



# Introduction

## INTRODUCTION

The social–emotional skills that preschoolers normally develop are quite impressive. Consider the following example:

Four-year-olds Joey and Mike are pretending to be pirates. They have rubber swords, cocked hats, “gold” coins, and even a stuffed parrot. They are having a lot of fun. Joey finds the buried treasure—hurray! But then things get complicated, changing fast and furiously, as interaction often does. Mike suddenly decides to be the Queen’s Navy, and Joey must “sword-fight” him. Then Jimmy, who has been hovering nearby, tries to join in. No way! Joey wants Jimmy to leave. At almost the same minute, Mike steps on a Lego and starts to cry. And Rodney, the class bully, approaches, laughing at Joey and Mike for making believe and at Mike for crying. Joey deals with all of them: He comforts Mike appropriately, manages to tell Jimmy to stay out of the game without alienating him, and does his best to ignore Rodney’s teasing. When their teacher calls them to have a snack, everybody is satisfied with the morning.

This is much more than a simple playtime; a lot of emotional transactions are occurring. Joey’s clear, convincing, and appropriate expressions of emotions aid him in getting what he wants socially:

- When Joey finds the buried treasure, his face shows absolute joy.
- When challenged by Mike as the Queen’s Navy, he roars with rage and acts very brave.

- He displays just the right intensity of anger to tell Jimmy to “keep out.” Not too strongly, though—Joey doesn’t want Jimmy to shout back, “I’m not your friend!” Joey’s understanding of emotions also allows him to respond quickly but accurately—helping him in the tough job of regulating his own emotions and responding to those of others—during rapidly shifting, highly charged play experiences.
- Joey responds to Mike’s crying by first quietly giving his friend a chance to pull himself together, and then comforting him. Misinterpreting Mike’s grimace as anger could have led Joey to act angry himself, hurting his friend’s feelings and endangering their relationship.
- When Rodney comes over, Joey appears noncommittal, masking his anger and fear.

So, within a 5-minute play period, several different elements of emotional competence are called for if the social interaction is to proceed successfully. Taken together, the expression, understanding, and regulation of emotions are vital for determining how Joey gets along with others, how he understands himself, and whether he feels good in his world, within himself, and with other people. Joey is one “emotionally smart” little guy; he is developing “emotional competence.”

## THE NATURE OF EMOTION

But what *are* emotions, anyway? Before we delve further into toddlers’ and preschoolers’ emotional competence, it is important to consider the nature of emotions and their experience. Thus I briefly review the history of the study of emotions. Given this foundation, I consolidate my own view, specifying what I mean by *emotion* and its experience, the interplay between emotion and cognition, and how emotions are regulators of, and are regulated by, the behavior of the self and others. Throughout I posit what I consider to be useful theoretical viewpoints.

At first glance, the need to define as common a human phenomenon as emotion may seem a bit strange, but the scientific study of emotion has a disjointed history. In initial studies of adult emotion, psychologists carefully pondered their own internal processes. After repeated self-observations, they described their conscious experiences of emotion. So early in the history of psychology, subjective qualities such as feelings were respectable topics for study (Buss, Cole, & Zhou, 2019).

However, it admittedly was difficult to observe internal states objectively (Izard, 2010). With behaviorism gaining ascendance in psychology, introspection was no longer considered an acceptable means of study. Only behaviors were investigated, nothing intrapsychic. Phenomena requiring any inferences—such as motivation, thoughts, and feelings—were rejected as unobservable, reducible to overt behavior, and unworthy of scientific scrutiny. So unsurprisingly, emotions were largely ignored for several decades. They were relegated to the status of afterthoughts—nuisances to be examined when they got in the way of “harder” behavioral science.

Then, with a swing of the scientific pendulum, unobservable psychological internal states were not only deemed acceptable, but seen as central to an understanding of human functioning. Still, however, emotions were overlooked: This revolution in psychology was strictly cognitive, and emotions still took a back seat. In their zeal, cognitive psychologists at first considered emotions mere by-products of cognitive appraisal, and thus still not worthy of focused, unitary study. Clearly a more balanced view of emotion was still necessary. It also turns out that this issue of how cognition impacts emotion continues as a longstanding issue.

Perspectives about emotional development that gained ascendance after the cognitive revolution included efforts to situate emotion's relation to cognition in a more balanced manner. The discrete emotions framework is a prominent, early, and continuing example of such perspectives. It holds that emotions can be grouped into a set of very specific, largely facial, responses, which are biologically based responses to specific stimuli, are evolutionarily "old," and are recognizable throughout cultures (e.g., Izard, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 2007). Such "basic" emotions invoke specific cognitions, behaviors, and regulatory efforts. More important, they are rapid, automatic, and nonconscious, requiring minimal or only rudimentary appraisal. Each basic emotion includes a unique feeling component as part of its neurobiological activation, which may be invariant over the lifespan (Izard, 2007).

Within discrete emotions theory, cognition is considered an important part of "emotion schemas"—for example, emotions such as shame and guilt, where self-evaluation is particularly relevant, require the support of, or are activated by, cognition (Ackerman, Abe, & Izard, 1998). More broadly, emotions interact with cognitive appraisals of ongoing events and higher-order cognitions like the aforesaid self-evaluations to become emotion schemas, going beyond basic emotions to incorporate individual- and culture-specific unions of feelings, motivational and regulatory processes, learned labels, and concepts. Memories, already-constructed concepts, and thoughts connected to a child's self-evaluation, beliefs, and values, strongly supported by language and other social cognitive development, help to create such emotion schemas. According to Izard (2007), the ability to form such schemas may be built into the neurobiological systems that underlie emotions and perceptual/cognitive action.

Thus, Rodney's developing emotion schemas are likely to differ substantially from Jimmy's. When Rodney's teacher tells him he must clean up when he isn't ready to (i.e., he can't get his way), memories of his father punishing him for merely having his toys on the living room floor (that wasn't fair!!), along with the somewhat contradictory admonishment to "stick up for yourself" form the cognitive substrate of an emotion schema. Predicting that his teacher will yell if he doesn't clean up, but that he needs to defend himself, he gets MAD!! He experiences emotion befitting his own individualized schema, supported by cognitions about his experiences with his father and the language to describe them.

In contrast, when Jimmy hears the teacher's request, he appraises the situation as one of obligation because of his Chinese mother's teaching about complying with adults, but his biologically based fearful temperament also engenders stress hormone output (Izard, 2007). So he feels a little scared as he quickly puts away toys. His schema for the same event was very different from Rodney's.

Despite the apparent heuristic power of the emotion schema construct, developmental researchers continue to struggle regarding when and how cognition interfaces with emotions. Thus, although Izard and others who developed theories after the cognitive revolution clearly did not ignore the influence of cognition, some newer theoretical frameworks give more prominence to the action of cognition and language within emotional experience and expression (e.g., Hoemann, Xu, & Barrett, 2019; Holodynski & Seeger, 2019). My stance would be that Izard's notion of emotion schemas allows for many aspects of these more recent theorists' contributions.

