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## Emotion Validating Language Regarding Negative Emotions in the Classroom Differing by Gender and Emotion Type

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**EMOTION VALIDATING LANGUAGE REGARDING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS IN  
THE CLASSROOM DIFFERING BY GENDER AND EMOTION TYPE**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Early Childhood & Family Development

By

Tea Rose Pankey

December 2022

# **EMOTION VALIDATING LANGUAGE REGARDING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM DIFFERING BY GENDER AND EMOTION TYPE**

Childhood Education and Family Studies

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Master of Science

Tea Rose Pankey

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined teachers' emotion validating language regarding negative emotion in early childhood classrooms. By analyzing teachers' emotion language differing by gender, the research highlights the gendered socialization of emotional expression, especially regarding negative emotions, in early childhood contexts. In toddler and preschool classrooms, 28 teachers were video recorded during 4 thirty-minute sessions of free play time. Videos were coded for teachers' emotion language regarding negative emotions with attention to the gender of the child to whom the language was spoken. Results indicate that teachers validate negative emotions more to girls than to boys. This aligns with previous research that suggests that girls' expression of emotion is more encouraged and acceptable than boys. Additionally, exploratory analyses of the type of emotion discussed suggest that teachers validate sadness less to boys than to girls and validate anger more to boys than to girls. This work highlights potential gender differences in emotion socialization and points to missed opportunities to validate boys' negative emotions and thus develop their emotion language and regulation skills. Implications for teacher professional development are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** social emotional development, emotion language, emotion validating language, socialization by gender, socialization in the classroom, teachers, early childhood education, emotion socialization, gender

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## INTRODUCTION

Teachers' use of emotion language in the classroom affects social emotional development by socializing contextual expectations through encouragement, or lack of, emotional expression (Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Denham et al., 2012; King, 2020). The current study is an examination of teachers' emotion validating language regarding negative emotions in toddler and preschool classrooms. Through proactive and reactive responses to children's and other's emotions within context, emotions can be acknowledged, identified, and discussed, presenting opportunities for children to develop their social emotional skills and vocabulary (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Coping with emotions regarded as negative (e.g., anger and sadness) is a life-long pursuit but validating these "tough" emotions early in life can provide the scaffolding to begin building social emotional skills. Children who are supported through negative emotional experiences exhibit less anxiety (Hurrell et al., 2015), and are given chances to develop coping skills and emotional understanding within these interactions (Gottman et al., 1997).

This study examined differences in teachers' use of emotion validating language with toddlers and preschoolers by child gender and by emotion type. Emotion validating language, defined for the purposes of this research as respectful and understanding acknowledgment and discussion of emotions and their context, is the focus of this research, exploring possible variations in educators' emotional support. In our current U.S. context, expectations of emotional expression vary by gender; girls are encouraged to express feelings of joy, while boys' emotion expression is generally less supported (Brody, 1999; Brody & Hall, 2008; Chaplin, 2015). As girls are socialized to internalize their feelings of sadness, boys are encouraged to externalize their feelings of anger (Brody & Hall, 2008), highlighting the variation of support by both gender



and emotion type. Through analysis of early emotion vocabulary present in a developing child's context, researchers can begin to identify the building blocks of socializing these biased schemas.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research has highlighted the importance of social emotional development throughout childhood, as social emotional skills affect relationships with others, and success in school and throughout life (Sarno, 1998; 2006; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1998). Emotion socialization, which is the implicit and explicit teaching of appropriate emotion understanding (Eisenberg et al., 1998) is a reflection of cultural context, therefore contains its own bias and definitions of appropriate emotional expression. Children grow up with the unique vocabulary and emotional expression that exists in their family, community, and society at large. Cultures around the world vary greatly in the encouraging or discouraging of children's emotional expression, which reflect the values and societally acceptable forms of expression within its given context (Cole & Tan, 2007; Cole et al., 2006). From the earliest moments in life, children are learning from behavior modeled by people in their immediate surroundings and the context that influences their way of life. A caregiver's vocabulary and vernacular directly influence a child's developing language skills, incorporating societal expectations and acceptable emotional expression (Lightfoot et al., 2018).

Given the dramatic rise in families taking part in early childcare programs (Wortham, 2002), research must analyze the socialization of emotion through parents', as well as teachers' emotion language. As the classroom presents children with new social and emotional situations to navigate, teachers play an important role in social emotional learning (Ahn & Stifter, 2006). Most research to date regarding social emotional development has been focused on white middle to upper class youth in the U.S., Canada and some Western countries. Due to this concentration of research, many scheme and models may not generalize to include other cultural contexts. For

the purpose of this study, focus on the U.S. is appropriate, though it is important to note that this work may not generalize cross-culturally.

