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Iwona Jabłońska
Radom Academy of Economics
ORCID: 0000-0003-3676-7863

The role of children's literature in supporting emotional growth

Jak literatura dziecięca może wspierać rozwój emocjonalny dziecka

Abstract

Books are an essential part of childhood. They have a way of deeply embedding themselves in memory. Through the content they contain, children learn about the world, prepare for life, enrich their vocabulary, and develop their imagination. Today, they hold particular value because reading to and with a child provides an opportunity to build closeness and impacts emotional competencies and skills, which are crucial in life. The aim of this article is to highlight the emotional aspect of development and the role of the teacher in this process. This topic seems open and highly relevant in the context of the realities of the 21st century, requiring action from educators.
Keywords: emotions, children's literature, family, child development, educators

Streszczenie

Książki są nieodzownym elementem dzieciństwa. Mają to do siebie, że głęboko zapadają w pamięci. Poprzez zawarte w nich treści dziecko poznaje świat, przygotowuje się do życia, wzbogaca słownictwo, rozwija wyobraźnię. Współcześnie nabierają szczególnej wartości, ponieważ czytanie dziecku i wspólnie z dzieckiem jest okazją do budowania bliskości, wpływa na kompetencje i umiejętności emocjonalne, które są niezbędne w życiu człowieka. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na aspekt emocjonalny w rozwoju oraz rolę nauczyciela w tym procesie. Temat zdaje się być otwarty i bardzo istotny w obliczu realiów XXI wieku i wymaga podejmowania działań przez wychowawców.
Słowa kluczowe: emocje, literatura dziecięca, rodzina, rozwój dziecka, wychowawcy

Introduction

Emotions – a term frequently invoked in recent times within both the public discourse and parental circles. However, do parents truly reflect upon the emotional development of their children? While they readily observe and celebrate milestones such as a child's first steps or first words, they seldom analyze or prioritize the

progression of emotional capacities. Nonetheless, these very competencies constitute the fundamental pillars of our later life. It is essential, first, to comprehend the nature of emotions as phenomena inherent to every human being. They manifest independently of volition or conscious effort, functioning in a nearly automatic manner. We do not acquire them through learning; they are innate biological endowments, which underscores their significant functional role in human existence.

Genesis of the concept

The term "emotion" originates from the works of Thomas Willis, while the word itself derives from the Latin *movere* – to move.[1] Neurobiologist Ralph Adolphs believes that "an emotion is a functional state of mind that puts the brain into a specific mode of operation, which adjusts our goals, directs attention, and modifies the weights we assign to various factors during mental calculations."[2] Lazarus assumes that "emotions are processes that result from a specific relationship between the organism and the environment."[3] Neither the environment nor the organism alone triggers emotions; a relationship between the person and their surroundings is necessary. A condition for the emergence of an emotion is physiological arousal caused by a situation. Every emotion is triggered by specific stimuli from the outside world and causes specific behaviours. Among many definitions is this one: "Emotions are subjective reactions to significant events, characterized by physiological changes as well as changes at the level of experience and behaviour visible to others."[4] Emotions signal that an event is important to a person. Their source lies in the satisfaction of biological, psychological, and social needs. "Emotions can be understood as a process of signalling that something significant is happening from the perspective of an individual's well-being, as well as the tasks performed by the cognitive system and behaviour."[5] If we were deprived of all emotions, we would not be able to function. Guilt, shame, empathy, jealousy, gratitude, and pride – emotions referred to as social emotions – are the foundation of a moral sense; they are key to our ability to function in society and to cooperate.

Frustration, contentment, hunger, love, and pain are also emotions. They help satisfy needs, help the organism survive, stay alive, avoid threats, and achieve goals. There is no human being who has not felt fear, joy, or displayed anger. Fear appears in situations where we are exposed to real danger. It is a necessary feeling because

[1] L. Mlodinow, *Emocje*, trans. T. Lanczewski, Poznań 2023, p. 31.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 104.

[3] J. Strelau, *Psychologia*, Vol. 2, Gdańsk 2000, p. 408.

[4] H.R. Schaffer, *Rozwój społeczny. Dzieciństwo i młodość*, Kraków 2006, p. 148.