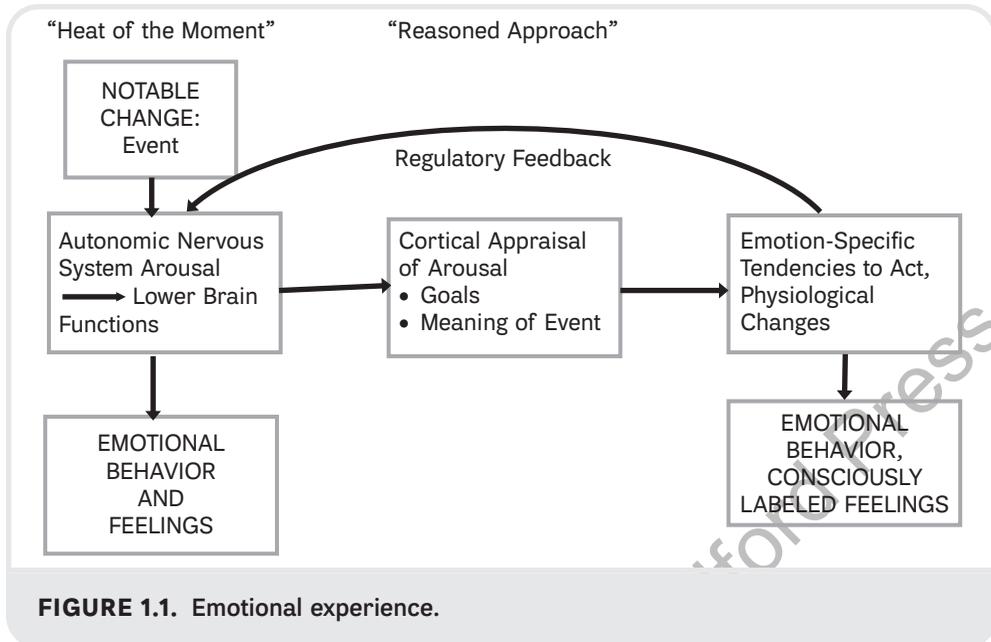
Despite competing theoretical frameworks, it is most likely that these two important systems, emotion and cognition, work in concert. It seems to me that, after infancy, sometimes emotional experience *precedes* cognition, sometimes it is *preceded* by cognition, and often it *co-occurs with* cognition, as in emotion schemas. In my view, then, although these newer perspectives give us many useful ideas that will be subsequently discussed, emotion and cognition often work together in the creation of emotional experience—although at times one or the other “takes the lead,” neither takes precedence over the other (Lewis & Michalson, 1983).

Although cognition was not integrated into all parts of discrete emotions theory, and some of the theory's tenets have not entirely held up in empirical scrutiny (e.g., Walle & Dahl, 2020), this stance allowed developmental researchers to make predictions about emotional development and the methodologies with which to test them. Given this theory and several others (e.g., functionalism, to which I adhere and which is discussed later; Barrett, 2020; Buss et al., 2019), emotion development research blossomed. In fact, the number of peer-reviewed citations for preschoolers and emotions rose from a low of 140 from 1960 to 1980, to over 1,100 in next two decades, exploding to over 4,400 from 2001 to 2020. This exponential increase has fueled developmental scientists' thinking about emotion itself. In what follows, I outline my own somewhat eclectic conception of emotion, and its nature, process, functions, and position within social relationships and culture.

### **Emotional Experience: Emotion and Cognition Together**

There is little disagreement that emotional experience originates with autonomic nervous system arousal, but what happens next, and how and why, continue to be the subject of much debate (see Buss et al., 2019; Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1989; Flores-Kanter & Medrano, 2020; Izard, 1993a; Lazarus, 1991; LoBue, Pérez-Edgar, & Buss, 2019; Stein, Trabasso, & Liwag, 1993). My view of how emotional experiences occur can be seen in Figure 1.1.

First, there is arousal. The autonomic nervous system is aroused by a notable change in the person's world. This change can be caused by an environmental event, by the actions of the individual, by the actions of others, or even by memories. Sometimes the response to this arousal is limited to lower, more primitive brain systems, such as the amygdala and medial prefrontal cortex (Diamond, Stuss, & Knight, 2002; Flores-Kanter et al., 2020; Izard, 2007). When the “bottom drops out” on the “kiddie” roller coaster ride, this accident is certainly a sudden and intense environmental change for a 5-year-old girl. And when a 4-year-old boy's mother blocks access to the cookies on the table, her actions are noteworthy. In both instances emotions ensue quickly and



automatically, along with their attendant behaviors: The 5-year-old hides her eyes and screams; the 4-year-old glares at his mother and stomps his foot. This “bottom-up” process of emotional experience is portrayed in the leftmost column of Figure 1.1. Quick and relatively effortless, it involves perception more than cognition.

Individuals experience these lower-level emotional experiences across the lifespan, but during early childhood much brain development takes place (e.g., the ventromedial and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex; Diamond et al., 2002; LeDoux, 1996; Tsujimoto, 2008), such that “top-down” functioning becomes increasingly important to the nature of emotional experience (Cole, Lougheed, & Ram, 2018). Moreover, the anterior cingulate cortex develops and functions as a bridge between the limbic system and neocortex, facilitating the constant, dynamic interaction between emotion and cognition. These developments in the brain from toddlerhood onward allow emotion, motivation, and cognition to work together strongly, influencing emotional experience by creating an increasingly complicated network of desired outcomes, or goals, and emotion concepts (i.e., emotion schemas). The creation and utilization of emotion schemas are effortful, although not necessarily conscious.

Hence the need for cortical brain involvement in much of emotional experience is clear: Notable changes and attendant arousal give children important information about their ongoing goals and their ability to cope with events, but this information needs to be held in mind and *understood*, not just automatically reacted to. A child (or an adult, for that matter) needs to *represent* the notable change, the new thing that has happened. Interpretations of the emotion-eliciting circumstance are necessary, and implicate cognitive processes like attention, language, memory, reasoning, and planning. How does the event affect ongoing goals, if at all? Can the child deal with these consequences? These cognitive aspects of an emotional experience are portrayed in the middle column of Figure 1.1.

As 2½-year-old Jessica is playing on the floor, she suddenly sees a large toy action figure, black and rather menacing—certainly unique in her experience—moving into the room on its own. This is a new thing! (Arousal takes place here.) This object must have some sort of effect on her world. But what? (What does this arousal mean? Interpretation is required.) She continues to watch Darth Vader as he comes closer. Slowly she understands that this guy is totally unpredictable. He may interfere with her goal of staying safe. Darth Vader is scary!

Cognition plays an important role in the emotion Jessica finally experiences—in this sense the appraisal theoretical perspective is fully integrated here (Lazarus, 1991). Before any specific emotional reaction is felt by her, or discerned by others, she must attend to the notable event, comprehend it, and interpret it. These interpretations and construals of events' relations to ongoing goals lead not only to felt emotions, but also to actions associated with each specific emotion and to physiological changes in arousal, as portrayed in the rightmost column of Figure 1.1.

In the version of Jessica's experience given here, she feels afraid because of her interpretation of Darth Vader's approach (felt emotion). She turns and runs toward her mother, screaming, "I scared" (goal-directed, emotion-related action; labeled feelings). If she finds her mom, her physiological arousal lessens. But if she realizes she is alone, she feels increased arousal instead. So the results of Jessica's emotion-related actions also influence her arousal and may feed back into new construals and changing emotional experience. As the child matures, self-monitoring of these emotion-related actions and of concomitant changes in arousal comes into play (e.g., an older child's arousal may change as he holds his ground, Darth Vader comes closer, and the child sees he's not a threat). This pathway is portrayed at the top of Figure 1.1.

Sometimes the precise experience of emotional arousal depends on *which* of several goals the child focuses on. For instance, Jessica may have two goals—having fun and remaining safe. The approach of Darth Vader may affect either goal or both. If she cannot remain safe, Jessica will feel afraid. If Darth Vader looks like an interesting toy, she may feel happiness.

In these ways, the argument of whether emotion is predominant over cognition in emotional experiences, or vice versa, can be resolved based on what we are learning about brain development (Diamond et al., 2002). Some emotional experiences do not involve cognition; they are mostly automatic. But because the cortical path to emotion predominates after about the middle of the first year, this intimate union of cognition and emotion is usually what is referred to when emotions are discussed (Izard, 1991; LeDoux, 1996; Stein et al., 1993). The conceptions of emotion put forward in Figure 1.1 thus inform the rest of this volume.