### **Socialization by Gender**

Cultural context informs each teacher's definition of appropriate emotional expression and understanding. Even within specific community contexts, the way adults react to and discuss emotions with children varies from child to child, often differing by gender and race. In the U.S., as discussions regarding unequal gender pay and violence against women highlight society's varying expectations and treatment by gender, research delves into the way expectations are socialized in the early years of life. Differences in internalizing/externalizing of emotions and expression by gender have been detected in infants (Brody, 1999), but disparities have been shown strengthen as children age, highlighting the socialized aspects of emotion (Chaplin, 2015). Through the development of a bio-psycho-social framework, Chaplin (2015) acknowledges many possible influences on emotional development differing by gender to reveal a detailed picture. Biological differences by gender have been researched, highlighting varying arousal levels and lingual capabilities in infants and toddlers (Brody, 1999; Zahn- Wexler et al., 2008), but work done throughout childhood draws attention to the importance of cultural expectations as influential for social emotional development.

Expectations of expressiveness and behavior relating to gender come from a child's immediate context and the culture at large. From observation and experience of their surroundings, children can develop cognitive schemas for gender (e.g., "boys don't cry" or "girls are sweet") (Martin & Halverson, 1981). In a Western cultural context, girls are expected to express their emotions, especially positive ones, and show greater empathy than boys (Brody &

Hall, 2008; Zahn-Wexler et al., 2001). Relating to empathy, girls are also encouraged to internalize negative emotions such as sadness and fear, fitting into the role for women in society to be calm, understanding, and accommodating (Chaplin, 2015). Boys are expected to show less sadness and fear, as they are more encouraged to externalize their feelings of anger (Brody, 1999; Brody & Hall, 2008). This encouragement/discouragement of various forms of expression engrains societal expectations dependent on gender, leading to stereotypes and inequity of power/opportunity. As boys are encouraged to express anger, get loud and even aggressive, the “tough” and individualistic American man emerges. Little girls are encouraged to internalize emotions, become practiced sympathizers, trained to listen, and relate more than assert their own emotions. Reactions and language used by observed adults, either encourage or discourage various developing schema during this time. As minimizing language is used more often with boys in reaction to emotional expression, boys may learn to minimize their expression (King & La Paro, 2018; King, 2020). As girls are raised to internalize and be calm in a context that rewards external confidence, they can fail by virtue of the limiting expectations or fail for deviating from social norms. The current U.S. context of men’s mental health highlights an externalization of emotional expression to an extreme, often in the forms of hurting themselves and others (Pertetz & Vidmar, 2021). There are vast disparities of emotional support by gender, and the socializing of expectations comes from a child’s context. Often starting at home but considering the rise of early childhood education in the U.S. (Wortham, 2002), parents and teachers are both major socializers of social emotional skills (Denham et al., 2012).

As researchers bring attention to these self-fulfilling prophecies of gender expectations, it becomes important to explore teachers’ discussion of and reaction to emotions in the classroom

differing by child gender. Considering how emotional expression is socialized encourages researchers to examine emotional expression present in a child's developmental context.

### **Socialization of Emotional Expression**

When examining how expectations of emotional expression are modeled and influence children, researchers turn to spending time inside the home or classroom to view caregiver child interactions and conversations, as well as interviewing parents and teachers about their own feelings of emotional expression and possible intentional social-emotional teaching (Gottman et al., 1997; Cole et al., 2006; Block, 1981). Much of the research on expectations of emotional expression has been done within parent-child interactions. The combination of parental interviews with collection of data from parent-child interactions allows researchers to define a parent's level of emotional expression and the importance placed on emotions, then connect that to the language used in social-emotional discussion with or around children. Before children are able to speak, interactions are dependent on an adult's emotional expression and how they choose to communicate that with or around an infant. Intentional or not, adults' attitudes, anxieties, and wide range or lack of emotion affect the relationship with their child and the way that a parent may express, or not express, their inner emotional life (Gottman et al., 1997).

Colwyn Trevarthen (1998; 2015) defines primary intersubjectivity as focused and responsive social interactions between caregiver and child. This important emotional and social relationship supports emotional connection and joint expression, which is made obvious when there is a loss of synchrony in interactions. Research that aims to disrupt caregiver-child interactions momentarily to determine its effects on an infant, finds that children easily fall out of the present emotional expression into negative emotions and distress due the lack of a responsive

second party (Apter et al., 2017; DiCorcia et al., 2016; Tremblay et al., 2005). This disruption in the interaction is commonplace outside the research setting, and ideally fleeting, like when adults are busy, or children are tired. When caregiver–child interactions are routinely out of sync, with little or no attempt by the caregiver to connect emotionally with the child, there are negative repercussions, usually linked to emotional regulation and expression (Pelaez et al., 2008; Schacht et al., 2009). Disorganized and unresponsive interactions in early significant relationships are speculated by developmentalists to lead to problems frequently observed in children of depressed parents, such as anxiety and conductive disorders (Lightfoot et al., 2018; Pelaez et al., 2008). In a classroom setting, many factors can affect a teacher’s ability to establish and sustain focused and responsive interactions with children. Teachers’ own social emotional skills effect the emotional competence of children in their class (Morris et al., 2012), and regarding mental state talk, teachers are shown to discuss emotion less often than cognitions and desires (King & La Paro, 2015).