[5] N.H. Frijda, *Emocje są funkcjonalne – na ogół* [in:] *Natura emocji*, eds. P. Ekman, R.J. Davidson, Gdańsk 1998, p. 103.

it protects and warns us. Thanks to it, we can avoid threats. If we avoid situations that trigger fear, we will isolate ourselves from our surroundings and, consequently, not develop fully. Anger appears when we cannot have what we want. Expressing unwanted, so-called negative emotions is considered uncivilized from a social perspective. It should be remembered, however, that hiding emotions contributes to increased anxiety and constant dissatisfaction, which adversely affects our health. Emotions have a huge impact on our daily lives, thoughts, and decisions. They play a fundamental role in every person's life, accompany us in various situations, and are responsible for our relationships with the outside world.

Functions of emotions

Emotions serve many functions, the most significant of which are:

a) adaptive,
b) social,
c) motivational.[6]

The adaptive function is related to preparing the body for action. Emotions are most often triggered in situations requiring adjustive actions, and their arousal is accompanied by autonomic nervous system activity that supports the action induced by the emotion. The adaptive function of emotions ensures that an individual can act effectively when needed. They allow for mobilization to complete a task.

The social function involves facilitating interaction with the environment. It helps people predict the behaviour of those around them, which is essential in interpersonal relationships.

The motivational function is very closely linked to emotions. If emotions evoke satisfaction or joy, they can incline a person toward active involvement; if they evoke disgust, they lead to discouragement. Motivation often influences how experienced emotions are displayed, their intensity, and how they direct behaviour.

Emotions are characterized by: evaluation, creativity, generalization, and scaling. They can lead to approach or withdrawal, cause a sense of well-being or distress, and help in avoiding threats. Depending on what is happening in our lives or at a given moment, a specific incident can cause various feelings to overwhelm us, as "emotional reactions are influenced by preceding events."[7] Every emotion-evoking event either facilitates or hinders the achievement of a set goal.[8] The thought process is heavily dependent on what a person feels at a given moment, and our emotional state influences how we think about a particular matter.

[6] A. Gałuszka, *Emotions – Their Meaning and Tasks*, "Journal of Education, Health and Sport" 2022, No. 12(1), p. 155.

[7] L. Mlodinow, *Emocje*, p. 135.

[8] N.H. Frijda, *Emotions Are Functional*…, p. 104.

Every person is expected to behave in a way that is socially deemed appropriate for the situation and place. Any "different" reactions are grounds for concluding that we lack emotional competence.

The essence of emotional competencies

According to H. Rudolph Schaffer, emotional competence is an individual's ability to cope with both their own and others' emotions.[9] Emotional competence consists of:

a) awareness of one's own emotional state, including the possibility of feeling multiple emotions simultaneously;
b) the ability to perceive others' emotions;
c) knowledge of vocabulary and expressions related to emotional states available in a given (sub)culture;
d) the capacity for empathetic engagement in response to emotions experienced by others;
e) the ability to realize that internal emotional states do not have to correspond with their external signs, both in oneself and in others;
f) the capacity to adaptively cope with distressing and unpleasant emotions;
g) the awareness that the nature of a relationship is largely determined by the way emotions are communicated and the emotional reciprocity within the relationship;
h) the ability to control emotions and acceptance of the emotional states experienced.[10]

Many researchers view these skills as components of emotional intelligence, understood as the ability to perceive and express emotions, understand and utilize them, and manage them to support an individual's development.[11] However, emotional abilities are not the same as competencies. "Abilities determine the efficiency of cognitive processes that allow a person to acquire effective ways of functioning; competencies are already mastered, specific skills for coping in various situations."[12] It is important to be aware of one's emotions and express them in an appropriate way. This ability is linked to so-called emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive feelings, name and express them, understand their causes, consequences, and interconnections, and manage them. A high level of emotional

[9] H.R. Schaffer, *Psychologia dziecka*, Warszawa 2013, p. 148.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 171.

[11] P. Salovey, P.T. Bedell, J.B. Detweiler, J.D. Mayer, *Aktualne kierunki w badaniach nad inteligencja emocjonalną* [in:] *Psychologia emocji*, eds. M. Lewis, J.M. Haviland-Jones, Gdańsk 2005, p. 165.

