

**ableau**

**The 5 Most Influential Visualizations of All Time**

[GET THE WHITEPAPER](#)

**Deciphering facial expressions for kids: Can we help children read emotions?**

© 2009 - 2018 Gwen Dewar, Ph.D., all rights reserved

Reading facial expressions isn't the only way we understand the emotions of others.

We rely on a variety of information, including tone of voice (Paulmann and Uskul 2014), body language (Aviezer et al 2012), and contextual cues (Aguert et al 2013).

Nevertheless, our ability decode faces is very important, and may be linked with these measures of success and social competence.



For example, children with stronger face-reading skills may achieve more popularity at school (Leppänen and Hietanen 2001). They tend to perform better academically (Kang et al 2017).

In addition, experiments hint that people who are better at identifying *fearful* expressions are more kind and generous (e.g., Marsh et al 2007).

On the flip side, children who have more trouble identifying emotion in faces are more likely to have peer problems and learning difficulties (Goodfellow and Nowicki 2009). Preschoolers with poor face-reading skills for their age are more likely to have externalizing behavioral problems, like hyperactivity (Chronaki et al 2015a). If they tend to be shy, such children are also more likely to suffer from anxiety (Sette et al 2016).

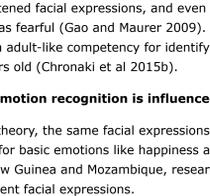
**So what determines a child's face-reading abilities?**

**We know these skills develop as children mature.**

Around the world, from Canada (Mao and Maurer 2010) to Italy (Mancini et al 2013) to Japan (Naruse et al 2013), researchers have confirmed that children become more accurate as they get older.



Facial cues of happiness may be the easiest for young children to recognize. By the age of five, most children are able to identify happy faces with adult-like accuracy (Gau and Maurer et al 2010). But other emotions -- like sadness, anger, disgust, and surprise -- take much longer.



In experiments on Canadian kids, five-year-olds had trouble distinguishing between sad and frightened facial expressions, and even ten-year-olds tended to misjudge sad faces as fearful (Gao and Maurer 2009). In another study, children didn't show an adult-like competency for identifying most emotions until they were 11 years old (Chronaki et al 2015b).

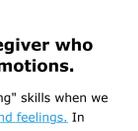
**We also know that emotion recognition is influenced by culture.**

Contrary to a popular theory, the same facial expressions aren't recognized everywhere, not even for basic emotions like happiness and fear. In studies conducted in Papua New Guinea and Mozambique, researchers showed people images depicting different facial expressions.

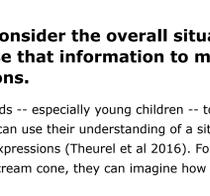
The images were from an official collection used by psychologists to depict supposedly universal facial expressions (Ekman 1973), but people in these places didn't always interpret the expressions in the predicted way (Crivelli et al 2017; Crivelli et al 2016). As children grow up, they have to learn culture-specific cues about facial expressions.

**What can we do to help kids read faces? Evidence-based tips**

If face-reading competence depends on learning, how can we help children become expert interpreters?



Research suggests that parents can have an important impact on the development of emotion recognition in young children. Here are some evidence-based ideas.



**1. Be a "mind-minded" parent -- a caregiver who engages kids in insightful talk about emotions.**

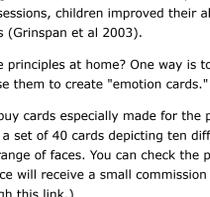
Studies suggest that children develop better "mind-reading" skills when we [expose them to accurate, sensitive talk about thoughts and feelings](#). In particular, kids develop better emotion-reading skills when their parents help them find appropriate labels for the emotions they observe. Parents can also help by discussing the causes and consequences of specific emotions (Castro et al 2015).

**2. Ask kids to consider the overall situation and context, and use that information to make sense of facial expressions.**

We shouldn't expect kids -- especially young children -- to rely on facial cues alone. Young children can use their understanding of a situation to help them make sense of facial expressions (Theurel et al 2016). For example, if they see someone drop his ice cream cone, they can imagine how they would feel if this happened to them.

**3. Talk with children not only about facial expressions, but also about other forms of body language.**

Children are sensitive to much more than a person's facial expressions. They also notice tone of voice, body posture, and gestures. Whether you are reading a story together, or observing someone in real life, help kids make connections between different kinds of nonverbal cues.