### **Language Development Connected to Emotion in Early Childhood**

Analyzing emotion language enables researchers to delve into the detailed differences that inform one’s understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others. Linguist Noam Chomsky (1988; 2017) describes a biological explanation of language acquisition that language is innate in humans and develops through natural maturation. Chomsky suggests that children are born predisposed with an interest in language and communication with those around them. Research shows that newborns show a preference for exaggerated language directed at them (Narayan & Mcdermott, 2016; Schachner & Hannon, 2011; Hillairet de Boisferon et al., 2017), and as young as two months are sensitive to the smallest phonemes in human speech

(Eimas, 1985; Lightfoot et al., 2018). Babbling and early attempts at language and communication begin around seven months of age (Hillaiet de Boisferon et al., 2017), and by eight months babbling can become specific to the language they are surrounded by and cultural context (Davis et al., 2000). Learning a language from a child's surroundings begins with perceptual scaffolding, a term that describes the early words children learn as anchors from which their understanding on vocabulary begins (Blanchard et al., 2010; Pruden et al., 2006). With evidence pointing to the importance of adult-child communication beginning at birth, the extreme influence of a child's context and surrounding forms of expression is made clear. A newborn's perceptual scaffolding is based the vocabulary of those around them which continues to build upon itself, adding words, phrases, and societal expectations of communication. As language understanding and production increases in toddlerhood and through preschool (Hart & Risley, 1999), the current study aims to analyze the emotion language surrounding toddlers and preschoolers during this developmentally important time. Including children in and directing conversation towards young children becomes extremely important when language development and emotional expression are so greatly affected by communication. Researchers in the field overwhelmingly support the value of early and continued, purposeful conversation with children; it is found to lead to larger vocabularies, higher IQ scores and when responsive and sensitive, encourage children's social and emotional development (Test et al., 2010; Hart & Risley, 1999; Hoff & Neigles, 2002; Ensor & Hughes, 2008; Harris, 2005). When considering scaffolding regarding emotional language, research can delve into the emotional vocabulary present in a child's context to analyze how varying supported emotion language scaffolding leads to varying social emotional development. The vocabulary used by surrounding adults informs a child's

developing social-emotional understanding. The current study explores teachers' verbal emotion validation of negative emotions in classroom contexts.

As we reflect on emotional communication with children, it's helpful to divide the means of emotion socialization through language into three primary categories: proactive, modeling, and reactive expression and discussion (Eisenberg et al., 2018). Proactive emotional discussion is any dialogue regarding emotions that are not current being expressed/experienced (e.g., "Sometimes I feel sad and sometimes I feel happy."). Modeling social emotional skills is a huge part of development, encompassing all the large amount of time spent by adults expressing themselves. Modeling can include when teachers say things like "I'm feeling sad today. Sometimes a hug helps me feel better." Reactive emotional communication pertains to any acknowledgment or discussion of emotions at the moment of expression (e.g., "You seem upset. What happened?") (Eisenberg et al., 1998). This study focuses on teachers' emotion language to children within all three of these categories, regarding negative emotion, to encompass a broad spectrum of the emotional messaging children receive in classrooms.

As an adult discusses negative emotion with children, through proactive language, modeling, or reactive responses, they can either encourage or discourage the expression in a number of ways. Encouragement of emotional expression leads to children's better understanding of emotions while dismissing, minimizing, and punishing emotional expression at a young age has been shown can lead to more subdued and fearful children (Gottman et al., 1997). As an adult dismisses a child's negative emotion, the child is socialized to suppress expression, yet can stay physiologically aroused (Fabes et al., 2001) without any assistance in deescalating the situation. Through minimizing the emotional experience there is a missed opportunity to build emotional vocabulary scaffolding. Without acquiring the appropriate



emotional vocabulary, children could be left without healthy means of emotional expression. Encouragement of expression through validating emotions when describing and reacting to emotion promotes emotional understanding and coping skills (Denham et al., 2012; Gottman et al., 1997). Through stories, play, and modeling, there are many opportunities in the classroom for teachers to validate emotions outside of possibly tense moments of extreme emotional expression; thus, the current study explores teachers' emotion validating language in discussion of negative emotions with children with respect to children's emotions as well as others' emotions (e.g., book characters, puppets).

