Children’s emotion understanding and regulation: Links with psychological symptoms

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Gaining an understanding of one’s emotions, and the ability to regulate them, are crucial tasks of early childhood. Deficits in either domain have been increasingly linked to emotional and behavior problems (Stegge & Terwogt, 2007). The current study examines the association between these variables among a sample of kindergarteners in Eastern Kentucky. Subjects were 35 children and their primary caregivers. Most families were low to moderate income. Parents completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL: Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), which assesses externalizing symptoms (e.g., noncompliance) and internalizing symptoms (e.g., sadness, anxiety). Children were administered a semi-structured emotions interview developed for this study. They were asked to display a face that matched each of six feelings and then to describe time they experienced the feeling. Emotion regulation was measured observationally via 4-point scales, including level of engagement and display of hyperactive/impulsive behavior. Emotion understanding was assessed primarily via transcript, with 4-point scales that included appropriateness of content to the emotion being discussed, coherence, and detail. Ratings were then summed for all regulation and understanding scales. Analyses revealed the expected associations. Specifically, highly engaged and regulated children had parents that reported significantly fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Analogous findings were obtained for children’s capacity to understand their emotions. This study underscores the importance of emotion skills for understanding the development of emotional and behavioral problems among young children. Moreover, the novel emotions interview and Appalachian sample expand the literature on these associations.