[12] K. Matczak, A. Knoop A., *Znaczenie inteligencji emocjonalnej w funkcjonowaniu człowieka*, Warszawa 2013, s. 16.

intelligence promotes social well-being and facilitates the individual's handling of interpersonal problems. The most common source of emotions is contact with others[13] and interacting with people. They manifest during shared conversations, when we begin to exchange ideas and take action. By knowing our own emotional reactions to various situations, it is easier to recognize them in others.

Nevertheless, to understand emotions, we must also remember that every person is raised in a different environment and has different life and social experiences.

The influence of parents on a child's emotional development

The family is the primary environment where a child functions and acquires initial skills and experiences. Jean Liedloff – creator of the continuum concept, suggests that optimal physical, intellectual, and emotional development depends on positive emotional experiences in early childhood.[14] During this period, the foundations for emotional regulation are established. As a child is entirely dependent on caregivers, they rely on a calming presence to learn how to regulate their body within a relationship, forming a bond. Through feeding, changing, and affection, a caregiver builds a child's sense of security, love, and acceptance.[15] The type of bond formed serves as the foundation for emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Many psychologists view attachment as a pivotal event in human emotional development, serving as the source of a child's security, self-esteem, self-control, and social skills. Through this intimate relationship, an infant learns to identify their own fee others.[16]

The emotional bond created with both parents during early life is extremely significant. How parents respond to a child's needs – such as crying or anger – affects their sense of security. These interactions serve as a model for future relationships; the feelings and behaviours between parents often become a prototype for the child's later interactions. Children learn through imitation and modelling, observing how parents express emotions and cope with challenges. "Imitation is also important because it serves as the basis for the development of empathy, the ability to experience what another person feels."[17] By observing the way family problems are solved, the communication patterns between parents, and their behaviour, there is a very high probability that a child will transfer such patterns of conduct into other

[13] P. Salovey, J.D. Mayer, D. Caruso, *Pozytywna psychologia emocjonalna* [in:] *Psychologia pozytywna. Nauka o szczęściu, zdrowiu i cnotach ludzkich*, ed. J. Czapiński, Warszawa 2008, p. 159.

[14] M. Kwiatkowska, *Podstawy pedagogiki przedszkolnej*, Warszawa 1988, p. 171.

[15] H.R. Schaffer, *Psychologia dziecka*, p. 167.

[16] L. Eliot, *Co tam się dzieje?*, Poznań 2010, p. 417.

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 409.

relationships and situations. By observing their parents, a child also determines whether the expression of emotions in a given situation will be beneficial for achieving a desired goal or not. Even in infancy, a child sees how parents show and express their emotions, and how they cope with emotionally charged situations. By observing its parents, a child learns to react similarly. Learning through imitation is one of the stages in the process of emotional development. It is impossible to avoid modelling. In the first months of life, a child stays with parents or other caregivers, and it is they who constitute the matrix for the child's future behaviours.

Factors influencing the predominance of specific emotions include:

a) the home atmosphere;
b) the prevailing parenting style;
c) mutual relations between family members;
d) the parents' attitude toward the child;
e) the parents' aspirations for the child.[18]

The role of the educator and pedagogue

The second, equally important educational environment is the kindergarten and school. In kindergarten, a child enters their first world, gaining experience in expressing and receiving emotions and feelings. The teacher-educator is the first person after the parents who influences the formation of attitudes, social skills, and the child's moral and emotional development. Thus, shaping the emotional sphere becomes an essential element of education; one must know the sources of emotions and what they entail. A teacher's goal should not be to suppress emotions but to maintain their balance and control, as every emotion has its own value and significance. The teacher's task is to support the child's development. What can be helpful? I'll give you a hint: a book. The song lyrics:

Courage floks from a book,
a book helps you through life
are timeless.

Although there are no universal prescriptions, the message embedded in literature is always an effective tool for readers, regardless of their age. By identifying with the characters, a child has the chance to explore emotions alongside them, learning to recognize and name them, cope with various feelings, and experience stories while receiving guidance on how to effectively solve problems. The verbal message stimulates processes of comparison, analysis, inference, and cause-and-effect understanding, fostering cognitive operations. By reading, the child learns strategic behaviour. When they find themselves in a similar situation, they will try to

[18] E.B. Hurlock, *Rozwój dziecka*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 402–403.

act exactly like the character they met in the book. Often, children even say in such moments, "I will do just like…". By interacting with literary heroes, a child often identifies with them and finds similar traits within themselves. Stories, tales, and poems provide opportunities for the child to learn how to function among friends, handle different situations, and build good relationships. Authors use stylistic devices – such as epithets, metaphors, similes, and exclamations – to accurately and vividly describe the emotions shifting within characters and to speak to the reader, as every human life is inseparably linked to emotions. Appropriate vocabulary allows for the precise naming of what a character feels, through which the child learns the words used to express feelings. Possessing a certain vocabulary enables the child not only to convey what they feel but also to listen to the experiences of others.