### **Emotion Language and Socialization in the Classroom**

As children spend time in a classroom, they enter a whole new social environment, filled with unique power dynamics and expectations. With new social experiences come new ways to encourage or discourage societally appropriate expression. Due to high turnover rates and changing classrooms from year to year, interactions in the classroom offer new and varied experiences for social learning. Children learn through emotionally supportive relationships with teachers (Dunn, 2003) and are exposed to many new situations due to the unique social setting granted in a classroom, comparatively more diverse than home life. While most research regarding development and emotional competence has been done with families, recent research finds that teachers' emotion language can influence a child's emotional understanding, expression, and behaviors (Denham et al., 2012; King & La Paro, 2015; 2018). Research has found that teachers in general do not often validate children's negative emotions (Ahn, 2005; Ahn & Stifter, 2006). Teacher's minimizing of boys' expression of emotions is linked with boys' lower emotional competence skills (King, 2020); however, emotion validating language is less

studied, especially with respect to child gender. The role teachers play in social emotional development in early childhood is becoming more clear given research in classrooms and more relevant as more children than ever take part in early childcare centers around the U.S. (Wortham, 2002). Teachers who model healthy positive and negative emotion expression and coping help children learn new ways to handle emotion in new spaces (Ahn & Stifter, 2006).

As Baumrind (1966; Baumrind & Black, 1967) discusses, competent and emotionally intelligent children tend to develop under caregivers practicing authoritative control; it is interesting to examine the language and vocabulary present in this healthy and developmentally supportive style. For example, practicing authoritative control is exemplified by verbal give and take; an adult explaining their actions and reasonings while listening and responding to a child's objections (Baumrind, 1966, p 891). Baumrind's work (1966; 1972; Baumrind & Black, 1967) asserts that this conversation is indicative of independence and encouragement of emotional expression. When an adult expresses their emotional and cognitive thinking openly with children in this way, it both allows them the space to express their own thoughts and feelings, while modeling healthy communication and social emotional skills; thus, teachers' emotion language directed to children that describes their own negative emotions is included in the current study.

### **Emotion Validating Language**

In the current cultural context, valence of emotion classifies sadness and anger as negative. This classification in context may encourage the cultural and individual avoidance of particular emotions (Sarno, 2006) which leads to missed opportunities for children to develop emotional scaffolding. Providing children in classrooms with supportive environments for emotional expression and reflection is important for children's learning (Ahn & Stifter, 2006).

When thinking about what best encourages social emotional health at a given stage, a teacher can assess if they are assisting the child in problem solving or solving the problem for them. To encourage healthy emotional expression and metaemotions, or feelings about feelings, caregivers should assist the child in identifying and acknowledging any given emotional experience and share their own related emotional experiences and/or coping mechanisms (Gottman et al., 1997). Emotion validating language goes a step further than simply acknowledging an emotion by verbally asserting that emotions are appropriate, respected, and/or useful (e.g., “It’s okay to feel sad about missing your mom.” “I get it, Mondays are hard for everyone.” “I’m sorry that happened, I would be frustrated if that happened to me.”).

As discussed by Erikson (1950), psychosocial issues presented throughout development should be considered when dealing with social emotional health. Toddlers and preschool age children developmentally grapple with questions of autonomy versus doubt and initiative versus guilt. Teacher’s verbal validation of emotional expression, of children’s emotions as well as others’, encourages social emotional autonomy by developing a child’s emotion vocabulary through identification and discussion of any emotional experience. It’s important that teachers’ language supports children in taking initiative regarding new emotional experiences, as opposed to associating guilt with emotional experiences through punishment and invalidation (Erikson, 1950). Validating negative emotions through language provides a trusting space for children to learn about emotions, rather than promoting feelings of guilt for expressing and experiencing certain emotions. It is possible, however, that teachers may discuss emotions differentially with boys and girls given their own socialized messages regarding appropriateness of certain emotions; thus, an examination of emotion validating language of negative emotions by child gender is warranted.

Skinner defines four options for adults to react to children's behavior: negative and positive punishment and negative and positive reward (Skinner, 1953). By defining caretakers' reactions into categories like positive and negative, reinforcement and punishment, Skinner's framework informs research on development to study the myriad of behavior modification techniques utilized across societies and the possible effects. Skinner's work is very specific in the possible reactions and the possible effects on a child's behavior, attempting to understand and define the learning of societally appropriate behavior. From Skinner's perspective, through reinforced or punished experiences, humans learn cultural expectations and implement any new ideas to their brain's pre-existing schema. As emotions are discussed or avoided during these interactions between adult and child, it effects the developing emotional vocabulary.

For the purposes of this research, focus on Skinner's own work applying his theories to real world context is enlightening. "When we act to avoid or escape from punishment, we say that we do what we have to do, what we need to do, and what we must do... When we act because the consequences have been positively reinforcing, we say that we do what we like to do, what we want to do" (Skinner, 1975, p. 11). This quote sums up Skinner's sentiment that positive reinforcement is a better teacher than punishment. By focusing on consequences, punishment inspires external drive, while reinforcement is able to encourage intrinsic motivation. Regarding emotional expression, internal versus external motivation is important because mental health is a primarily internal experience. Emotion validating language positively reinforces emotional expression for children, encouraging deeper exploration and understanding (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016). Developing emotional competence includes some independence in coping with big emotions and developing confidence of internal, emotional awareness (Gottman et al., 1997).

