



How Mood Affects Children's Recognition of Others' Emotions

by
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We examined how the induction of positive, neutral and negative mood influenced eighty-seven 5- to 8-year-old children's performance on two types of emotion recognition tasks: a context-based task (a task in which the child must derive an emotional expression from a sentence, e.g., "It's John's birthday and he got all the presents he wanted. John hugged his family") and a label-based task (a task in which the label of the emotion is provided, e.g., "Happy. Which face is the happy face?").

Children were randomly assigned to one of three mood conditions (positive, negative or neutral) in which they listened to a brief story about a boy that moved to a new town and had good experiences (positive) or a story about a boy that moved to a new town and had bad experiences (negative). For children in the neutral condition, they listened to a list of table manners. Each story lasted for approximately three minutes. For children in the negative condition, children heard a happy ending to the story following completion of the study.

After listening to the story, children viewed photos of adults' facial expressions (e.g., happy, sad, surprise, disgusted) presented on a computer monitor. Children then heard either a label-based question or a context-based question and were asked to identify which face displayed the correct emotional expression. Children were asked six context-based questions and six label-based questions.

Results from the experiment demonstrated that children were most accurate in responding to label-based questions and had faster response times as compared to the context-based questions. For the context-based questions, however, children were better able to identify negative emotions (i.e., sad and disgusted) as compared to positive emotions (i.e., happy and surprised). In addition, children in the positive mood completed the label-based and context-based questions significantly faster than children in the neutral or negative mood, but positive mood did not significantly influence children's accuracy of response.

Results from our study may help to enhance children's decisions about others' emotions in social interactions. Children who are in a positive mood, for example, will be faster at determining how another person feels. If we provide children with contextual information, in addition, children may be more accurate in identifying persons who are in a sad emotional state. Determining how to improve children's interpretation of others' emotions in social interactions may provide researchers with ways to enrich the development of children's social, cognitive, and behavioral skills necessary for successful social adaptation.