Fairy tales are of invaluable worth. The world of fairy tales helps show the child reality so that they can experience and understand it as their emotional development progresses.[19] Through their content, a child learns to distinguish good from evil, empathize with the wronged, rejoice in the victory of good, and feel concern when dangers mount. They learn to act according to accepted norms, what to value in life, and what a value system is. The moral within them provides guidance on how to live in society. Furthermore, a narrated event evokes real experiences in the child; the word has a magical influence on the child's imagination and feelings, immediately becoming "flesh" and triggering a complete and real reaction, as if it were reality. Only with time does the child learn moderation in reacting to fictional reality, gaining the ability to resist the suggestion of the word and creating two basic categories of perceiving phenomena: fictional and real.[20]

However, they act most strongly on the child's emotions and feelings. It is worth reaching for "prescription" fairy tales, including *Fairy Tales That Heal* by Doris Brett, *Fairy Tales for a Good Night's Sleep* by Gerlind Ortner, *Fairy Tales Help Children: Stories that Heal, Comfort, and Give Courage* by Cornelia Nitsch, and others. In therapeutic and educational fairy tales, the characters usually face problems similar to those the child is experiencing.

Emotional balance appears in a seven-year-old child. They begin to have better control over their emotions and become less emotionally excitable. According to Lev S. Vygotsky,[21] the process of "intellectualizing feelings" – the transition from unconscious emotions to higher feelings – occurs when a child adopts an emotional attitude toward thought-of and imagined facts and events, rather than just reacting to a direct emotional situation. Keeping the child's well-being in mind, it is worth considering this connection in the educational process.

[19] A.M. Basak, *Wpływ bajek czytanych przez rodziców na rozwój dzieci w wieku szkolnym*, "Pedagogika Rodziny" 2012, No. 2/4, p. 46.

[20] S. Szuman, *Wpływ bajki na psychikę dziecka*, Warszawa 1960, p. 60.

[21] L.S. Wygocki, *Nauczanie i rozwój w wieku przedszkolnym* [in:] *idem*, *Wybrane prace psychologiczne*, Warszawa 1971, p. 537.

Books come to the rescue. They are a goldmine of situations taken from everyday life. The relationships of book characters often perfectly reflect a daily reality that is not always easy. In scenes and conversations, one can find themselves. No one is perfect. The attitudes of young children often mirror the emotions of characters with different temperaments; their behavior can be a pretext for a conversation about how we are all different. Properly selected literature can help a child understand themselves and the world they live in.

Wojciech Kołyszko and Jovanka Tomaszewska's series *Bajki o uczuciach* [*Fairy Tales about Feelings*] is a complete set of tales about anger, jealousy, joy, fear, sadness, and shame. They contain not only stories but also practical ways of dealing with feelings, games, and exercises to help get to know them better – sort of "user manuals" for feelings. The authors show that feelings are natural; both joy and anger are needed. They write: "anger also helps find the strength to overcome an obstacle or defend oneself against a threat – as far as possible." They describe what an angry person looks like using various comparisons, through which the child learns to recognize feelings and expands their vocabulary.

From the series *Moc uczuć* [*The Power of Feelings*] by Katarzyna Miller, we also learn that we are not devoid of feelings; rather, everyone feels them with different intensity and in different situations.

In the book *Powiedz mi dlaczego… Nie mogę oglądać telewizji?* [*Tell Me Why… I Can't Watch TV?*], Sara Agostini and Marta Tonin remind us of timeless advice – one must talk to children. We cannot skip awkward topics or pretend that unresolved, complicated matters have been settled. Children have an extraordinary power to see through those close to them and perfectly sense when things are not as they hear from their parents. The book also offers tips on how to persuade children, as prohibitions and commands achieve little and often only trigger arguments.