Emotion validating language is verbal acknowledgement of emotions which confirms the emotion being experienced/expressed is valid and worthy of respect. When reacting to expression of negative emotions, teaching occurs when children are given time and space within the emotion to explore their options of coping (Zinsser et al., 2018). As Mr. Rogers says, “anything mentionable, is manageable,” so as teachers acknowledge the tough negative emotional experience of children, they open up space for emotion management, as opposed to dismissing the experience and only learning how to avoid. As we suppress emotions, the physiological arousal stays (Fabes et al., 2003) and can have life-long effects on mental and physical health (Sarno, 1998). In research on emotion validation, about half the mothers studied used validating language at all and overall, about 75% of reactions to emotional expression by a child were invalidating (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016). Ginott (1965) discusses limits on behavior, not emotions, as a perspective from which to handle a child’s emotional expression. When emotion validating language is used, a teacher is able to validate an emotional experience while establishing societally appropriate and inappropriate behaviors of coping (e.g., “It’s ok to be mad, but it’s not ok to hit your friend”).

In this research I aim to analyze if there is a difference in teachers’ language validating negative emotions when speaking to boys and girls and possible differences in validating language by gender regarding emotion type such as anger/frustration and sadness. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does the rate of teachers’ language validating negative emotions differ when speaking to boys compared to girls?
2. When teachers use emotion validating language with respect to negative emotions, do teachers more often validate anger or sadness, and does this differ by child gender?

## METHODS

The purpose of this study is to quantitatively analyze teachers' emotion validating language about negative emotion in toddler and preschool classrooms. Through naturally occurring interactions in early childhood classrooms, the research examines the frequency and rate of teachers' emotion validating language in discussion of negative emotions, as well as the variance of emotion validating language differing by child gender. The research hypothesizes that teachers' use of emotion validating language varies by gender, with validating language being used more often with girls than boys. It is also expected that there is variation in emotion validating language differing by gender regarding type of negative emotion expressed (greater support of girls' sadness and greater support of boys' anger).

### Participants

*Teachers and programs.* 28 teachers from 28 classrooms were included in this study. Teachers were recruited from a public list of programs in one Midwestern city. This Midwestern city has a population of ~169,000 people and is 88% white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Programs were contacted to provide study information, and teachers were nominated for participation by program directors prior to researchers meeting with teachers to engage in informed consent procedures. Teachers ages ranged from 20 years to 62 years old ( $M = 34.07$ ,  $SD = 10.7$ ). Teachers included lead teachers who had worked with young children for an average of 9.12 years ( $SD = 7.66$ ), ranging from 4 months to 25 years. Teachers' educational background was reported with 14.8% having a high school diploma or GED, 33.3% taking part in some college classwork, 14.8% having a 2-year AA or AAS degree, 18.5% having a 4 year degree, and

18.5% with some graduate school experience or more. At least 18.5% of teachers' degrees relate directly to early childhood. Teacher's gender and racial identity information were gathered via self-reporting questionnaire. All teacher participants identify as women. 88.9% reported white/European American (n=24), 7.4% reported Indigenous, Native American or Alaska Native and white/European American (n=2), and 3.7% reported Mexican/Mexican American (n=1). All teacher participants reported speaking English with 7.4% reporting understanding of an additional language (n=2).

*Children.* The current study examined teachers' emotion validating language regarding negative emotions in toddler and preschool classrooms. Gender of 169 boys and girls, between 12 months and 5 years were included in the study as reported by parents. When teachers spoke to a child not included in the study, gender was reported by coders, which is further discussed below.

## **Procedure**

Classroom recruitment began with reaching out to early childhood programs throughout the city. Researchers reached out to program directors, explained the study, and sought permission to offer participation to the teachers in their program to join the study. Directors nominated toddler and preschool classrooms/teachers to take part in the study, and with informed consent, teachers agreed to take part in the study. Teachers were paid \$100 for their participation, \$50 in the fall semester and \$50 in the spring semester. Researchers obtained parental/guardian consent for child participation through informed consent forms sent home; for the purposes of this study only children's gender and other demographic information were included. Teacher and child demographic information was collected via questionnaires given to teachers and guardians.

30-minute videos of naturally occurring classroom interactions were collected four times total, with two observations occurring one to two weeks apart in fall and two observations occurring one to two weeks apart in spring. The videos were analyzed by researchers, coding for emotion validating language when dealing with negative emotional expression, coding for the gender of child in the interaction and the type of emotion expressed (e.g., anger, sadness).

