



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Issue 1 (2017) 150-156

ISSN 2421-8030

www.prosoc.eu

Selected paper of 8th World Conference on Educational Sciences (WCES-2016), 4-8, February 2016, University of Alcalá, Madrid, Spain

Children's empathic tendencies: Effect of perceived family relations

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Suggested Citation:

Kilic, S. & Altinok, M. (2017). Children's empathic tendencies: Effect of perceived family relations. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 01, pp 150-156. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Jesus Garcia Laborda, University of Alcalá, Spain

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the effects of perceived family relations on children's empathic tendencies. Correlational research model was used to analyze the data. The study group was comprised of 250 children from grades 4th and 5th in primary school in the city-center of Aksaray. To gather data, "KA-Sİ Empathic Tendency Scale Child Form" and "Family Relationship Scale for Children" were conducted. Multiple regression analyses were performed to predict the determinants of children's empathic tendencies. According to findings, supportive family relations predict cognitive and emotional empathic tendencies of children positively, while discouraging family relations predict cognitive and emotional empathic tendencies of children, negatively. This study pointed out how familial relations perceived by children affected empathic tendencies. For further studies, it can be recommended other parental factors be evaluated based on parenting socialization, practices and believes for expanding on this growing area of literature.

Keywords: Empathic tendencies, perceived family relations, primary school children.

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1. Introduction

Empathy has different definitions in literature reflecting its multidimensional concept (Duan & Hill, 1996; Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, David, 2004). The most accepted description of empathy, which has quite various descriptions, is understanding of and sharing in emotional state of another person. That is, affective and cognitive components both play a role in empathy (Carr & Lutjemeier, 2005; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Emotional constituent of empathy include vicarious practicing of feelings consistent with those got by the way of ordinary associations or more complicated processes of perspective-taking (de Wied, Goudena & Mathys, 2005). Being able to feel other's feelings and demonstrating the most suitable reaction towards other's emotional status constitute the emotional side of empathy (de Kemp, Overbeek, de Wied, Engels, & Scholte, 2007). Cognitive component of empathy is the ability to assess other person's perspective and it is effective on individuals' social functionality (Smith, 2006). Empathy is related especially to positive social behaviors, which is referred as superior social functioning (Saarni, 1990). When we compare non-empathic people with people who indirectly experience emotional states of others (negative feelings in particular), second group people would understand others' emotions. As a result they will be motivated to diminish distress of others more than the people in the first group (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Therefore, we expect them to behave more socially proper, be cooperative and sensitive. Researchers found relationship between empathy of children and adolescents and positive behaviors of them like helping, comforting, and their social competence and these results are in line with theoretical predictions (Davis, 1994; Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Guthrie, Murphy, & Reiser, 1999).

Socialization agents might affect the development of responses related to empathy by a diverse methods proposed by researchers and theorists. To illustrate, according to Barnett (1987), for empathy to be developed, a family environment (1) gratifying emotional needs of children and enervating too much self-concern, (2) promoting experiencing and expressing of different feelings by children, (3) ensuring the child to have opportunity to behold and interact with other people promoting emotional sensitivity and responsiveness. These elements might be associated with emotional functionality of family and family context and emotional reactions the family give. Epstein, Bishop and Baldwin (1983) developed McMaster Model and based on this model as functions of a healthy family, *emotional reactions, emotional participation, problem solving, communication, roles and behavioral control* that the family give is determined (Zeitlin, Megawangi, Kramer, Colletta, Babatunde, Garman, 1995). Krysan, Moore and Zill (1990) sort characteristics those the healthy families have as *commitment to family and individuals within family, appreciating each other, desiring to spend time together, effective communication, high level of religious/spiritual orientation, ability of positively coping with crises, encouraging individuals and having determined roles*. These characteristics were qualified as "supportive family relationships" of healthy families (Demirtas, 2013) and used as supportive family relationships within the scope of this study, Bishop and Baldwin (1983) stresses that healthy family relationships have characteristics of problem solving, communication, roles, emotional reactions, emotional participation and behavioral control in the McMaster Model. As a second approach, Krysan, Moore and Zill (1990) proposes characteristics which healthy families have as *commitment to family and individuals within family, appreciating each other, desiring to spend time together, effective communication, high level of religious/spiritual orientation, ability to cope with crisis positively, encouraging individuals and having determined roles*. Inclusion of unhealthy characteristics by family relationships is defined as "frustrating family relationships" (Demirtas, 2013) and items like punishment the child gets and not talking of family members to each other were evaluated as frustrating family relationships.