## **Emotions as Regulators of the Behavior of Self and Others**

### *The Functionalist Perspective*

An important way of looking at emotions, upon which the just-described viewpoint largely rests, focuses on a child's goals, accenting the *functions* of various emotions. What do emotions *do* for children and the people with whom they interact? The functionalist perspective notes that children's emotions provide both children and others

with information (see Buss et al., 2019; Campos & Barrett, 1984; Saarni, Campos, Camras, & Witherington, 2006). The information inherent in the experience and expression of emotion is important to a child because it can shape behavior during and after the event, in accordance with the child's goals.

Thus each emotion has a unique function serving a person's goals for achieving, maintaining, or regaining well-being, both social and cognitive (Cole et al., 2018; Saarni et al., 2006). For example, Jessica in the previous example appraised Darth Vader's arrival as a threat to the goal of safety and is ready to flee. An angry child has had a goal blocked and will work to overcome the obstacle, such as when Mike and Joey literally cross swords over their differing plans for play. In contrast, sadness is marked by an appraisal that an important goal will not be attained and must be abandoned; Jimmy was sad when denied entry to the playtime.

Thus differing emotions affect children's thinking, behavior, and feelings in unique ways and benefit from different regulatory strategies (Barrett, 2020; Dennis & Kelemen, 2009); they also have different consequences, especially in the differing behaviors they elicit from others, because emotional expressions can help others to describe and predict the child's behavior (Walle & Campos, 2012; Widen & Russell, 2010b).

In this functionalist view, then, emotional experience and expressiveness not only are important information for oneself *but also* for others—others' behaviors often constitute antecedent conditions for a child's emotions, but the child's emotions' effects on others are equally important. The experience and expression of emotion signal whether the child or other people need to modify or continue their own goal-directed behavior (Saarni, 2001; Walle & Campos, 2012). For example, if a girl experiences anger while playing at the puzzle activity table with another child, she may tell her mother "I don't want *her* to come to my birthday party." The experience of anger gave her information that affects her subsequent behavior. But her anger also gives information to others that affects their behavior—the play partner who witnessed her anger may seek to avoid her until she is calm, and maybe even until the next day. The information inherent in emotions is crucial to self *and* others. Take another example:

Eighteen-month-old Amy expresses anger when her parents curtail her freedom to run around the room. She does not want to get into her high chair; in fact, her goal is to continue to dash from the window to the door and back again. Because she experiences this anger, she is likely to engage in specific behaviors, such as kicking and yelling, in service of the goal of freedom. As for her parents, Amy's kicking and yelling lets them know that she does not like the restriction of the high chair. The parents react to this behavior with distractions such as singing, or, in contrast, by yelling at her to sit still. Peers and siblings too benefit from witnessing Amy's expression of emotion. When Amy's 3-year-old brother witnesses her social signal of anger, he may know from experience that his most profitable response is to retreat.

Another example is fear:

If Marco experiences fear when Billy arrives at day care, the experience of fear gives him important signals that affect his subsequent behavior. He gives Billy a wide berth, seeks the lap of a caregiver, and remains vigilant during his day. Marco's expression of fear gives

important signals to other people that affect their subsequent behavior too. His caregivers are watchful because they wish to know what is bothering him so that they can help him, and Billy also studies him, ready to take advantage by grabbing a toy.

Joey's "pirate" play, described earlier, is likewise replete with evidence of emotions' links to his ongoing goals. When he is happy about finding the buried treasure, his experience of happiness makes him want to continue this enjoyable activity. At the same time, Joey's expression of joy tells his friend Mike that it is an opportune time to join him in flinging "gold doubloons" in the air.

In sum, the experience and expression of emotion signal that the goal-directed behavior of the child or other people needs to be modified or continued. So emotions are important both interpersonally and intrapersonally, and intimately include (but are not limited to) cognition, in terms of children's appraisals of how events impact their goals (Walle & Dahl, 2020). As noted by Barrett (2020), the development of emotional competence *can* include the conceptual foundation suggested by Hoemann et al. (2019) and the symbolic representation upon which Holodynski and Seeger (2019) rest portions of their notion of internalized experience and expression of emotion. These viewpoints require careful study and inclusion in our evolving thinking about emotional competence. At the same time, the development of emotional competence is not just the orderly, progressive development implied in those perspectives—it is dynamic, with expressions, feelings, brain development, and aspects of physiological arousal all changing across micro- and macro-level time spans (Barrett, 2020; Cole et al., 2018). Given this level of complexity, the functional perspective offers a fruitful, advantageous lens with which to examine such development. And its inclusion of emotion's influence on others as well as the self leads to another important perspective to consider.

### *The Social Constructivist Perspective*

As already noted, there is no doubt that emotional expressiveness is a powerful interpersonal regulator and that this social side of emotion is important. Some prominent researchers and theorists go even further to assert that this interpersonal function of emotion is central to the very nature of emotional expression and experience (Gergen, 1985; Russell, 1989). This social constructivist approach thus focuses on emotions as social products. According to Saarni and Crowley (1990), emotions and social relations are inseparable. Saarni (1987) states that "emotion's meaningfulness is grounded in human relationships . . . transactions among people [are] the primary focus for feelings to be experienced, observed or inferred, talked about, and elaborated into expectancies for guiding one through future interpersonal interactions" (p. 535–536; see also Boiger & Mesquita, 2012). Interpersonal communication is crucial not only to emotional experience and expression, but also to emotion knowledge and regulation.

According to Saarni (2001), children *make sense of emotions*, as in the functionalist view already described, especially within social interactions. Even very young children learn the "feeling rules" of their community from their own experiences and the socialization of adults—what to feel in differing situations, how to interpret and manage these feelings, and how to react to the feelings of others (Hochschild, 1979).

That is, emotions and emotional competence skills are affected strongly by socialization according to cultural values and norms; for example, how two cultures' value and respond to anger and shame may differ markedly (Cole, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2006). Cultural transmission of beliefs and practices regarding emotional competence is a theme I return to frequently in this book. What is adaptive in one cultural group may not be in another (Raval & Walker, 2019).

Thus, to summarize this perspective, emotion-relevant expectations, beliefs, and values are transmitted by social partners during emotional events. As much as emotional competence skills affect interpersonal relations, interpersonal interactions and their contexts guide the development and articulation of these skills (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). The experience, expression, regulation, and interpretation of emotions all depend on one's sociocultural environment and interactions within relationships. Therefore, children's emotional worlds develop with input from socializers, the first of whom are parents. The general tenets, developmental progressions, and outcomes for emotional competence and its socialization may have universal aspects, but we must consider cultural variations as well (Saarni & Crowley, 1990).

## WHAT IS EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE?

Given my theoretical view consolidating a way of describing emotional experience and its function and position within social and cultural milieus, it is time to turn to a definition of *emotional competence*, the focus of the volume. Emotional competence can be defined as *emotional effectiveness*, by which a child can reach short- and long-term goals during or after emotion-eliciting encounters (Saarni, 1999). As exemplified in Joey's play, emotionally competent young children begin to (1) experience and purposefully express a broad variety of emotions, without incapacitating intensity or duration; (2) understand their own and others' emotions; and (3) regulate their emotion whenever its experience is "too much" or "too little" for their own comfort or others' needs and expectations.

It is important to view this development within the context of young children's key developmental tasks. During the early childhood years, emotional competence skills are organized around the developmental tasks of maintaining positive emotional engagement with the physical and social world, making and maintaining relationships with other children and adults, and managing emotional arousal in the context of social interaction and new cognitive demands (Parker & Gottman, 1989; Waters & Sroufe, 1983). These skills are not easy ones for young children, especially because they are just entering the peer arena. As well, the new classroom context that so many young children experience can be very taxing; they are being asked to sit still, pay attention, follow directions, approach group play, complete preacademic tasks, and get along with others in ways that challenge their emerging abilities. The emotional competence skills that develop dramatically during early childhood can assist with these hurdles, and help preschoolers succeed at developmental tasks.

