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Parent-Child Emotion Talk (PCET) Dynamics in The Trajectory of Children's Emotion Understanding Development: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. Children's emotion understanding (EU) ability can affect their social interactions, psychological well-being, adaptation to the surrounding environment, and can reflect their emotional intelligence. Based on previous literature, the role of parents is very important in stimulating children's EU development from early to middle childhood, one of which is through parent-child emotional talk (PCET). However, the dynamics between PCET and improved EU ability in children's development, especially in recent years, remains unclear. From 54 recent studies found through databases search using the PRISMA method, we collected 9 articles which were then systematically reviewed in this study. The results of the systematic review shows that (1) PCET has a significant impact on children's EU development in preschool age (3-6 years), while in toddler (1-3 years) and middle childhood (6-11 years) the effect is more limited; (2) PCET involving emotion labelling, validation of children's emotions, as well as active causal interaction, proved to be most effective in improving children's EU. This review underscores the importance of understanding the appropriate age period for PCET and the characteristics of appropriate conversations to effectively influence the development of children's EU.

Keywords: Emotion understanding, parent-child emotion talk, children's emotion development

Abstrak, Kemampuan emotion understanding (EU) yang dimiliki anak dapat berpengaruh terhadap interaksi sosial, kesejahteraan psikologis, adaptasi anak terhadap lingkungan sekitarnya, hingga dapat mencerminkan bagaimana kecerdasan emosional yang mereka miliki. Berdasarkan literatur sebelumnya, peran orang tua sangat penting dalam menstimulasi perkembangan EU anak mulai dari masa kanak kanak awal hingga menengah, salah satunya melalui parent-child emotional talk (PCET). Namun, dinamika yang terjadi antara PCET dengan peningkatan kemampuan EU dalam perkembangan anak, khususnya dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, masih belum jelas. Dari 54 studi terkini yang ditemukan melalui pencarian database menggunakan metode PRISMA, peneliti mengumpulkan 9 artikel yang kemudian ditinjau secara sistematis pada penelitian ini. Hasil tinjauan sistematis menunjukkan bahwa (1) PCET berdampak signikan pada perkembangan EU anak pada usia prasekolah (3-6 tahun), sementara pada usia balita (1-3 tahun) dan kanak-kanak menengah (6-11 tahun) pengaruhnya lebih terbatas; (2) PCET yang melibatkan pelabelan emosi, validasi emosi anak, serta interaksi kausal yang aktif, terbukti paling efektif dalam meningkatkan EU anak. Tinjauan ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya memahami periode usia anak yang tepat dalam pemberian PCET serta karakteristik percakapan yang sesuai, agar dapat secara efektif memengaruhi perkembangan EU anak.

Kata Kunci: Emotion understanding, parent-child emotion talk, children's emotion development

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Introduction

One of the basic components in individual emotional development is the ability to recognize emotions, both one's own and others', known as emotion understanding (EU) (Camras, 2022). Furthermore, EU includes an individual's ability to detect emotion cues, classify emotions into categories, and determine the reasons that can underlie these emotions (Spunt & Adolphs, 2019). This ability has been developing in individuals since early childhood. According to the trajectory of EU development for children aged 3-11

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years proposed by Pons et al. (2004), there are 3 stages in the context of understanding emotions. These stages include external understanding, mental understanding, and reflective appraisal.

In the external understanding stage, which begins around the age of 3, children begin to understand aspects of emotions that are seen through the ability to recognize basic emotions. Furthermore, at around 5 years of age, children can identify situational causes of emotions and understand that certain events or objects can reactivate emotions that have been experienced. The second stage is mental understanding, which begins around the age of 7. At this stage, children begin to realize that emotions are related to individual desires and beliefs, and understand how the difference between expressed and felt emotions. At 9-11 years old, children enter the third stage, reflective appraisal. At this stage, they begin to see situations from multiple perspectives, feel conflicting emotions, feel uncomfortable for holding back emotions, and learn to regulate emotions through their thoughts.