Primary education is a period in which child gets out of family and open up to the outer world, gets into the social environment, existential anxiety is experienced (Yorukoglu, 1996) and children, in this age period, show tendency to empathize and this tendency help them solve their own problems. According to studies, there are many factors within family influencing children's tendency to empathize. Also, there are studies focus on relations of parental warmth and positive expressiveness

to children's empathy-related and social functioning (Zhou, Eisenberg, Fabes, Reiser, Guthrie, Murphy, Cumberland & Shepard, 2002), investigating the connections of empathic skills of mothers and children's level of self-respect (Korukcu, 2004) and level of empathic skills mothers have and child-rearing attitudes they have (Ucmaz Halıcıoglu, 2004), parental empathic abilities and children's perspective-taking abilities (Oguz & Koksall Akyol, 2008), attitudes of parents and their levels of acceptance and refusal and their children's empathic skills (Onder & Gulay, 2007; Cetin, 2008). In this study, it is aimed to investigate how perceived family relations of supportive and discouraging patterns influence children's tendency to empathize emotionally and cognitively. It is thought that working throughout this aim would make new contributions to the field.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research model

In this study, correlational research model was employed. It can be said that correlational studies are efficient in finding out the relations between variables and determining the levels of relationships between variables. Furthermore, they are important studies providing clues for further studies about those relationships (Buyukozturk, Cakmak, Akgun, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2009).

2.2 Study group

The study group includes 250 children from grades 4th and 5th in primary school in Aksaray city center. 145 of participant students (% 58) are female and 105 of them (% 42) are males. 118 of students are at 4th (47.2 %) and 132 of them are at 5th grade (% 52.8).

2.3 Data collection tools and analysis

For data collection tools of "KA-Sİ Empathic Tendency Scale Child Form" and "Family Relationship Scale for Children" were used. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. When inner consistency of KA-Sİ Empathic Tendency Scale Child Form is examined, Cronbach alpha coefficients are .84 for the whole scale, .79 for emotional empathy and .72 for cognitive empathy. Test, retest reliability coefficients of scale are .74 for the whole scale, .71 for emotional empathy and .69 for cognitive empathy. Child form answers were arranged as (1) Never appropriate to me, (2) Appropriate to me, (3) Quite appropriate to me and (4) Completely appropriate to me in a four degree scale. The Family Relationship Scale Children Form (FRSC) was developed in order to examine children's family perceptions (Demirtaş, 2013). FRSC includes two dimensions; Discouraging and Supportive Family Relationships. There are 10 items in each dimension of the scale (in total, 20 items) and it is given to students of fourth and fifth grade. Each item is answered by three choices; 3=Always 2=Sometimes 1=Never. For every dimension, total score vary between 10-30. Cronbach Alpha coefficients were used to calculate internal consistency reliability in both dimensions and for participants of second and third groups. For FRSC, Cronbach Alpha coefficients of first group were .82 for the first sub-factor and .76 for the second factor. In the third group, alpha coefficients for sub-factor 1 and 2 were .84 and .78 respectively. Multiple regression analyses were performed to predict the determinants of children's empathic tendencies.

3. Findings

Multiple regression analysis has been performed in the direction of the data obtained from the study for describing the predictor variables of children's empathic tendencies. Results of the analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables that predict cognitive empathic tendency of children

Variables	B	Std Error	β	t	p
Constant	14.058	2.178	-	6.455	0.00
Supportive family relationships	.304	.062	.308	4.931	0.00
Discouraging family relationships	-.128	.064	-.125	-1.994	.047
R ² =.135	R=.368	F (2,247)=19.299	P=0.000		

According to the result of the analysis, supportive family relations predict children's cognitive empathic tendencies significantly [(F (2, 247) =19.299; p<0.00]. These variables, together, explain approximately %13 of the variance. According to the results of the regression analysis; supportive family relations affect children's cognitive empathic (R= .368, R² =.135 ; p<0.00 tendency positively, discouraging family relations negatively.

