089	.039	-.122*
<b>Not Refer to Emo. Anger</b>	U2	.131	.118	.208	.042	.275*
	PI			-.106	.037	-.150*
	U4			.147	.046	.177*
	H3			.109	.046	.127*
	U3			.111	.055	.109*
<b>Not Refer to Emotion</b>	U2	.130	.122	.167	.035	.247*
	H3			.127	.040	.166*
	Pi			-.079	.033	-.125*

Note: N= 393; PI, Personal Income; FI, Family Income; H1, Anatolian High School; A2, Living with Roommates; H3, Vocational High School; ME2, Mother Graduated from High School; H2, Anatolian Teacher High School; \* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01

GPA, monthly personal income, and attending University\_1 accounted for 5% of the variance in the *punishment response* of pre-service teachers. Senior students with high GPA were less likely to prefer to punish children for expressing negative emotions (see Table 4).

The final regression equation for the *problem focus* response shows that graduating from vocational high school, being female, and monthly personal income accounted for 6% of the variance. Female pre-service teachers indicated to use the problem focus response to children's negative emotions more often than male ones (see Table 4).

The regression analysis for the *minimize* response to children's negative emotions reveals that attending University\_2, University\_5, and University\_4, monthly personal income, and having a mother who graduated from high school accounted for 12% of the variance. Pre-service teachers from these three universities indicated to prefer to use the minimize response more often than ones from University\_6. Interestingly, pre-service teachers having a mother with high school education preferred to minimize emotions more often than peers whose mothers have only primary school education or no formal education at all ( $R^2$  change = .013).

Attending University\_2 explained 7% of the variance in *not refer to emotions for children's sadness* response. Graduating from a vocational high school explained an additional 3% and being male explained an additional 1% of the variance in this response. Moreover, both graduating from an Anatolian teacher high school and monthly personal income explained an additional 2% of the variance in the response of not refer to emotions for children's sadness. In the final regression equation, all these variables explained 13% of the variance in this response (see Table 4).

For *children's anger*, the response of *not refer to emotions* was mostly explained by attending University\_2 ( $R^2$  change = .048). Monthly personal income also explained an additional 3% of the variance in this response. Furthermore, attending University\_4 and University\_3 and graduating from a vocational high school explained an additional 4% of the variance in the response of not refer to emotions for children's anger. The sum of the mentioned variables explains 12% of the variance in this variable (see Table 4).

Pre-service early childhood teachers' use of *not refer to emotions* response was mostly explained by attending University\_2 ( $R^2$  change = .074). Graduating from vocational high school explained an additional 4% of the variance in the response of not refer to emotions. Together, these variables and monthly personal income explain 12% of the variance in this response (see Table 4).

#### 4. Conclusion

According the result of this study, pre-service teachers' monthly personal income was an important variable to explain their responses to children's negative emotions. Interestingly, all responses were negatively correlated with personal income.

Pre-service teachers' response of talking about children's current feelings was mostly explained by monthly personal income. Family income and GPA were positively related to the label feeling response. Additionally, the type of high school a pre-service teacher had previously graduated from and the university they currently attended were related to their label feeling response.

Both talking with children about how to express their feelings (emotion regulation response) and referring to emotions when responding to children's sadness were mostly explained by personal income. However, the high school teachers had attended and gender were also common variables to explain these responses. Female pre-service teachers preferred to use emotion regulation and to refer to emotions for children's sadness more often than males.

Pre-service teachers with high GPA chose more often the refer to emotions response to children's anger. Type of high school and current university were also important variables to explain this response, beside personal income.

Male pre-service teachers preferred to tell interesting and funny stories (distraction response) as response to children's negative emotions more often than female ones. Moreover, pre-service teachers who graduated from vocational high school also chose this response more often than ones who had graduated from a regular high school.

Vocational high school education and current university place explained mostly the response of talking about appropriate behaviors needed to be learned and classroom rules everybody had to obey (behavior focus response).

Punishment response was mostly explained by GPA. Pre-service teachers with high GPA are less likely to use punishment. In addition, being female and graduating from vocational high school explained the response of talking about how to solve existing problem (problem focus response).

Pre-service teachers' response of telling children that they overreact when they express negative emotions was seen to vary according to which university they attend. In addition, generally the response of not referring to children's emotions when responding to their negative emotions correlates with pre-service teachers' current university and the type of high school they had attended.

Overall results indicate that pre-service early childhood teachers' responses to children's negative emotions were usually shaped by their education and their own educational experiences. Mix method research would provide further insights and enhance our understanding of the important variables and processes that shape pre-service teachers' emotional socialization strategies. Our findings also strongly suggest that the content of teacher training programs need to be carefully observed during instruction concerning the emotional socialization of children.

This study provides valuable information regarding the self-reported responses of pre-service teachers towards young children's negative emotions. Further comparison of pre-service teachers' responses with their applications can enhance our knowledge of how they socialize young children's emotions.

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