These abilities continue to develop throughout the lifespan, but as Joey shows us, preschool-age children are surprisingly adept at several components of emotional competence. A preview of the exemplary types of competencies mastered by preschoolers

includes the following (Camras & Halberstadt, 2017; Halberstadt et al., 2001; Saarni, 1990).

### **Emotion Expressiveness**

- Using gestures to express nonverbal emotional messages about a social situation or relationship (e.g., Joey hugged Mike when he stepped on the Lego).
- Demonstrating empathic involvement in others' emotions (e.g., Jimmy kissed his baby sister when she fell and hurt her knee).
- Displaying complex social and self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, pride, shame, and contempt, in appropriate contexts (e.g., Mike hung his head when his mother discovered forbidden chocolate all over his face).
- Realizing that one may feel a certain way "on the inside," but show a different demeanor "on the outside"—especially showing that an overt expression of socially disapproved feelings can be controlled, while expressing more socially appropriate emotions (e.g., Jimmy was somewhat fearful of an adult classroom visitor, but showed no emotion or even a slight smile).

### **Emotion Knowledge**

- Discerning one's own emotional states (e.g., Rodney realized that he mostly feels sad, but also a little bit angry, when getting time-out from his preschool teacher).
- Discerning others' emotional states (e.g., Jimmy knew that Daddy's smile as he comes into the house meant that his workday was satisfactory and he probably won't yell tonight).
- Using the vocabulary of emotion (e.g., Rodney reminisced with his mother about family sadness when a pet died).

### **Emotion Regulation**

It is important to note that emotions are regulators of behavior within oneself (intrapersonal, as when Joey reins in his annoyance with Mike) and in interactions with others (interpersonal, as when Joey retreated in the face of Rodney's contempt) (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004).

- Coping with aversive or distressing emotions or the situations that elicit them (e.g., even though he was very upset, Joey used his mother's assistance instead of hitting when his younger brother grabbed all the toys, and his mother knew he needed help because of his distress).
- Coping with pleasurable emotions or the situations that elicit them (e.g., when his toddler sister loudly belched, Mike took a deep breath and downplayed his laughter when it began to feel uncontrollable, but even so, his sister looked offended).
- Strategically "up-regulating" the experience and expression of emotions at appropriate

times (e.g., Joey grimaced in anger to make Rodney retreat; he sang out loud to share his happiness at play with Mike).

Although these components of emotional competence are often viewed as individual differences, and often are discussed as such throughout this book, I also emphasize their social roots, informed by both the functionalist and social constructivist perspectives. Preschoolers' unique developmental and social histories and exposure to specific contexts all influence how they experience and interpret emotional transactions. But although children's emotional competence is grounded in their own personal goals and is intimately connected to their own sociocultural context, it also develops in concert with their individual abilities and vulnerabilities related to cognitive skills and influenced by temperament-related emotional dispositions (Saarni, 2001).

Thus, in the next sections of this introductory chapter, I address developmental change and stability, as well as individual differences, in young children's emotional competence, and devote special attention to these contributors: (1) intrapersonal (i.e., cognition, language, and temperament); and (2) interpersonal (i.e., socialization, with an expanded emphasis on culture). Then I briefly introduce topics as they appear in the following chapters of this volume: the outcomes of emotional competence during early childhood for both social competence and preacademic school success. Having introduced these matters, I propose an overarching model of emotional competence during early childhood. Then I turn to the consideration of children who have difficulties in their emotional competence development, along with the need to accurately assess early childhood emotional competence and offer programming to promote its development. Next I describe where I think the field of emotional competence is headed, both theoretically and methodologically, along with an outline of subsequent chapters. Finally, I offer a call for action.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGE IN TODDLERS' AND PRESCHOOLERS' EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

With this introduction to the nature and importance of emotional competence in early childhood, and some delineation of the nature of emotion itself, it is time to consider developmental change in emotional competence across early childhood. The age period from 2 to 5 years is a time of change for children and caregivers alike. Progress in all areas of children's development—talking, thinking, running, jumping, and playing together—seems to occur daily. Adults are often delighted with these new abilities, especially with children's growing deftness in interacting with both grownups and peers.

As amply described earlier, these new proficiencies are not limited to isolated language, cognitive, social, and motor skills. Children from 2 to 5 years of age are more emotionally sophisticated than we ever previously imagined. The many changes in emotional competence during this age period have prompted developmental psychologists to try to describe them more fully, to search for the contributions of socialization and maturation to such change, and to find ways to examine and promote this

development. This focus is particularly auspicious because it signifies an increasing ability to describe specific children, and to predict their behavior, in terms of physical, social, cognitive, and emotional attributes.

Accounts of any child's behavior are arid and incomplete unless they include information on emotions. The important developmental question "What changes over time?" cannot be answered fully without knowing the details about children's emotional lives. Children obviously reason in a more abstract way and become more motorically adept as development proceeds. But knowing about developmental change in emotional competence—that 2-year-olds' negativity generally wanes considerably, or that kindergartners are at the threshold of understanding finer complexities of emotional experience—is invaluable to filling out a more complete picture of children at these ages.

These age-related changes have important implications. Different levels of emotional competence in children who differ in age should be expected, often because of advances in language, perspective taking, and other cognitive abilities. In a group of young children, older preschoolers' expression and understanding of emotions differ from toddlers' and even from younger preschoolers'. A 4-year-old at the playground with her mother, upon seeing another child crying, is no longer so likely to freeze, or even to cry herself, as she was at 18 months. Instead, she is likely to look concerned and ask, "Why is he crying?"

The upper limit of this age range—around the transition to kindergarten—is often a time when children experience growth in their understanding of the causes and consequences of emotions and of their complexity. For example, during a busy day in kindergarten, two boys may discuss who is sitting at and who is missing from their snack table. They may commiserate over their shared emotions: "John is here. That's the happy thing." "But Darryl is not, and that's the sad thing. We need to see if we can find him on the playground." Another 5-year-old may assert, "Only our moms know what we really feel on the inside." Still another may smile wanly when offered an unfamiliar food by her favorite aunt, instead of refusing it with an ill-tempered retort. Because of these myriad changes in emotional competence, preschoolers' lives with parents, siblings, peers, and teachers change as well, and their attainment of social and preacademic skills can increase.

In this book, I examine all the component skills of emotional competence—experience and expression, knowledge, and regulation—from the organizing perspective of developmental change across the toddler and preschool periods. Another important organizing perspective focuses on what may stay relatively the same—individual differences in emotional competence.

## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Normative change in emotional competence, although important, does not tell the whole story. Caregivers often focus on critical individual differences in children's emotional competence: "She gets upset so easily. I wish I could help her calm down." Or "He drew a smile on his picture of himself on the potty. Isn't that super? I love it that

he feels proud about what he's done!" Hence, as noted earlier, the important developmental question "What stays relatively the same over time?" also cannot be answered fully without knowing more about children's emotional lives. We may know that a 3-year-old girl can alternate feet while climbing stairs. However, this is not the same as knowing that she sings gaily as she does so, or stomps in anger over an insult incurred an hour ago, or must be coaxed to come upstairs because the "bogeyman" might be there—and that we see similar propensities, perhaps expressed somewhat differently—when she is 5 years old.

Where could preschoolers' budding emotional skills possibly come from? What fuels the development milestones they successfully meet (what is changing?) and their unique individual profiles of emotional competence (what stays relatively the same)? No doubt, both intrapersonal and interpersonal contributors, along with brain development, are critical for both developmental change and individual stability. How do other areas of children's development, such as cognition, fuel emotional competence? How do parents, other caregivers, siblings, and peers contribute to preschoolers' growing emotional competencies and to individual differences among them? I now consider these questions.