Regression results of emotional empathic tendency and family relations are submitted in Table 2.

Table 2. Variables that predict emotional empathic tendency of children

Variables	B	Std Error	β	t	p
Constant	14.986	2.518	-	5.951	0.00
Supportive family relationships	.375	.071	.328	5.253	0.00
Discouraging family relationships	-.117	.074	-.125	-1.571	.0117
R ² =.138	R=.371	F (2,246)=16.669	p=0.000		

Based on the multiple regression analysis supportive family relations predict children's emotional empathic tendencies significantly and discouraging family relations negatively [(F (2, 246) =16.669; p<0.00]. These variables, together, explain approximately %14 of the variance (R= .371, R² =.138 ; p<0.00).

4. Results and discussion

First microsystem where child learns how s/he will live is "family", one of the most substantial sources affecting children's lives, their developmental features is parental relationship and quality of that relationship. Family is defined as a crucial predictor of emotional and social competencies of children in childhood period. Still, by reviewing literature, it has been found out empathy, a substantial component for emotional competence, generally researched upon parenting styles, that parental perspective is a reference point for that. This study investigated, in a sample of children attending to primary school, connections of perceived family relations and tendency of emotional and cognitive empathy. According to findings, perceived supportive family relations is a predictor of cognitive and

positive empathic tendency in children and perceived discouraging family relations are predictor of negative empathic tendencies.

Findings of this study is consistent with findings of prior studies (Laible & Carlo, 2004; Soenens, Duriez, Vansteenkiste, & Goossens, 2007; Zhou et al., 2002) and appropriate to literature of development; that is, supportive family environment is a good indicator of development of empathy (Barnett, 1987; Eisenberg & Valiente, 2002; Hoffman, 2008). Problem solving skills of family, more clearly, emotional problem solving (problems related to anger, depression, etc) and in daily problem solving (problems related to obtaining needs like eating, drinking, shelter), competency of family, verbal communication within family are behavioral patterns providing familial needs to be met and roles, supportive family relations like being able to express emotions within family, determining behavioral standards of members and providing discipline (Miller, Ryan, Keitner, Bishop, & Epstein, 2000) and social learning theory has been used to explain empathy in children and so, children has the opportunity to behold and experience perspective taking and emotional concern with supportive parents and their empathic tendencies develop in this learning context (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Besides, supporting interest and involvement with others, supportive caregiving is useful for interpersonal skills according to assumption of attachment theory and in turn, this leads to increase in level of empathy (Bowlby, 1980; Hoffman, 2000; Laible et al., 2004; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986; van der Mark, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2002). Securely attached people would identify with empathic and supportive caregiver model in addition to satisfied emotional needs of own. As a result, they would react in a sensitive and empathic way to others with a developed tendency to empathize and they would keep their needs separate from others' in subsequent relationships (Miklikowska & Duriez, 2011). According to results, perceived discouraging family relations have a negative influence on cognitive and emotional empathic tendencies of children. When the literature is reviewed, there is a connection between frustrating and negative family relations like punishment given to children, disconnected and rule-dependent communication between family members, forceful undertaking of roles by one member of family and low-level of empathy (Bulut, 1990; Lam, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012).

This research study makes important contributions to literature. It is thought that the study is important in terms of investigating family relationships and emotional and cognitive empathic tendencies of children within the present and from the viewpoint of children and make a new contribution to literature. In addition, it shows evidences of influence of perceived supportive and discouraging family relations on empathic skills. Suggestions could be made to adults being in communication with children of primary school age depending of those findings; they can support children about discussing their feelings and problems with parents and teachers; teachers, trainers, experimenters and other adults somehow connecting with the child may be models of empathic behaviors; they may create and present programs to increase empathic tendencies of school age children and as a result, may provide a healthy well-being, emotional and social competence

There may be some constrains of this study resulting from method and assessment tools. Firstly, participants were children of primary school; 4th and 5th grade. The study may be replicated in different age groups. In the second place, a crosssectional pattern has been used in the study. Because of the type of study, we have information about psychological processes of individuals at only at the very moment of the study. As a result, in future studies, a longitudinal approach could be held in order to examine family relations and empathic tendencies.

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