Nine toddler teachers participated both fall and spring, with two participating in just fall, and two participating just in spring, for a total of 13 toddler teachers. Seven preschool teachers participated both fall and spring, with four participating just in fall, and four participating just in spring, for a total of 15 preschool teachers. The number of minutes of observation per teacher had a mean of 86.45 minutes ( $SD = 28.77$ ). Teachers' total observation time ranged from 31.83 to 123.60 minutes total); thus, when compiling data regarding emotion language, a rate per hour was calculated, which his further described below.

This study obtained IRB approval and implemented informed consent with all participants (See Appendix). Upon teacher selection and consent, parents were given an informed consent form to complete and return to the teacher to provide consent for their child to participate. Additionally, a parent opt-out form was provided in the event that parents did not want their child to participate nor did they want their child to appear on video. Names or other identifiers were not included in any aspect of research made public and the data was stored on protected MSU servers only accessible by researchers. Participants involved in the study could remove themselves at any time with no consequences and the research posed no risk to those involved.



## Measures

*Teachers' Emotion Validating Language.* Teachers' emotion validating language was coded when it was in discussion of negative emotions in the classroom. This discussion of negative emotions includes but is not limited to reacting to negative emotions of a child or their peers in the room, the teacher verbalizing their own negative emotion, and the possible negative emotions of inanimate objects or characters. The coding process began once coders were trained to code with consistent agreement. One coder coded all videos, and a second reliability coder coded 20% of the videos, with high reliability (over 80%). In viewing four 30-minute video recordings of naturally occurring teacher-child interaction in the fall (two) and in the spring (two), coders noted teachers' use of emotion validating language of negative emotions. Only interactions between teacher and child were coded, not conversation between teachers.

Emotion validating language can often include labeling, asking questions, or explaining emotions, but must both acknowledge the emotions at hand and validate them. For the purposes of this study, emotion validating language was coded when discussing negative emotions with a child. Researchers coded for teachers' emotion validating language in response to children's expressions, or perceived expression, of negative emotions specifically; for example, children crying, children getting physical (hitting, throwing, or biting), children yelling, use of words such as "I'm mad/sad." Researchers also coded for teachers' emotion validating language regarding expression of their own negative emotions or the perceived negative emotions of inanimate objects or characters (e.g., "I think Mr. Puppet is upset that his friend took his toy").

Emotion validating language can include labeling (e.g., "I'd be angry if I were you"), asking questions (e.g., "what is frustrating you?") or explaining (e.g., "most people are sad after they fall down and hurt themselves"); all three types are included in analyses. Emotion validation

is acknowledgment that you are listening to and respect the child's side (e.g., "I hear you," "I understand," not discouraging of emotional expression) and may include directly stating that the emotion at hand is valid and worthy of respect (e.g. "I'd be mad if I were you," "everyone misses their mom sometimes," "that's tough man, I feel ya").

*Emotion Type.* Coders noted the negative emotion discussed between teacher and child. For the second research question regarding emotion type, this study focused on teachers' discussion of sadness and anger by child gender, as potential differences by gender have been discussed in previous literature. Coders noted the full phrase of the teacher and coded the emotion type based on the emotion words used. Words such as *mad*, *angry*, *frustrated* were coded as anger, and *sad* was coded as sadness.

*Child Gender.* Coders used demographic information of children based on parent questionnaires to code for child gender in all videos of classroom interactions. During observations, each child had a sticker with an ID number visible on their backs, thus the researchers knew child gender from the parent demographic survey. When teachers spoke to a child without an ID number, gender was reported by coders using children's name and gender presentation; in the very few instances where coders could not come to a consensus, gender was randomly selected. For each instance of teachers' emotion validating language, coders noted if the teacher was speaking to (1) a boy, (2) a girl, (3) multiple boys, (4) multiple girls, or (5) a group of both boys and girls. For the purposes of this study, analyses collapsed these variables into (1) boy or boys or (2) girl or girls. As this study focuses on differences by gender, and because there were few instances of emotion validating language to a group of both boys and girls, analyses compared these two groups.

## **Analysis**

Teachers had different total observation times (ranging from 31.83 to 123.60 minutes total); thus, when compiling data regarding emotion language, a rate per hour was calculated. To normalize the data, teachers' emotion validating of negative emotions rates were transformed using square root transformation, which is appropriate for data containing zeros (Osborne, 2002) and has been used in previous emotion language research (King, 2020). For research question one, a paired sample t-test was used to compare rates of validating emotions to boys to rates of validating emotions to girls. For research question two, descriptive analyses were conducted to assess validating negative emotions by emotion type.

## RESULTS

Across all teachers and observations, teachers verbally validated negative emotions to any gender group a total of 116 times. Teachers validated negative emotions to boys at a rate between .00 and 11 times per hour ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ ). Teachers validated negative emotions to girls at a rate .00 to 7 times per hour ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ). These descriptive statistics are prior to square root transformation.