**4. For extra practice, try playing emotion identification games**

Researchers have developed training programs that ask kids to practice categorizing the emotions depicted by facial expressions (Grinspan et al 2003; Hubble et al 2015).

For example, in one study, researchers gave typically-developing elementary school students training in the identification and self-production of facial cues. After only 6 half-hour sessions, children improved their ability to read emotions compared with controls (Grinspan et al 2003).

Can we apply the same principles at home? One way is to assemble a collection of photographs, and use them to create "emotion cards."

Alternatively, you can buy cards especially made for the purpose. For example, Picture by Picture sells a set of 40 cards depicting ten different emotions modeled by a diverse range of faces. You can check the price on Amazon [here](#). (Note: Parenting Science will receive a small commission from Amazon for purchases made through this link.)

What can you do with your cards? Try these games.

**Imitating faces and guessing emotions**

Facial mimicry isn't just an exercise in theater. Research suggests that it also helps us identify emotions and experience empathy (Sato et al 2013). So try this: Shuffle the cards and put them face down. The first player picks a card, keeps it to herself, and then mimics the expression on the card. The other player(s) have to guess the correct emotion.

**Matching faces to situations**

In this game, you'll need an extra set of cards -- each depicting an emotion-evoking situation. Then players will attempt to match each facial expression card with the most appropriate situation.

The images for your situation cards can come from a number of sources. You can draw your own, or cut pictures out of magazines. Some situation cards may evoke multiple emotions.

**Creative scenarios: Why that face?**

In this simple game, players take turns picking a card from the deck and inventing a reason for the facial expression displayed. For example, if the player picks a card with a woman looking surprised, you might say, "She just found a dinosaur in her bathtub."

**Collaborative, improvisational storytelling: A game inspired by a child psychology tool**

The MacArthur Story Stem Battery is a tool psychologists use to get young children to discuss and imagine certain themes and concepts -- like separations from loved ones, conflict with peers, and moral dilemmas. The psychologist sets up a hypothetical situation, and encourages the child to flesh out the details of what happens next.

In this cooperative game, players can decide together on the basic scenario. It can be fanciful or outlandish, but it should involve characters with realistic emotional responses. Then players create a narrative together, taking turns and building on each others ideas.

To begin, the first player picks an emotion card, and starts the narrative. He can take the story into any direction he likes, but he must incorporate the emotion depicted on the card -- i.e., events in the story must reflect the appropriate emotion. The next player picks a card and continues the narrative, and so on. Players continue to take turns until they have used all the cards or reached a satisfying conclusion.

**More reading**

For more information about the influence of parenting on a child's emotion recognition abilities, see ["The case for teaching empathy."](#) For helpful advice about fostering empathy, see [these evidence-based tips](#).

Share this page: [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Pinterest](#) [Tumblr](#) [Reddit](#) [WhatsApp](#)

Copyright © 2006-2020 by Gwen Dewar, Ph.D.; all rights reserved. For educational purposes only. If you suspect you have a medical problem, please see a physician.

**References**

Aguert M, Laval V, Lacroix A, Gil S, and Le Bigot L. 2013. Inferring emotions from speech prosody: not so easy at age five. *PLoS One*. 8(12):e83657.

Aviezer H, Trope Y, and Todorov A. 2012. Body cues, not facial expressions, discriminate between intense positive and negative emotions. *Science*. 338(6111):1225-9.

Castro VL, Halberstadt AG, Lozada FT, Craig AB. 2015. Parents' Emotion-Related Beliefs, Behaviors, and Skills Predict Children's Recognition of Emotion. *Infant Child Dev*;24(1):1-22.

Chronaki G, Garner M, Hadwin JA, Thompson MJ, Chin CY, Sonuga-Barke EJ. 2015a. Emotion-recognition abilities and behavior problem dimensions in preschoolers: evidence for a specific role for childhood hyperactivity. *Child Neuropsychol*. 21(1):25-40.

Chronaki G, Hadwin JA, Garner M, Maurage P, Sonuga-Barke EJ. 2015b. The development of emotion recognition from facial expressions and non-linguistic vocalizations during childhood. *Br J Dev Psychol*. 33(2):218-36.

Crivelli C, Jarillo S, Russell JA, Fernández-Dols JM. 2016. Reading emotions from faces in two indigenous societies. *J Exp Psychol Gen*. 145(7):830-43.