### **Intrapersonal Contributions to Individual Differences in Emotional Competence**

Children's specific abilities and attributes can promote or hinder emotional competence. Some children are blessed with cognitive and language skills that allow them to better understand their social–emotional world and better communicate their feelings, wishes, desires, and goals for social interactions and relationships (Cutting & Dunn, 1999). Differences in these abilities contribute to differences in emotion expressiveness, knowledge, and regulation. As an example of cognition influencing emotion knowledge, a preschooler who can reason flexibly may more readily perceive how another person's emotional reactions might differ from her own in a specific situation—though they delight *me*, others may fear swimming pools.

Jenny knows that her friend is afraid of climbing to the top of the jungle gym, even though it is Jenny's favorite activity on the playground. This knowledge of her friend's feelings moderates Jenny's behavior during play with her. The direction of this moderation is governed by other factors: If Jenny is kind, she avoids this activity when playing with her friend; if she is a bit more self-concerned, she teases and goads her.

Thus, preschoolers differ in their age-appropriate abilities to categorize complex elements, such as other people, and to take the perspective of these other persons. These cognitive abilities may support their emotional competence skills—expressiveness, knowledge, and regulation. In fact, in the new theory of constructed emotion (e.g., Hoemann et al., 2019), *all* of emotion development solely consists of the development of linguistic emotion concepts. The strong version of this theory asserts that children only experience and perceive emotions after sufficient brain development to assemble "embodied" emotion concepts that give meaning to arousal and guide behavior, using

similar prior experiences. After taking in information from their bodies and the world, children (and others) linguistically *categorize* the information to experience emotion (Hoemann et al., 2019).

The cognitive constructivist view is useful in that conceptualizing emotions and their attendant arousal may help children to know when, and perhaps how, to regulate emotion and behavior based on prior behavior. However, as Barrett (2020) points out, children's emotions are not just concepts—as I've noted, emotions are *functional*—they are organized around the need to motivate and mobilize action tendencies that may include our social interaction partners. In short, and to reiterate earlier conclusions, emotion concepts are important ways in which brain development and cognition influence emotional competence, but they are not its sole determinants. What may be some other intrapersonal attributes that influence the meeting of developmental milestones and contribute to individual differences in preschoolers' emotional competence?

In a less-strict view focusing on language, language skill clearly supports emotional competence in young children, allowing them to represent experience and communicate with others about feelings (Pons, Lawson, Harris, & DeRosnay, 2003). It may especially serve emotion regulation, helping children codify a menu of goal-related emotion regulation strategies, and allowing them to internalize the expression of emotion for regulation that is more efficient and socially satisfactory (Holodynski & Seeger, 2019). Language also allows children to ask for help with their feelings; for example, children with better language skills as toddlers expressed less-intense anger as 4-year-olds (Roben, Cole, & Armstrong, 2013).

Young children's growth in emotion knowledge also benefits from their language skills (Martin, Williamson, Kurtz-Nelson, & Boekamp, 2015; Martins, Osório, Verissimo, & Martins, 2016; Seidenfeld, Johnson, Cavadel, & Izard, 2014). More verbal children can ask better questions about their own and others' emotions, discussing emotions and the means of dealing with them in conversations with parents and peers. Understanding the answers given by parents and peers may present an advantage in dealing with emotions (Pons et al., 2003). Such conversations also may motivate parents especially to talk more with their children about emotions and their regulation; exposure to discussions about emotions promotes emotional competence (Ogren & Johnson, 2020).

Temperament also is an important intrapersonal element that can guide the development of emotional competence. Children with different emotional dispositions (i.e., temperaments) may demonstrate specific patterns of expressiveness. Further, they may be well- or ill-equipped to develop certain components of emotional competence, especially emotion regulation (Calkins & Mackler, 2011). For example, an especially negative child may find that she or he has a greater need for emotion regulation, even though this may be difficult. Moreover, negativity may be related to difficulties in understanding emotions (e.g., shyer children had less-developed emotion knowledge in DeRosnay, Fink, Begeer, Slaughter, & Peterson, 2014). In contrast, a child whose temperament allows him to shift attention from a distressing situation to focus on comforting actions, objects, or thoughts is better able to regulate his emotions—Benny hums to himself when working on writing letters and focusing on that helps him feel a bit calmer during this challenging task.

## **Interpersonal Contributions to Individual Differences in Emotional Competence**

Although each child brings a particular set of abilities and propensities to his or her emotional life, other persons clearly play a role in the development of emotional competence, as already noted in the discussion of the social constructivist perspective. That is, interpersonal socialization factors also contribute in a major way to the development of individual differences in emotional competence. Children learn much from various socializing agents about the appropriate expression of emotions, the nature of emotional expressions and situations, means of coping with emotions, and even potential reactions to others' positive and negative emotions.

During this point in the lifespan, the foremost socializers are parents. Most preschoolers enjoy continued close contact with their parents and teachers during this period, even as they move into peer relationships. Parental modeling, contingent reactions to children's emotions, and coaching (i.e., teaching and discussing) contribute to the children's own patterns of expressiveness, emotion knowledge, and emotion regulation (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998).

Parents' own patterns of expressiveness are reflected in their children's expressiveness. Even preschoolers themselves are aware of these associations. When asked to articulate how she feels when her mother is happy, a preschooler may assert, "I give Mommy a big hug!" Another child reflects on his angry father: "I hide from him, I go outside; I don't like him when he's mad." Furthermore, parents who talk about emotions and foster this ability in their children enable their children to express certain optimal patterns of emotions.

Ranjit's mother calmly discusses her son's anger over not being allowed to sample grapes freely from the produce aisle as they stroll through the grocery store. A few shoppers eye her skeptically. But as Ranjit grudgingly grumbles about his desires, he is learning to use words to communicate emotional needs, rather than launching into a full-blown tantrum.

And parents' specific reactions to their children's emotions encourage or discourage certain patterns of expressiveness. In this example, the mother's calm response fosters not only Ranjit's acceptance of his own anger, but also his modulation of its intensity.

These aspects of socialization also contribute to young children's emotion knowledge. Parents' talking about emotion-laden experiences in daily life, accepting and encouraging children's emotional expressiveness, and expressing predominantly positive emotions all promote children's emotion knowledge.

When Joanna's father discusses her feelings about the end of the preschool year—the joy of an upcoming trip to the beach, and the accompanying sadness about missing friends—the guidance is quite direct. If Joanna's parents accompany their emotion teaching with positive expressiveness and a readiness to cultivate her emotional life by reacting to her emotions in a helpful, accepting way, then she is even more motivated to tackle the thorny issues centering around emotion knowledge.

Last, it is likely that parents' own emotions, teaching, and reactions to children's emotions influence children's means of emotion regulation.

Watching his mother break out in tears for the third time that day, Larry witnesses one way to deal with situations that require emotion regulation—just vent them! But he does not get to talk to his mother much about feelings, because she is too busy “letting out her anger.” Perhaps the only message he does get is when his mother justifies her outbursts. The mother's scathing reactions to Larry's own emotions lead him to suppress his expressiveness, at least when she is present.

Other socializers' contributions to emotional competence also are important. Especially in the last decades, there is a new spotlight on how early childhood caregivers and educators contribute to preschoolers' emotional competence. Although the same mechanisms can be seen in their emotion socialization, their effects on emotional competence may differ in the larger group environment of the classroom (Denham, Ferrier, & Bassett, 2020).

Peers and siblings also can be very effective socializers of emotion. Their socialization is likely to differ substantially from that of parents, however: If a younger sibling becomes angry in a grocery store, the older sibling is not likely to be as patient and accepting as Ranjit's mother in the earlier example—anger, ridicule, or even desertion is far more probable! Obviously, the preschooler in question could deduce from these reactions that some people do *not* tolerate his anger—an equally important lesson.

