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978-0-521-62992-8 - Emotional Development: The Organization of Emotional Life in the Early Years

L. Alan Sroufe

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In the past, researchers have treated the development of the emotions and the task of emotional regulation as two separate topics, the former emphasizing normative questions and the latter emphasizing individual differences. An understanding of the first has not been seen as relevant to the second. By bringing them under the perspective of development and emphasizing common core processes, *Emotional Development* illuminates both topics.

All emotions are expressions of arousal, or “tension”: Whether a given emotion can or does occur depends on the developed capacity to generate tension and on the meaning of an event in its context, which change with age. *Emotional Development* reveals the common core processes underlying the emergence of specific emotions and the capacity for emotion regulation. It explains the timing of emotional emergence and why emotions function as they do; it also explores individual styles of emotional regulation. Close ties between emotional, cognitive, and social development are discussed as well.

This book will appeal to professors, graduate students, and clinicians who study developmental, cognitive, and social psychology.

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For June:

consultant, primary reviewer, inspiration

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Preface

For more than two decades graduate students have come to the University of Minnesota to work on an ongoing longitudinal study of 180 children and their families begun in 1974. The children have been followed year by year from birth to early adulthood. Of course, the special knowledge developed by any particular group of students has tended to center around the ages of the child subjects during the time those students worked on the project. Thus, some students became knowledgeable, and in time even leading experts, on infant emotional development, temperament, and attachment relationships. Others became experts on the emotional functioning of the preschool child and/or the structure and functioning of the preschool peer group and/or parent–child relationships during the preschool period. Later students mastered the intricacies of friendships and peer group functioning, school adjustment and school-related problems, or the development of the sense of self in middle childhood. More recent students have probed identity formation, adolescent family relationships, the challenges of intimacy in adolescence, and child and adolescent psychopathology.

I have come to lament this situation. This is not because development is less interesting with age. Each period of development has been fascinating, and I doubt that the students thought wistfully about how much more interesting an earlier period might have been. Rather, I sensed that the students were becoming further and further removed from the beginning – the beginning of development and the inception of our project itself. To be sure, the students read early reports and did analyses linking each new period with all that had gone before. They could articulate, even better than we could at the beginning, why early attachment quality would be related to later functioning and what would promote or diminish such ties. And they certainly got a feel for development by comparing the current age period with the one before (and by thinking about what lay ahead). But later students didn't have the time to immerse themselves in each preceding period, and when they considered earlier development it was primarily with regard to individual differences. For example, many understood differences in attachment quality, but few were fully informed about normative emotional development.

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This situation is somewhat true of the field as a whole. Middle childhood and adolescence, neglected to some extent historically, have come to the fore as foci of study. Moreover, even when infant social and emotional development remains the focus, current research is often concerned only with individual differences – for example, differences in temperament or attachment.

This is not a plea for a return to the good old days. In fact, our earlier students were somewhat short-changed because they weren't able to see long-term outcomes; they were there for the planting but not the harvest. And the field of socioemotional development in general is rightly considering individual differences in some detail. Rather, this is a call to refresh our knowledge of early emotional life.

The study of early emotional development is vital for several reasons. First, it illustrates the fundamental nature of development itself. Even after all these years, it provides unsurpassed examples of the developmental process. Second, it reveals the necessarily close link between the study of normative development and the understanding of individual differences. We forget this link, and it is a lesson to be relearned often. Too many studies of individual differences pay no attention to normative development. Finally, emotional development is the foundation for the study of individual adaptation and psychopathology. Pursuing these fields without being fully grounded in emotional development is analogous to trying to do research in genetics without being grounded in biology.

Even current research in emotional development seems at times to move along without sufficient regard for the solid work of the past. Currently, a major focus is emotional regulation. But this work too rarely makes contact with the descriptive work on the development of the specific emotions, in part because much of this work is now decades old. It is important to bring forward the lessons of the past and at the same time redraw them with an eye on current problems and current understanding.

Thesis

The overall thesis of this book can be summarized in the following seven points:

1. Each specific affect (such as joy or fear) evolves according to the principles of development; that is, it emerges from precursors according to a discernible process, involving transformation and qualitative change, yet maintenance of core aspects.
2. Striking parallels across affect systems exist, in accord with the proposition of “repetitive” processes in development.
3. A key process in affect expression and its change with development concerns the fluctuation of arousal, or what may be better defined as *tension* (but in distinction to the psychoanalytic use of the term).
4. Whether positive or negative affect occurs depends on the degree of tension

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- engendered, the infant's or child's capacity to modulate that tension, and the context in which the tension is engendered. Increasingly, that context is not purely the physical situation but, rather, the infant's evaluation of the situation.
5. Developmental change centers, therefore, on the capacity for engendering tension, the capacity for modulating tension, and the changing capacity for evaluating threatening or supportive aspects of the context.
 6. Similarly, these are three key aspects of individual differences as the child matures.
 7. There is a critical role for the infant–caregiver relationship as (a) a critical feature of context (and therefore the infant's evaluation of events) and (b) a basis for developing “procedures” for modulating tension and establishing basic expectations with regard to the disorganizing or growth-promoting potentials of tension.

In considering both normative development and individual differences, a central thesis of this book is that development always builds on what was previously present. Emerging forms of emotion build on precursors, and individual patterns of emotional regulation build on patterns of regulation earlier achieved within the caregiving relationship.