Emotion socialization at nursery school: An evidence-based research adopting a conversational approach

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The present study was carried out into the theoretical background of the emotional development and emotional socialization constructs (Denham, 1998). Recent years have seen the implementation of a range of training programs aimed at improving children’s socio-emotional skills (e.g., Izard, Trentacosta, King & Mostow, 2004). Nevertheless, few studies have been conducted with toddlers at nursery school. In this training study, we adopted observational and experimental paradigms to examine the efficacy of an intervention based on conversation about emotions in small group, from shared book-reading of emotionally laden brief stories. The conversational approach (Siegal, 1999) gives children the opportunity to discuss, reflect on and reason about the themes introduced by the adult, helping them to develop verbal abilities and to access the viewpoints of others. The two-month innovative intervention for young children was designed to promote toddlers’ emotional talk, emotion understanding (EU) and prosocial behaviour. This study consisted of three phases: pre-test, intervention, and post-test for both the training and the control group. Participants were 110 children (68 girls; overall mean age at pre-test: 29 months), divided into two groups as a function of age, from seven nurseries located in a northern region of Italy. Before and after the intervention phase, on one hand parents were asked to fill three instruments related to their children’s verbal and empathic competences, on the other hand toddlers were individually administered four tasks of emotion understanding and were videotaped during spontaneous interactions. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for repeated measures was run. Results showed that the training group significantly outperformed the control group on measures of knowledge and use of emotional-state language, EU competence and prosocial behaviour towards peers. There was also a significant group x age interaction, with the older training group participants displaying greater gains in EU than the younger ones. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings in terms of emotion socialization activities in educational contexts.