### *More on Culture*

Cultural, historical, and socially embedded contexts influence the creation and interpretation of the beliefs and practices in which emotions are experienced, expressed, understood, regulated, and socialized (De Leersnyder, Boiger, & Mesquita, 2015; Saarni, 1987, 1998, 2001; Saarni & Crowley, 1990). In this view, emotions are ongoing, dynamic, and *interactive* (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012). Within the aforementioned socialization framework, parents convey culturally specific patterns of expressiveness and different reactions to children's emotions, and directly teach children cultural information on the ways to express, regulate, and understand emotions. Parental behavior lets children know *what matters* in the world of emotions.

It is crucial to remember that emotional competence and its socialization occur in both collectivistic/relational and individualistic cultural contexts, and it is best to understand both emotional competence and its socialization in terms of the balance of both these continua in the specific setting (Friedlmeier, Çorapçı, & Cole, 2011). Thus, for example, in more collectivistic/relational cultural contexts, the view of the self is more interdependent, whereas independence is accentuated in more individualistic contexts; moreover, emotional goals differ across these continua. That is, in individualistic cultures, the emotional goal is to enhance self-esteem via promoting positivity and allowing expression of negativity, whereas more collectivistic/relational cultures focus on the welfare of the group and its harmony. What these varying goals mean for emotional competence can be exemplified by the emphasis on empathy and shame in

collectivistic/relational cultures, and by the opposing accent on pride and anger in individualistic ones, for example. How then might young children's emotional experience and expression, knowledge, and regulation, as well as the socialization mechanisms of modeling, teaching, and responding to children's emotions, be similar or different across cultural contexts? In the ensuing chapters, I attempt to answer these questions.

## **THE COMPLEX LINKAGE BETWEEN EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AND SOCIAL AND SCHOOL SUCCESS**

It is one thing to understand that children show differing patterns of emotional competence across ages and individuals. It is quite another matter to realize that these differences have a very real impact on how children work and play together and even on how they master preacademic skills like learning letters and numbers. Not only must parents, educators, and psychologists know what to look for in terms of young children's emotional development, they must know why such development is so crucial, and what aspects of it need fostering.

All the component abilities of emotional competence are important in their own right but also buttress broader aspects of development. Much more detail is given in subsequent chapters, but it is important to note several points here. First, the components of emotional competence help to ensure effective social interactions and young children's overall social competence—their listening, cooperating, appropriate help seeking, joining interactions, and negotiating (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). Second, young children also utilize emotional competence to facilitate learning alongside and in collaboration with teachers and peers (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010). Thus emotional competence supports not only social competence, but also early school success (generally defined in this volume as positive attitudes toward learning, persistence, adjustment to classroom routines, and the growth of preacademic competence; Denham, Bassett, Mincic, et al., 2012; Romano, Babchishin, Pagani, & Kohen, 2010).

More specifically, preschoolers who understand and regulate emotions, and are more emotionally positive when they enter school, are at a double advantage throughout their primary years. They can more easily develop positive and supportive relationships with peers and teachers, as well as more easily participate in school and achieve at higher levels (Garner & Waajid, 2008; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Izard et al., 2001; Leerkes, Paradise, O'Brien, Calkins, & Lange, 2008). Conversely, children who enter school with fewer emotional competence skills are more often rejected by peers, develop less-supportive relationships with teachers, participate less in class, enjoy school less, achieve at lower levels, and are at risk for later behavior problems (Denham, Bassett, Mincic, et al., 2012; Denham, Bassett, Thayer, et al., 2012; Herndon, Bailey, Shewark, Denham, & Bassett, 2013). Aspects of these skills are even uniquely associated with adult experiences of education, employment, mental health, and avoidance of crime and substance use (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). In short, emotional competence greases the cogs of a successful early social and school experiences, with potentially long-lasting effects. In later chapters I go into greater detail on these advantages of emotional competence.

More specifically, regarding emotional expressiveness, a child who is sad or angry—either sitting on the sidelines of the group or querulously huffing around the room—is less likely to be able to understand, let alone tend to, the emotional needs of others, rendering him a rather poor playmate. Furthermore, this child also probably is too upset, too often, to develop positive attitudes about school, follow class schedules reliably, or focus on preacademic tasks.

Young children who understand emotion better also have more positive peer relations. The youngster who understands the emotions of others should interact more successfully when a friend gets angry with him or her, and the preschooler who can talk about his or her own emotions also is better able to negotiate disputes with friends.

If Matthew really wants the toy Jesse is holding, and is becoming increasingly frustrated, he may call to his teacher, “Jesse is making me mad. Put on the timer so we’ll know when it’s my turn.” Matthew probably also has more friends than he would if he progressed through his day grabbing and hitting when angry. Matthew also might be able to ask the teacher to help him when he’s frustrated doing a hard number task with manipulatives.

Or if a preschooler sees a peer bickering with another friend and correctly deduces the peer’s sadness, she comforts her friend rather than retreating or even entering the fray. These accurate perceptions of emotion help children to react appropriately, thus bolstering their relationships. Additionally, knowing readily how to deal with peers’ emotions—because they are accurately comprehended—allows preschoolers to give more “space” to preacademic tasks.

Learning to get along in groups of age-mates also presses the preschool child toward regulating emotional expressiveness. A preschooler who begins to regulate his or her own emotions gets along more successfully with peers. In the previous example, Matthew regulates his anger, and Jesse is glad that he does!

In sum, Joey, our “pirate” friend, uses emotion understanding, expressiveness, and regulation at full capacity during his play with peers, and this skill makes him a super playmate—he is more able to behave prosocially, and thus is often part of his peers’ plans and is better liked, with more friends than other children. At the same time, because of his emotional competence skills, he has the personal resources that allow him to be better ready to sit still, follow rules and directions, pay attention, and focus on preacademic tasks. So to maximize social competence and early school success, researchers and others must scrutinize how emotional competence allows a child to mobilize personal and environmental resources within peer interactions. This inquiry benefits from a consideration of how components of emotional competence work together.

### **Interrelations among Components of Emotional Competence**

As important as relations are between each component of emotional competence and social competence or preacademic success, it also is important to note that these components also are likely to support one another as an interrelated network (Eisenberg, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2005); when functioning optimally, they work together in an

integrated way. In fact, all aspects of emotional competence work together to promote children's social and preacademic success (Denham, Bassett, Mincic, et al., 2012). So, although in subsequent chapters I describe the expression, understanding, and regulation of emotions separately, it is my hope that the complex interrelations of these components of emotional competence will become obvious.

All components of emotional competence are intricately interdependent (Denham, 1986; Giesbrecht, Miller, & Müller, 2010; Hudson & Jacques, 2014; Lindsey, 2017). In particular, as Cole, Martin, et al. (2004) theorized and Denham, Bassett, Mincic, et al. (2012) demonstrated, emotion regulation and expressiveness often operate in concert. Children who experience intense negative emotions and are unable to regulate their expressions of such emotion, are especially likely to suffer difficulties in social relationships (Contreras, Kerns, Weimer, Gentzler, & Tomich, 2000). A crybaby does not fare well on the playground, and a grouch is not welcome during make-believe. In contrast, however, even children who are high in negative emotionality are buffered from peer status problems by good emotion regulation skills, which parents and caregivers can teach them (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, et al., 1997).

Jenny, who is angry and sullen day after day, and just can't seem to regulate her feelings, is unlikely to learn much about her playmates' emotions, at least partially because they avoid her. If Rodney develops successful strategies for regulating anger during a conflict, he may better recognize and understand both his own emotions and his friend's and may experience guilt over causing distress.

The emotion regulation that facilitates social interactions rests upon a foundation of other aspects of emotional competence. Specifically, emotion knowledge also may support positive, regulated emotional expressiveness, especially in predicting social competence and school success (Denham, Bassett, Thayer, et al., 2012; Denham, Caverly, et al., 2002; Di Maggio, Zappulla, & Pace, 2016).