Agnieszka Pawłowska's *Kraina uważności* [*Land of Mindfulness*[series makes children aware of how important the way we talk to someone is. By listening to the stories, the child has the opportunity – along with the inhabitants of the Land – to learn how to talk to others and see that communication is an important and necessary life skill.

Mała i jej świat. Uczucia [*Mała and Her World: Feelings*] by Anna Obiols describes various feelings. It includes suggested exercises on what to do to experience different feelings and what triggers them. It also features maxims and a Guide for Parents. Furthermore, it highlights that knowledge about feelings and emotions is just as necessary as knowledge about the world.

The benefit of interacting with a book is invaluable. A book not only develops imagination and enriches vocabulary or accompanies one in moments of loneliness, but it also shapes awareness and sensitivity toward others, allowing one to understand oneself and the world. Through characters in books, a child learns how others deal with troubles and problems, how they solve them, and the consequences of the decisions they make. While listening or reading, a child has the chance to

become someone else, live an unforgettable adventure, and experience something different and previously unknown. A book has the quality of allowing a person to develop their inner self, showing that people can experience the same event in different ways – that every person is different and reacts differently to stimuli, signals, and words.

The influence of a book on human behaviour is not seen immediately. However, it should be considered that books help create a bridge between childhood and adulthood. Skillful use of them will allow a child to develop fully and make their childhood richer in experiences and skills. Regardless of the positive role they play, they cannot replace contact and conversation with the primary educational environment – the parents. The family is the natural educational environment. "It is the family, and not the kindergarten or school, despite their unique importance in education, that constitutes the first source of symbolic transmission; in it, the young child learns to express feelings and thoughts, as well as appropriate reactions and behaviours."[22] Clinical psychologists have discovered that conversation works most effectively, but it should be conducted with someone important to us or a trusted friend – and at the right time and place, so the listener can truly hear us.[23] After reading a literary work, it is worth sitting down with students and talking about what they felt while listening or reading, what emotions accompanied them, and how they understand what happened. Such a dialogue helps develop reflectiveness, allows them to imagine themselves in a similar situation, and helps them understand the needs of another person. Instead of just informing, it is better to point out how others have handled various situations, as this teaches alternative ways of acting. Understanding the emotions of others is an element of social cognition that enables behaviour appropriate to the situation.

According to many psychologists, the fundamental factors influencing the quality of emotional development are peace, tenderness, and a sense of security, which contribute to the creation of an appropriate "educational climate." Such a climate is indispensable both in the family home and in educational institutions, as an atmosphere of peace, kindness, and a full sense of security fosters the gradual expansion of a child's social contacts.[24]

Conclusion

From a pedagogical, psychological, and sociological perspective, emotions should be the key because, as J.J. Campus states, they are processes that "establish, maintain, change, or terminate relations between the individual and the environment

[22] B. Milerski, B. Śliwerski, *Pedagogika. Leksykon*, Warszawa 2000, p. 192.
[23] L. Mlodinow, *Emocje*, p. 261.
[24] M. Kwiatkowska, *Podstawy pedagogiki przedszkolnej*, Warszawa 1988, p. 24.

in matters significant to the individual (…) emotions bind what is important to us with the world of people, things, and events."[25] The most important aspect is the ability to cope with and manage one's own emotions. There are no positive or negative emotions; all are good and necessary. Only their intensity or the way they are expressed poses a problem. Although they are an essential element of human existence, they are discussed only occasionally, and there are no specific curricula for them. Learning about emotions is not difficult, but it requires commitment and significant support from the closest adults, as well as the awareness that a person's later behaviour and functioning depend on earlier experiences and behaviours shown to the child.

Emotions do not appear without a reason. All of them perform many functions. „Emotions lead us into the depths of sadness, but also to the heights of joy. They are the main driver of our choices and behaviours, the reason why we formulate and achieve our goals."[26] Emotions form the foundation of the relationship between an individual and the environment, linking our internal values with the external word. It is emotions that direct the processes occurring in the human mind, and they determine how a person lives.

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[25] C. Saarni, *Kompetencje emocjonalne i samoregulacja w dzieciństwie* [in:] *Rozwój emocjonalny a inteligencja emocjonalna*, eds. P. Salovey, D.J. Sluyter, Poznań 1999, p. 122.

[26] L. Mlodinow, *Emocje*, p. 248.

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