In childhood, EU development has also been found to be important in supporting their future developmental success. Children with high EU were found to be more successful in building social peer relationships. This is because they tend to use positive conflict resolution strategies, and are better able to collaborate and coordinate tasks with peers (Cao et al., 2023; Viana et al., 2020). Conversely, difficulties in recognizing emotions can lead to problems in understanding peer group dynamics, which increases children's risk of peer victimization (Pozzoli et al., 2017). The ability to understand emotions has also been found to be related to children's academic success in school. Children with more developed EU tend to succeed in academic performance and fit in more easily at school (Voltmer & von Salich, 2017). Furthermore, EU achievement can also reflect the level of their emotional intelligence. This is because emotional intelligence involves a child's ability to effectively understand and assess their emotional experiences.

Several studies have shown that one of the factors related to children's EU development is family characteristics (Ogren & Johnson, 2021; Zhang, 2018; Wang, 2017). For example, children who have disorganized attachment with their parents were found to be less able to recognize and understand emotions. They are less sensitive to facial expressions and have difficulty distinguishing it (Forslund et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be said that children's interactions with caregivers, especially parents, are very important to their EU ability. Parents who consistently respond attentively to children's feelings, acknowledge and understand their emotions will help children learn to recognize and deal with their emotions (Zheng, 2023). Quality mother-child interactions in early childhood also predict better emotion recognition skills in children aged 8-12 years (Flykt et al., 2021). In other words, one of the factors that support EU development in children is how parents play an active role in inviting them to discuss emotions.

Discussions about emotions between parents and children are also known as parent-child emotion talk (PCET) (Chan et al., 2021). In relation to children's EU, parents' talk about emotions can contribute both directly and indirectly. This can happen because one of the ways children learn and improve their EU is through the production of emotion-related language. Children express this language spontaneously during social interactions with caregivers, which are usually parents (Camras, 2022). Over time, the way parents interact and respond to children's emotions also changes. Furthermore, these changes contribute to the dynamics of children's EU development throughout childhood.

In early childhood, PCET is important because it is related to the concept of ZPD (Zone Proximal Development) proposed by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that in the context of understanding emotions, children still need the help of other figures who are "smarter" than them to be able to reach the right EU. Entering school age (middle childhood) children begin to attend school and the time spent between parents and children becomes less when compared to the previous period (early childhood) (Eisenberg, 1998). Children begin to recognize other figures such as teachers and peers. Although there is a change in the pattern of the relationship between parents and children, the family still plays a very important role in children in middle childhood (Berk, 2013). Thus, it can be said that emotion-related interactions between parents and school children are still needed.

However, there is a lack of detailed and up-to-date research on the dynamics of PCET, particularly during childhood EU development. Some previous reviews have discussed the socialization of parental emotions to children in general, and have not focused directly on children's EU (England-Mason et al, 2023; Breaux et al, 2022). In addition, these reviews have not considered the dynamic differences in each period of child development. Therefore, we wanted to further examine how the dynamics of PCET that can influence the development of children's EU, and how this relates to specific age periods.

Method

In conducting this systematic literature review, we took a series of processes proposed by Kitchenham (2004). First, we planned the concept of the review. We began to determine what phenomena related to emotional development would be discussed along with the reference articles. We then identified and developed the benefits of this systematic review.

Furthermore, in the review stage, we began to collect, select, and evaluate the quality of the collected articles. The article search words used were parent-child emotion talk, parent emotion talk, parent emotion talk, parent-child emotion conversation, parent reminiscing talk, parent validation talk, terms with the same concept as EU (such as emotion knowledge, emotion recognition, emotional competence, emotion labeling, emotion awareness and emotion comprehension), toddler, early childhood, and middle childhood. These search terms were used to find articles in the Google Scholar, Science Direct, SAGE Journals, ProQuest, SpringerLink, Scopus, and Wiley Online Library databases. We also applied several filters in the search process, such as publication year limit in the range of 2018-2025, as well as peer-reviewed review articles.

We also identified and determined the inclusion criteria of the study; it had to address the context of PCET and EU, research subjects were children aged 2-11 years, Scopus indexed journals and published in the last 7 years. Articles that did not meet the minimum year of publication (before 2018) were excluded because they were considered less relevant (11 articles). In addition, some articles found were not scientific research type and peer-reviewed articles such as literature reviews or theoretical reviews (24 articles), so it had to be excluded. There were also articles that met the criteria, but the discussion was too out of context, such as relating more to emotion regulation or emotional intelligence than to children's EU (10 articles). After considering various aspects, these articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the purpose of this systematic review.