Crivelli C, Russell JA, Jarillo S, Fernández-Dols JM. 2017. Recognizing spontaneous facial expressions of emotion in a small-scale society of Papua New Guinea. *Emotion*. 17(2):337-347.doi:

Declerck CH, Bogaert S. 2008. Social valence orientation: related to empathy and the ability to read the mind in the eyes. *J Soc Psychol*. 148(6):711-26.

Ekman P. 1973. Cross-cultural studies of facial expression. In P. Ekman (ed): *Darwin and facial expression: A century of research in review*. New York: Academic Press.

Gao X and Maurer D. 2009. Influence of intensity on children's sensitivity to happy, sad, and fearful facial expressions. *J Exp Child Psychol*. 102(4):503-21.

Gao X and Maurer D. 2010. A happy story: Developmental changes in children's sensitivity to facial expressions of varying intensities. *J Exp Child Psychol*. 107(2):67-86.

Goodfellow S and Nowicki S. 2009. Social adjustment, academic adjustment, and the ability to identify emotion in facial expressions of 7-year-old children. *J Genet Psychol*. 170(3):234-43.

Grinspan D, Hemphill A, and Nowicki S Jr. 2003. Improving the ability of elementary school-age children to identify emotion in facial expression. *J Genet Psychol*. 164(1):88-100.

Hubble K, Bowen KL, Moore SC, van Goozen SH. 2015. Improving Negative Emotion Recognition in Young Offenders Reduces Subsequent Crime. *PLoS One*. 10(6):e0132035.

Kang K, Anthony L, Mitchell P. 2017. Seven- to 11-Year-Olds' Developing Ability to Recognize Natural Facial Expressions of Basic Emotions. *Perception*. 46(9):1077-1089.

Leppänen JM and Hietanen JK. 2001. Emotion recognition and social adjustment in school-aged girls and boys. *Scand J Psychol*. 42(5):429-35.

Mancini G, Agnoli S, Baldaro B, Bitti PE, Surcinelli P. 2013. Facial expressions of emotions: recognition accuracy and affective reactions during late childhood. *J Psychol*. 147(6):599-617.

Marsh AA, Kozak MN, and Ambady N. 2007. [Accurate identification of fear facial expressions predicts prosocial behavior](#). *Emotion*. 7(2):239-51.

Naruse S, Hashimoto T, Mori K, Tsuda Y, Takahara M, and Kagami S. 2013. Developmental changes in facial expression recognition in Japanese school-age children. *J Med Invest*. 60(1-2):114-20.

Paulmann S and Uskul AK. 2014. Cross-cultural emotional prosody recognition: Evidence from Chinese and British listeners. *Cogn Emot*. 28(2):230-44.

Sato W, Fujimura T, Kochiyama T, and Suzuki N. 2013. Relationships among facial mimicry, emotional experience, and emotion recognition. *PLoS One*. 8(3):e57889.

Sette S, Baumgartner E, Laghi F, Coplan RJ. 2016. The role of emotion knowledge in the links between shyness and children's socio-emotional functioning at preschool. *Br J Dev Psychol*. 34(4):471-488.

Theurel A, Witt A, Malsert J, Lejeune F, Fiorentini C, Barisnikov K, Gentaz E. 2016. The integration of visual context information in facial emotion recognition in 5- to 15-year-olds. *J Exp Child Psychol*. 150:252-271.

Wang L, Chen W, Li H. 2017. Use of 3D faces facilitates facial expression recognition in children. *Sci Rep*. 7:45464

Content last modified 2/2018

Image of man making many faces by istock

Image of mother in fancy sari with child by [Sundaram\\_Ramaswamy\\_flickr](#)

Image of boy making face by [Chip.Griffin/istock](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[Attachment](#), [Attention\\_deficits](#), [Babies](#), [Breastfeeding](#), [Crying](#), [Diet\\_and\\_nutrition](#), [Empathy](#), [Friendships](#), [Intelligence](#), [Odds\\_and\\_Ends](#), [Parenting\\_styles](#), [Praise](#), [Preschool\\_math](#), [Preschool\\_science](#), [School\\_science\\_education](#), [Self-control](#), [Sleep](#), [Social\\_skills](#), [Spanking](#), [Stress](#), [Toys\\_and\\_games](#), [Toilet\\_training](#), [Video\\_games](#), [Terms\\_of\\_use](#)

Powered by [SBI](#)

AN ELITE CAFEMEDIA FAMILY & PARENTING PUBLISHER

DO NOT do business WITHOUT IT