Five-year-old Joey can "read" the emotions of his friends. He smiles easily at his friend Allen to cheer him up after a teacher's reprimand but sneers a bit at the outcast whose sickly smile indicates a bid for play. Joey can also understand his own emotional signals and fine-tune them so he can continue to be the undisputed leader of his group. When he realizes that he feels a little jittery during small-group time, he tries to still his tapping feet and dancing pencil, because other people (including his teacher) don't like him to behave this way. Besides, he really can do his alphabet work—there's no need to be tense!

In this vignette, we can see that the development of emotion regulation is necessary because of preschoolers' increasingly complex emotionality and the demands of their social world to maintain an even keel. It also is clearly supported by their increased comprehension of their own and others' emotionality. Preschoolers' emotional experience also becomes more and more complicated as they begin to feel blends of emotions and finely nuanced emotions (e.g., guilt or shame), and to better comprehend the emotional messages of parents and peers. So, with so much going on emotionally, some organized emotional gatekeeper—emotion regulation—must be cultivated.

Preschoolers' attention is becoming more riveted on success with friends, and this developmental focus also demands emotion regulation. In short, emotional expressiveness, knowledge, and regulation are working together, inextricably linked.

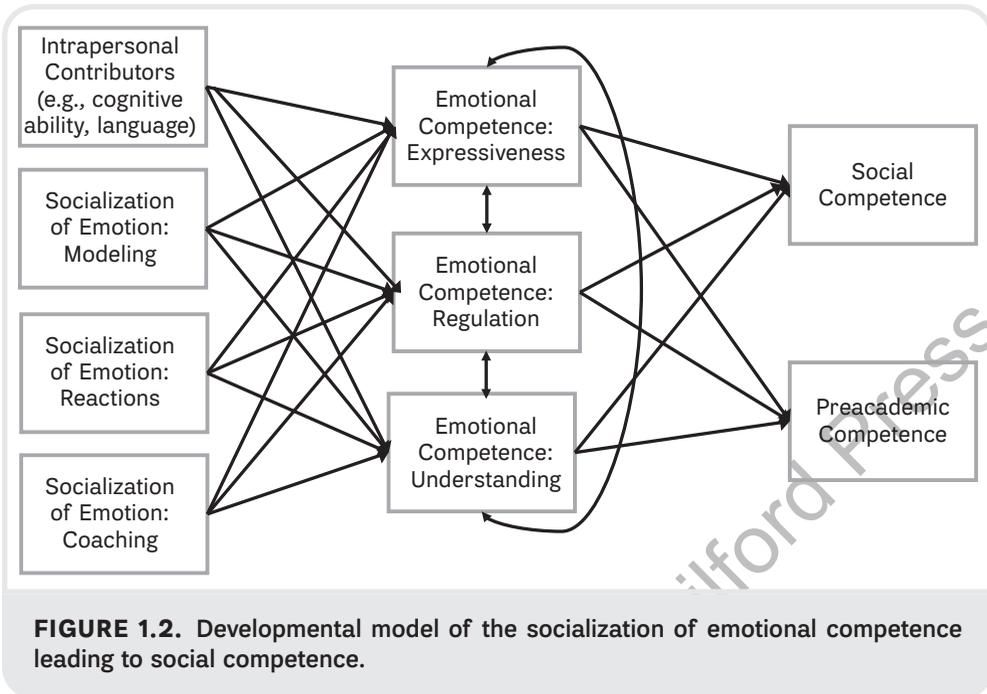
All these assertions about the interconnectedness of early emotional competence abilities have been corroborated: 4-year-olds with more positive profiles of emotional expressiveness, emotion regulation, and emotion knowledge did indeed show greater social and preacademic success as evaluated later that school year and in kindergarten (Denham, Bassett, Mincic, et al., 2012). Emotional competencies worked together to ensure the preschoolers' positive outcomes.

Further, it can be important to demonstrate relations among the aspects of emotional competence as outcomes in their own right. In a study of tantrums, preschoolers' self-reports of general sadness/distress and their lack of emotion knowledge, as well as parents' reports of their dysregulated sadness, use of venting to regulate emotions, anger reactivity, and anger and distress in tantrums, were all intricately related (Giesbrecht et al., 2010). Thus expressivity, emotion knowledge, and emotion regulation all showed associations. As another example, Lindsey (2017) noted the relation between young children's mutual positive affect and emotion knowledge. Finally, Hudson and Jacques (2014) showed that understanding emotions in general, and display rules in particular, contributed to 5- to 7-year-olds' ability to regulate emotion during a disappointing gift task.

In sum, emotional competence components do not operate in isolation. They support or weaken one another and promote or make difficult social and preacademic competence. Peers and adults experience children's emotional competence skills working together during interaction and as supports for learning. In forthcoming chapters, I expand on these interrelations where evidence is available. At this point, though, the ways we understand the nature of emotion and of the components of emotional competence and their potential interrelations and outcomes during early childhood have been discussed. I can now present a model to pull together these important ideas.

## **A MODEL OF EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

Both intra- and interpersonal contributions to the interrelated dimensions of emotional competence and the contributions of emotional competence to social and preacademic competence form the foundation of a developmental model. I argue that both intrapersonal factors (e.g., temperament, cognitive ability, and language) and interpersonal socialization of emotion (i.e., modeling, coaching or teaching about emotions, and reactions to children's emotions) within the preschool period contribute to the young child's expression, knowledge, and regulation of emotions, and that these elements of emotional competence contribute to indices of social and preacademic competence (see Figure 1.2). I use this model as a guiding framework throughout the book. I focus on the elements of emotional competence, the contributory pathways from the children themselves and the people around them, and the outcomes that are important in their world. This model helps conceptualize the explanations I expand upon in the coming chapters. It serves as a road map that describes typical development and suggests a template from which to evaluate less typical development.



## DIFFICULTIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Thus the model in Figure 1.2 helps to illustrate what I consider to be theoretically universal transitions to and from young children's emotional competence. But what happens when the development of emotional competence goes awry? It is well and good to study the emotional development of young children, as fascinating as it is, but what use can we make of this knowledge? An applied focus is an important foundation for this book.

Many broad societal problems with which communities struggle have strong emotional undercurrents. Often mental health difficulties are centered on deficits or unusual patterns of emotional expressiveness, knowledge, and regulation. At the core of marital difficulties and child abuse lie anger, contempt, and shame. The experience of debilitating depression and anxiety is primarily emotional. On our highways and in our cities, images of anger predominate and too often explode into violence.

To focus more specifically on childhood development, the lack of emotional competence is obviously central to intractable difficulties. Even a cursory review of the literature on behavior disorders reveals repeated mentions of emotional factors. Anger and other negative affects, as well as lack of positive affect or emotional support, are consistently described as characteristics of both children with behavior problems and their parents (Dadds, Sanders, Morrison, & Rebetz, 1992; Gardner, 1989; Mullin & Hinshaw, 2007; Rubin, Burgess, & Hastings, 2002). Moreover, such emotion-related behavioral characteristics often predict continuity in both externalizing and internalizing psychopathy (Werner, 1989). Thus, when developmental milestones of emotional

competence are not negotiated successfully, preschoolers are at risk for psychopathology, both during preschool and later in life (Zahn-Waxler, Iannotti, Cummings, & Denham, 1990).

Of course, the direction of effect also can be the reverse of emotional competence deficits contributing to difficulties in optimal development and psychological health. Intrapersonal issues, such as cognitive impairment, autism spectrum disorder, or other psychopathology like oppositional defiant disorder or attention deficit disorder, can contribute to deficits in emotional competence. Similarly, interpersonal issues, such as child abuse and interparental violence, and other poor emotion socialization practices can hinder the development of emotional competence. Living in conditions of demographic risk (e.g., low income, chaos, systemic racism) also can negatively impact young children's emotional competence. In this book, I discuss all the issues related to emotional competence difficulties, organizing them according to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mixed contributors to difficulties in emotional development. Knowing how emotional competence develops both typically and atypically points to the need for assessment and programming in this area.