Relevant information from each selected article was then extracted and organized systematically to enable comparison and synthesis of key findings. Next, we synthesized the data. A synthesis of findings was conducted to organize information from multiple studies to identify patterns, trends and consistent findings, as well as differences or controversies that may arise from existing research.

In reporting the results of this systematic review, we used the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method which is further described in Figure 1 (See Figure 1). We found a total of 54 relevant studies based on keywords through the database search. After screening according to the inclusion criteria, 9 articles were used in this systematic review.

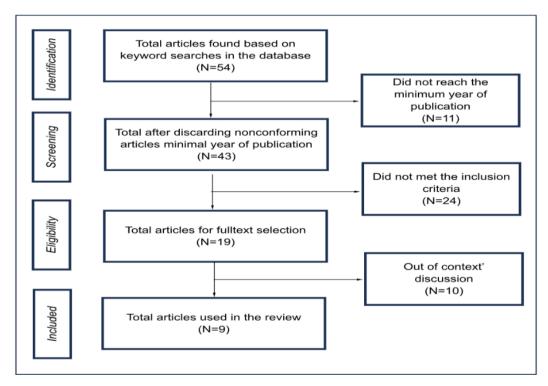


Figure 1. PRISMA chart of the article selection flow

Result

After collecting articles that fit the research criteria, we summarized the articles used (see table 1). We found 9 articles that met the inclusion criteria in the last 7 years. In terms of participant age, 2 articles focused on toddler-age children, 2 articles focused on preschool-age children, 1 article focused on middle childhood-age children, while the other 4 articles were longitudinal. The articles found also varied in terms of research methods, ranging from correlational quantitative, observational, experimental, to exploratory qualitative.

Table 1 The summary of used articles

No	Author (Year)	Participant	N	Journal Rank	Method	Findings
1	Reschke, et al. (2024)	3, 4, and 5 years old child and their parents	256	Q1	Observation	Parent-child conversations about emotions, particularly those involving parental questions and emotional talk, do not seem to significantly correlate with children's emotional knowledge either concurrently or prospectively. However, a negative relationship was found between parental causal questions about emotions at Wave 2 and children's emotional knowledge at Wave 3. This may indicate that causal questions might lead children to focus on aspects of emotional knowledge that are not directly assessed in emotional knowledge tests (e.g., contextual understanding of emotions and actions), potentially distracting from aspects measured by the test (e.g., facial expressions and emotion labels). Furthermore, children's active emotion-related speech during parent-child conversations appears to play a critical role in their developing emotional knowledge. In other words, children's own active engagement with emotion-related discussions is more influential than their parents' involvement.
2	Cooper, et al. (2023)	2-3 years old child and their parents	166	Q1	Observation	EU is not directly measured, but it is always mentioned as related, because of the influence of PCET on children emotion talk. Conversations about emotions between parents and children, including conversations and questions asked by parents, play an important role in helping children understand and process their emotions, especially their self-conscious emotions.
3	Bjørk, et al. (2022)	Late kindergartener (M = 5.91) and one of their parents	40	Q1	Quantitative- Experiment	When parents encourage children to express and share difficult emotional experiences, it significantly enhances their EU. Parental responses that focus on comfort or distraction, rather than labeling and validating emotions, negatively affect children's overall EU. This happens because children miss the opportunity to process and understand their emotions when parents don't address them verbally or emotionally. In short, children's EU improves when parents actively engage with and validate their emotions, rather than redirecting or minimizing them.
4	Ruba et al. (2022)	12 - 24 months old child and their parents	50	Q2	Observation	Parental use of causal questions may help children learn emotion labels by encouraging them to think about the causes behind emotions. Surprisingly, no aspects of parental emotion talk were significantly associated with the number of emotion state labels in infants' receptive vocabulary. Other forms of parental emotion talk do not appear to significantly influence the development of infants' understanding of emotion labels.
5	Levya et al. (2021)	First-grade children (M = 79.50 mo) and their	204	Q2	Observation	Maternal emotion content and reminiscing style did not show a significant relationship with children's EU, possibly due to the study's cross-sectional design. Previous research suggests