### **Teachers' Emotion Validating Language to Negative Emotions, by Child Gender**

To examine the first research question, a paired sample t-test was used to compare rates of validating negative emotions to boys to rates of validating negative emotions to girls, using the normalized data. Teachers validated negative emotions to girls more than to boys ( $t(27) = -2.064$ , two-sided  $p = .049$ ).

### **Exploratory Analysis of Emotion Type**

Due to the low rate of teachers' emotion validating language of negative emotions, examination of the second research question regarding specific emotion type is purely exploratory. Table 1 shows the frequency count of the specific emotions of anger and sadness differing by child gender. Teachers validated both anger and sadness similarly in terms of frequency, however there are potential differences by child gender. Teachers validated the emotion of sadness to boys less than to girls and validated the emotion of anger to boys more than to girls.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine emotion validating language regarding negative emotion in the classroom. By analyzing teachers' emotion language differing by gender, the research highlights the gendered socialization of emotional expression, especially regarding negative emotions, in early childhood contexts.

Results indicate that teachers validate negative emotions more to girls than to boys. This aligns with previous research that suggests that girls' expression of emotion is more encouraged and acceptable than boys (Brody & Hall, 2008). The data analyzed modeling, reactive, and proactive language which means it reflects several types of emotion language used to encourage children to reflect on their own emotions but also the emotions of others (e.g., teachers or characters in books). This suggests that teachers validate emotions more around girls than boys, which may have implications for young children's own emotion understanding as well as their developing empathy, as previous research indicates that validating emotions promotes children's emotion understanding and coping skills (Denham et al., 2012; Gottman et al., 1997). As emotions are validated around young girls, they learn to understand and manage their own and others' emotions, which leads to expectations for girls and women to empathize with others and manage their own emotional expression; boys are often not held to the same standard (Zahn-Wexler et al., 2001; Chaplin, 2015).

Across approximately 40 hours of video of naturally occurring classroom activity, there were 968 instances of emotion language, with only 116 of those validating negative emotions (across all gender groups). This lack of data suggests the omission of emotion language, especially regarding validating negative emotions in classroom, and reflects the societal lack of

conversation regarding negative emotions in the U.S. (Sarno, 2006). As teachers avoid direct discussion of negative emotions, they miss opportunities to develop a child's social emotional understanding and appropriate emotion management skills. Within the small number of occurrences, negative emotions were validated to girls more than boys which leaves boys with very few discussions to develop their vocabulary for social emotion understanding and management.

The occurrence of language validating negative emotion was too low for statistical analyses regarding emotion type (anger compared to sadness). The exploratory discoveries however point to anger/frustration being validated more with boys than girls, and sadness being validated more with girls than boys. This aligns with previous research which suggests boys are expected to express less sadness, and more anger than their female classmates (Brody, 1999; Brody & Hall, 2008). As the importance of mental health comes more to the forefront of our societal discussions, reflection on one's social emotions skills, or lack of, can highlight where people need support and coping mechanisms. Acknowledgment and healthy management of emotions is crucial for lasting mental and physical health (Sarno, 2006) and as young children are socialized with society's biased treatment, girls and boys are given different tools and opportunities to develop into women and men. When a child's anger or sadness goes unacknowledged and is invalidated, they learn to not acknowledge it themselves. If boys' sadness is ignored, they may miss opportunities to learn healthy coping techniques or vocabulary for supportive discussion. If adults disregard girls' anger, they again miss opportunities to teach young girls how to identify and manage their innate frustrations. Biased expectations of expression put everyone at a disadvantage by supporting development of some social emotional skills and not others depending on one's sex assigned at birth.

## **Implications**

As gendered differences in emotional expression are recorded to increase from infancy through early childhood (Chaplin, 2015), we must consider the socialization of these biased expectations across the contexts of early childhood. From home to the classroom, parents and teachers model and teach children the socially appropriate forms of emotional expression and acknowledgment. As this study suggests, negative emotions are validated to girls more than boys in toddler and preschool classrooms, which may indicate not only that children may be receiving differential messaging regarding the validity of their emotions, but also that children's emotion language can develop differentially by gender. Through emotion language used by adults in their context, children learn emotion terms which help with emotion understanding and management (Ahn & Stifter, 2006). As teachers use more emotion validating language around girls, we may not be providing boys with the support and vocabulary helpful for social emotional development.

Teachers may benefit from self-reflection related to how they communicate emotionally with boys and girls. From professional development to education-related classes and certifications, there should be a focus on how to validate emotional expression and experience equitably and reflect on biases in the classroom. Providing teachers with the data of potential biased treatment by gender and real-life examples of socialization in the classroom could be helpful tools for teachers to acknowledge the disparity of emotion language in our schools. It may be beneficial for educational opportunities for teachers to describe the immediate and lasting benefits of emotion validating language and why it's important for acknowledgment and change related to gender bias in emotion communication.