### **ASSESSMENT AND PROGRAMMING TO PROMOTE EARLY CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

To solve these pressing problems, emotional competence and the means for strengthening it must be addressed. Realizing when and how young children are at risk for delays and learning to recognize disturbances in the expected milestones of emotional competence are equally necessary. Recognizing the importance of emotional competence in young children and finding the means for cultivating it are essential tasks for caregivers. A knowledge of risk factors and of how to identify delays in the development of emotional competence as well as how to intervene are vital if the centrality of developing emotional competence is to be taken seriously (Knitzer, 1993). Thus the burgeoning literature on how to assess emotional competence during early childhood and on how to create efficacious programming, both targeted and universal, will be delineated within a framework showing how these components contribute to a model of early childhood education.

### **STUDYING THE YOUNG CHILD'S EMOTIONAL LIFE: THIS VOLUME AND BEYOND**

If emotional competence is so very important, it behooves researchers, educators, and parents to understand what is really going on in the young child's emotional world. Ecologically valid measurement systems that require an investigator to enter a child's world, rather than vice versa, best allow researchers to discern young children's emotional competence. Thus I argue forcefully—and attempt to illustrate amply throughout this book—that studies should be conducted during children's typical play and family activities, either by directly assessing children or by observing them in the social

contexts in which they typically live. Ambiguous data or negative results may emanate from less-sensitive modes of study. Since the publication of *Emotional Development in Young Children* in 1998, many investigators have taken up his challenge.

How can we study emotional expressiveness and regulation—two important components of emotional competence? Fortunately, better operational definitions and other methodological advances have enabled successful examinations of children's emotional expressiveness patterns, whether these studies focus on microanalytic facial expressions of emotions or on more comprehensive, global indicators. In addition, new paradigms that challenge preschoolers' emotion regulation, as well as dynamic ways to view such emotion regulation in real time, are emerging with good effect.

And how can we learn more about how preschoolers understand emotions? Asking young children to verbalize about issues of emotional competence leads directly to a quagmire of demands: A preschooler might think, "What does this person want me to do or say? How should I be feeling and acting in this setting?" Even more important, such means of questioning exist in a social vacuum (Saarni, 1987, 1990). A preschooler might query, "What is this lady talking about? Can I answer her at all? Why can't I just go play?" Fortunately, ecologically valid means of examining understanding of emotion are available in response to these concerns.

Thus the stage has been set for a more fruitful inquiry into developmental change and individual differences in preschoolers' emotional competence. I attempt in this volume to give a picture of an exciting time—the unfolding of a vital set of emotional skills that sustain children's well-being, relationships, and even school success. I intend to explore the evidence of these indispensable early capacities to express, understand, and deal with one's own emotions and those of others. It is my hope to convey some of the energy inherent in this field of inquiry and to inspire continued research into these engaging capabilities.

Then, in subsequent chapters I explore these important aspects of the changing emotional competencies of toddlers and preschoolers (see the middle column of Figure 1.2). First, in Chapter 2, I describe patterns and developments in children's emotional expressiveness—their consistent manner of showing emotions in various situations. I survey children's changing expression of the simplest, most basic emotions, which are separable according to facial, vocal, and behavioral indices; they include happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. I also consider the beginnings of empathy in Chapter 2. Next, in Chapter 3, I examine the emergence of more complicated emotions, which involve other people and self-consciousness and/or other cognitive abilities, either implicitly or explicitly; they include shame, guilt, shyness, embarrassment, and pride. I also discuss children's increasing display of blended emotions, as well as their expanding demonstration of emotional display rules.

In Chapters 4 and 5, examining toddlers' and preschoolers' understanding of emotion, I take the view that young children are developing an impressive body of knowledge about both internal states and the causes of behavior. Consequently, in Chapter 4, I explore their growing awareness of emotions in general and of specific discrete emotions, working from a model that melds my own approach to the skills involved in emotion knowledge (Bassett, Denham, Mincic, & Groling, 2012) and that of Pons and colleagues (e.g., Pons, Harris, & de Rosnay, 2004). I describe toddlers' and

preschoolers' abilities to use emotion labels, to recognize emotion situations, and to demonstrate knowledge of emotions' causes and consequences. Young children's use of emotion language within their families also is addressed. In addition, in Chapter 5, I describe the development of more complex aspects of understanding of emotion, such as knowledge of equivocal situations, conflicting expressive and situational cues, personalized experience of emotion, ways of regulating both positive and negative emotions, display rules, and simultaneity and ambivalence.

Developmentalists are making big strides in operationalizing fascinating aspects of emotion regulation—to investigate its emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components; I outline how I and others have come to understand emotion regulation in Chapter 6, what we know about developmental change and about individual differences in emotion regulation and in children's use of regulatory strategies. I also explore new views of young children's ability to regulate their emotional expressiveness, including a consideration of the fluid, dynamic, contextually bound in-the-moment emergence of emotions in real time, as well as their reorganization over developmental time. In Chapters 2 through 6, I also describe intrapersonal elements that are likely to contribute to individual differences in emotional competence during the preschool period. Adults need to know what to expect in terms of preschoolers' emotional expressiveness and regulation, as well as their understanding of their own and others' emotions. If they do, they not only help children, but also create a more positive emotional environment for themselves.

Just as I describe typical developmental changes in emotional competence over the toddler and preschool period, and its intrapersonal supports, I explore the interpersonal roots of its individual differences (see leftmost column of Figure 1.2). In Chapters 7 and 8, I review the evidence for parents' influence on children's emotional expressiveness, knowledge, and regulation. I continue this concentration on emotion socialization in Chapter 9 by examining new evidence of how preschool teachers, broadly defined (i.e., childcare providers as well as Head Start, private preschool, or public pre-kindergarten teachers), contribute to the development of young children's emotional competence. Although this area of study is relatively new, it looms large because of young children's ubiquitous exposure to early educational settings.

In Chapter 10, I begin to focus on outcomes supported by the young child's growing emotional competence (see the rightmost column of Figure 1.2)—in this case social accomplishments and lack of behavior problems. I spotlight how essential these capabilities are to children's mental health, even at such an early age. In Chapter 11, I outline the ever-growing evidence for a connection between emotional competence and academic success from preschool through elementary school.

If we have a clearer understanding of the roots and nature of young children's emotional competence, we can not only examine its outcomes, but will be better able to begin the vital task of facilitating it. So, in Chapter 12, I discuss young children who develop problems in emotional competence. Some deficits in emotional competence seem to reside in the children themselves. In contrast, other deficits in emotional competence seem to arise primarily from transactions with the environment. How can such children be identified? What can be done to assist them? In Chapter 13, I outline ways of assessing and promoting emotional competence.

## A CALL TO ACTION

As concerned researchers, practitioners, and caregivers, we want to learn answers to these questions, so that we may help children develop optimal emotional skills. We are finally becoming aware of the importance of such emotional competence. We see that when children are not “smart” in this way, they are at a long-term risk for depression, aggressiveness and violent crime, problems in marriage and parenting, and even poor physical health. As adults who care about children, we need to take emotional competence seriously. As Goleman (1995) put it so eloquently over 20 years ago,

[We must] make sure that every child is taught the essentials of handling anger or resolving conflicts positively . . . [we need to] teach empathy . . . [and] the fundamentals of emotional competence. By leaving the emotional lessons children learn to chance, we risk largely wasting the window of opportunity presented by the slow maturation of the brain to help children cultivate a healthy emotional repertoire. . . . In this sense, emotional [competence] goes hand in hand with education for character, for moral development, and for citizenship. (p. 286)

I now turn to a more detailed consideration of the nature and manifestations of preschoolers’ emotional competence.