		mothers				that reminiscing conversations may impact preschoolers' EU, especially when discussing past emotional events. As children grow older, reminiscing conversations may become more beneficial for helping them draw conclusions about the context and causes behind emotions.
7	Lambie et al. (2020)	2-5 years old child and their parents	11	Q2	Quantitative- Experiment	Parent-child emotional discussions involving emotion validation help children become more aware of their own emotions. These discussions lead to children feeling calmer and more accepting of negative emotions. The validation of emotions encourages children to talk more openly about their feelings.
	Pate et al. (2020)	4-8 years old child with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or Typically Developing (TD) with their mothers	101 (ODD = 69, TD = 32)	Q1	Quantitative- Correlational	While deeper conversations about negative emotions with mothers may be intended to help children, excessive focus on emotions, especially with open-ended questions and emotion descriptors, can hinder children's understanding of the causes of their emotions. For children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), this type of emotional elaboration may even impair emotional regulation. Effective emotional development requires not only in-depth conversations but also balanced, interactive dialogue where both the parent and child actively participate
8	Doan et al. (2018)	36, 42, and 54 months old child and their mothers	131	Q1	Observation	Maternal references to mental states (MSL) support children's emotion knowledge (ESK), particularly for European American children, and show long-term benefits for Chinese immigrant children. Maternal references to behavior are negatively associated with children's emotion knowledge, as they focus more on external actions rather than emotions. Th. e impact of MSL may be most significant when children are first developing an understanding of emotions and mental states, but its importance may vary by culture and age. As children grow, other factors like peers, language skills, or prior experiences may influence emotion knowledge more than maternal input.
9	Yuill & Little, 2018	5-9 years old child with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) or Typically Developing (TD) and their mothers	18 (SLI = 9, TD = 9)	Q1	Qualitative- Exploratory Study	The way children engage in conversations about emotions, cognition, and causality is more important for their EU than the frequency of these conversations by mothers. Children with typical language development (TD) produce more cognitive and causal talk, which positively impacts their EU, while children with language impairments (SLI) benefit from more guided conversations with their mothers. Simple use of emotion terms did not significantly differ between TD and SLI children, nor did it predict EU. Scaffolding by mothers in causal discussions about emotions plays a crucial role, especially for children with language impairments, in developing better emotion knowledge.

Discussion

Based on the collected articles, all articles basically emphasize the importance of parents' role in the development of children's EU. Interestingly, in the context of PCET, most of the articles indicate that parents' emotion talk has no significant influence on children's EU (Cooper et al., 2023; Levya et al., 2021; Pate et al., 2020; Ruba et al., 2022; Reschke et al., 2024; Yuill & Little, 2018). More precisely, the frequency with which parents talk about emotions in PCET does not directly affect children's EU ability.

On the other hand, the three other articles used in this review found different results, indicating a significant effect between parent emotion talk and children's EU (Bjørk et al., 2022; Doan et al., 2018; Lambie et al., 2020). Furthermore, Bjørk et al. (2022) found a negative direction of these influence. Thus, we need to interpret and draw conclusions from these findings carefully. Several perspectives can explain why parents' emotion talk in PCET could not directly influence children's EU ability. These include the developmental trajectory of the child, the quality of the emotion talk, and the characteristics of interaction between parents and child during the discussion.

Considering the developmental trajectory, children's EU basically begins to develop from the age of 1-3 years or at the toddler age (Cooper, et.al., 2023; Reschke, et.al., 2023). At this age, children begin to understand self-conscious emotion simply, to label emotions. Furthermore, at preschool age (3-6 years old), children begin to achieve the ability to realize their own and others' emotions, hide the emotions they feel, and regulate these emotions (Reschke, et. al., 2023; Bjork, et. al., 2021; Laugen, et. al., 2023). Interestingly, articles that used toddlers as research participants (Ruba et al., 2022; Reschke et al., 2024) did not show a significant relationship between parent emotion talk and children's EU ability. This is in contrast to findings on children in the next developmental stage, preschool (3-6 years), which generally found a significant relationship between parent emotion talk and children's EU ability (Bjørk et al., 2022; Doan et al., 2018; Lambie et al., 2020).