Gender differences aside, the lack of validating negative emotion in the classroom should also be addressed. While it is enticing to try to keep a child, or anyone, happy by focusing on the

positives, all humans experience a wide range of emotions and should be given the tools to face them. To avoid associating guilt with emotional expression and encourage autonomy in dealing with big emotions (Skinner, 1953), adults should validate negative emotions for all children. A lack of understanding and respectful communication regarding negative emotion can lead to the underdevelopment skills regarding healthy emotion management (Gottman, et al., 1997).

Teachers can do more with respect to modeling and discussing their own experience of negative emotions as well as not shying away from addressing uncomfortable feelings a child may express. Granting affordable access to therapy and other forms of emotional self-reflection could enable teachers to feel more comfortable addressing their own negative feelings in the classroom and identify skills in managing emotions to teach both boys and girls.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size of participants and low numbers of emotion validating language used regarding negative emotion are the largest limitations in this study. Data collection began in 2021 and the pandemic affected data collection. Turnover rate is very high for early childhood teachers which affected the number of teachers who were able to take part in both fall and spring data collection, as 6 teachers left their position during the course of the study. A small sample of all female predominantly white teachers does not reflect the diverse means of emotional communication in toddler and preschool classroom across the U.S. Additionally, research did not collect reliable data on the number of boys and girls in each classroom, thus it is difficult to examine if gender ratio in classrooms affected the number of emotion language utterances by gender.



Within 40 hours of naturally occurring classroom activity, there were 968 instances of emotion language, with only 116 of those validating negative emotions (across all gender groups). These low numbers of emotion language may reflect our society's lack of comfortability with addressing negative emotions, but also lead to low numbers for analysis and prevented exploration of emotion language by classroom age group, emotion language by type (proactive, reactive, or modeling), or emotion language by referent (child's emotions, teachers' emotions, or inanimate characters' emotions). Further, emotion validating language can include labeling, asking questions, or explaining; all three types are included in analyses. There was not enough data to examine the results of validating language regarding negative emotion among these categories.

### **Future Directions**

The research encourages further study into emotion socialization through analysis of emotion vocabulary used in the classroom. From gendered differences to varying rates of emotion validation by emotion type, observation and statistical analysis of data can show us what emotional socialization looks like in the early childhood classroom context. Larger scale studies, and more observations completed throughout various parts of the U.S. could provide further insight and opportunities for reflection on the ways teachers socialize emotion with respect to nuances in things like region of the country, culturally-specific expectations, or teachers' or children's racial identity. A more intersectional look at emotional communication and expectations would be beneficial to get clearer picture of how varying cultures social emotion in varying ways.

Teachers own social emotional abilities affect the way they communicate emotionally with the children in their class (Ersay, 2007; Sutton, 2005). Ersay's work (2007) found that teachers with lower social emotional skills were less likely to be supportive of children's emotions and were more punishing and minimizing of expression. Next steps in research would be to further examine teachers' own social emotional skills and their effect on their emotion language in the classroom to explore how teachers reflect and address their own social emotional skills to better support children's social emotional development.

## **Conclusion**

The cumulative findings of this study point to gender biases in the way that teachers validate negative emotions. While toddler and preschool teachers validate negative emotions more to girls than boys, they are potentially socializing expectations for girls to exhibit more emotional expression and empathy, and for boys to dampen their negative emotions. This difference in language affects the developing social emotional skills in the young children in a teacher's care, as associations have been found between teachers' emotion language and toddlers' social emotional competence (King, 2020). As toddler or preschool classrooms are often a child's first foray in a community setting, teachers set the stage for acceptable forms of emotional expression outside of the home. These societal expectations placed on young children become the building blocks for the way they navigate their emotion experiences well into adulthood. Avoiding or suppressing negative emotions can lead to mental and physical problems later in life (Sarno, 2006); thus, teaching and modeling healthy expression and management of negative emotions for children is an important step in early mental health support. Emotion

validating language is an understanding and respectful way to approach big emotional experiences in early childhood and throughout life.

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Table 1. Frequency Count of Validating Negative Emotions by Emotion Type and Gender

	To Boy or Boys	To Girl or Girls
Angry	7	3
Sad	1	6

*Note:* Values before square root transformation.

## APPENDIX. IRB Approval Form

IRB-FY2021-625 - Initial: Initial Approval

D

do-not-reply@cayuse.com

Mon 6/28/2021 9:15 AM

To: King, Elizabeth K



**Missouri State.**  
UNIVERSITY

**To:**

Elizabeth King  
Childhood Ed & Fam Studies

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2021-625

**Study Title:** Social Emotional Expression in Classrooms

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** June 28, 2021

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Elizabeth King

**Co-PI:**

**Primary Contact:** Elizabeth King

**Other Investigators:** Kamilah Legette, Alexis Diaz, Tea Rose Pankey, Ashley Gregory

**Reply** | **Forward**