This can happen because at toddler age, children are not yet able to speak fluently or understand conversations well. Therefore, it is not surprising that emotional talk from parents begins to have a significant impact on children's EU at preschool age. At preschool age, children's emotional achievement is more developed. In addition, children spend more time with their parents at home, which makes emotion talk more relevant and understandable. Moreover, at this age, children begin to express their feelings and opinions, especially related to emotions. Therefore, preschool age is considered a very appropriate period for parents to improve children's EU through a high-quality PCET (Bjørk et al., 2022; Doan et al., 2018; Lambie et al., 2020; Levya et al., 2021).

However, the non-significant relationship between parent emotion talk and children's EU is not only found in toddler age, but also in the middle childhood (Laugen, et.al., 2023; Levya, et.al., 2021; Yuill & Little, 2018). This is thought to occur because during this period, children begin to develop independence and tend to gain perspective from sources outside the family, such as friends or even through their personal experiences. In other words, the influence of parent emotion talk on middle childhood children's EU ability tends to decrease because children have started to gain experiences and interactions outside the family, which offer a wider range of emotional situations. Furthermore, during this period, children have started to develop a broader and more complex understanding of emotions. Thus, emotion talk with parents can only be effective for children's EU ability if parents build appropriate emotion discussions. In line with Levya et al. (2021), who suggested that parent emotion talk, especially from mothers, can better influence children's EU ability if mothers involve more in-depth questions related to emotions (Levya et al., 2021). This can help children to understand the broader emotional context, not just the emotions they feel on a particular occasion.

Another discussion of why parents' emotion talk in PCET does not always affect children's EU ability is due to the quality and dynamics of the talk. Through research conducted by Bjork et al. (2022), Doan et al. (2018), and Lambie et al. (2020), it is known that there are several characteristics of PCET that can affect children's EU development. These characteristics involve conversations where parents label and validate emotions, and fostering causal interactions with their children about feelings. (Bjørk et al., 2022; Doan et al., 2018; Lambie et al., 2020). For example, if a child falls off a bike and feels scared or sad, a parent who labels

and validates the child's feelings, such as saying, "You look scared, that must be hurts," will better help the child understand and talk about his or her emotions. In contrast, if the parent simply says, "It's okay, don't worry, let's get over it," without validating the child's feelings, the child will feel confused and unaware of the emotions he or she is feeling (Bjørk et al., 2022). This may occur because PCET, which includes validation of parents' emotions, encourages children to be more open in expressing their feelings and ultimately supports them in understanding and managing their own emotions.

Therefore, in PCET related to children's EU ability, it is also important to see how often children respond to parents' emotion talk. Several articles used in this study revealed that children's ability to talk about their emotions in parent-child emotion discussions was more related to their EU (Reschke et al., 2024; Pate et al., 2020). This supports the importance of causal, interactive interactions between parents and children regarding emotions in emotion discussion sessions. Causal and interactive PCET can improve children's ability to talk about and label their emotions, ultimately improving their EU (Cooper et al., 2023; Ruba et al., 2022; Lambie et al., 2020; Doan et al., 2018; Yuill & Little, 2018). In other words, high-quality PCET can be a platform for parents to improve their children's EU.

Furthermore, the results of this review can be used as a basis for current research on the effect of PCET on children's EU. However, this review is still limited to the context of PCET without including other emotion socialization techniques. This is because the main focus of this review is on children's ability to understand emotions, without extending it to other aspects such as emotion regulation. Therefore, the results obtained should be considered with caution and not considered as definitive conclusions. On the other hand, this review also has limitations due to the lack of research on the specific topic of PCET and children's EU. Future research could explore other forms of emotion socialization, such as emotion modeling and emotion coaching that could potentially influence children's EU, more specifically.

Conclusion

Based on the review' results and discussion, it can be concluded that the effect of PCET on children's EU varies depending on the age of the child, the quality of the conversation, and the type of interaction between parents and children. At toddler age (1-3 years), emotional talk by parents has no significant effect, but at preschool age (3-6 years), the effect is more obvious and significant. Then in middle childhood (6-11 years old), emotion talk by parents is no longer significant. In addition, the quality of conversations that involve labeling and validating children's emotions, as well as active causal interactions, are essential in PCET in order to improve children's EU. Further research could explore other emotion socialization techniques, such as emotion modeling and emotion coaching, to understand their effects on children's emotional development.

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