

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY ON BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL STRENGTH AMONG ISLAMIC PRESCHOOLERS: PARENTS AS RESPONDENTS

Charyna Ayu Rizkyanti

Faculty of Psychology University of Pancasila, Jakarta, Indonesia

charyna@univpancasila.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Preschool age is a special time where children develop their ability in controlling emotion and behavior. Empathy is one of the most important virtues encouraged in Islam, which helping the children to manage themselves. This basic human capacity could be identified in a very early age. However, many environmental factors may diminish the children's empathy that actually is still flourishing. This research investigated the effect of the empathy on the emotional-behavioral strength among preschool children in Islamic Kindergarten, Jakarta, through parents' reports. There were 107 out of 150 parents completed two types of questionnaires. The Empathy Questionnaire (EmQue) measures three aspects in young children: (a) emotion contagion, (b) attention to other's feelings, and (c) prosocial actions; while PreBers Scale assessed the Emotional and Behavioral strength by four facets (a) emotional regulation, (b) school readiness, (c) social confidence, and (d) family involvement. The result indicated that empathy has significant effects on behavioral and emotional strength among preschoolers. Based on this finding, parents should nurture their child's empathy to help them see from the point of views of others.

Keywords: Empathy, Behavior and Emotional Strength, Preschoolers, Parents' Reports

INTRODUCTION

Preschool age is the period of greatest growth and development which children are highly eager to learn by experiencing and by doing. In this age, the child is learning to explore the world through play and it is also the time for the child begins school. As children interact with others, their emotions play a vital role (Gunter, 2012). Goleman (1995) found that children who are able to manage their emotions are better able to learn, pay attention, absorb information, and retain what they have learned. Conversely, children with poor emotional communication may display more academic struggles, more difficulties connecting with their peers in school, and more tendencies to use physical aggression to convey their thoughts (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). Subsequently, they will display more academic struggles, more difficult connecting with their peers in school, and more tendencies to use physical aggression to convey their thoughts.

Where children typically are impeded in their typical development, such as regulating their words, thoughts, emotion and behavior, then, dysfunctions in the emotional regulation capacities could occur (Egger & Angold, 2006). Therefore, the behavior issues will come up: internalizing behaviors such as, feeling of worthlessness, lack of energy, poor concentration (Greenberg, Domitrov, & Bumbarger, 2001) and externalizing behaviors, such as violence, aggression, and disruptive actions (Greenberg et al., 2001).

Psychosocial theory by Erikson called preschool age as the “play age” whereas a child enjoys their vivid imaginations, cooperates and shares with others, be able to understand and follows rules, comprehends fantasy from reality, etc. Further, Erikson shows the third stage of psychosocial crisis at preschool age (3 to 6) with learning initiative vs guilt phase. At this stage, children learn that they can do many things which may include risk-taking behaviors, such as riding a bike with a fast speed or jumping from the top of the table.

At the same time, preschoolers are still showing difficulties in managing their feelings and behavior, e.g. problems in managing anger and frustration, aggression, tantrum and being withdrawn, fearful, anxious or upset much time, etc. Indeed, children show their negative behaviors which come up as a result of a sense of frustration for not being able to achieve a goal as they have already planned. It is happening because preschooler still hasn't developed much impulse control. Preschoolers interpret failure as a sign of being “bad” (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009). Thus, the guilty feeling may engage in behaviors that seems aggressive, ruthless, and overly assertive to adult. Moreover, they may use hitting, biting, or pushing as a way to solve conflicts.

A sense of guilt feeling might be implanted because preschoolers' thought is only focused on one aspect and neglect others. According to children are no longer egocentric while they passed preschooler stage Piaget (Papalia et al, 2009), young children center so much on their point of view that they cannot take in another's which is called as “egocentrism”. The egocentric child assumes that other people see, hear and feel the same as the way this child does.

However, although Piaget (Papalia et al, 2009) stated that, an intervention is needed in order to make the child be able to control and to regulate their emotional and behavior problems. Despite of preschool age experiences such difficulties dealing with their limitation of thinking, a number of skills begin to grow, including the awareness of other people's feelings. The ability to understand and regulate, or control, one's feeling is one of the signal advances of early childhood (Dennis, 2006). Children who can understand their emotions are better able to control and to be sensitive to how others feel (Garner & Power, 1996). Thus, a key point to solve child's behavioral and emotional problems is by enhancing the child's Empathy (Borba, 2002).

Empathy, a basic human capacity that is important in daily life has a various definitions. It begins with a definition that empathy is an aspect of social connection or center of what it means to be fully human, then developed into cognitive and emotional (Hogan, 1969; Borke, 1971; Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Hoffman, 1978). Further, Hoffman (1971; 1984; 1990) divided empathy into three components: an affective, a cognitive, and a motivational. Based on Hoffman's model, Davis (1980) constructed the instrument which was designed to observe differences in cognitive functioning as well as differences in emotional reactions. Thus, Hoffman (Rieffe, Ketelaar, & Wiefferink, 2010) explain that empathy could be stated as the ability to recognize and respond to the emotion of others. In other words, we may simply define empathy as the ability and tendency of a person to understand what another person is thinking and feeling.

Children who have empathy are usually very aware of their own emotions and others' emotion as they do. They also know the appropriate response to deal

with not only their emotion, but also others' emotion too. In the study of children's collaborative problem solving, it has been speculated that an awareness, or sensitivity to, one another may be beneficial to learning (Garton, 2004). Empathy has been also suggested to facilitate or collaborative problem solving in children (Garton & Gringart, 2005). Children who have empathy can relate a friend's feeling whether he/she was sad or hurt. The egocentric child at this age can be more aware because they want to please other children so that he can keep them nearby (Brazelton & Sparrow, 2002). Therefore, empathy will not be only make children much more understanding and caring, but also will usually be more adept at handling anger.

While empathy develops slowly in a series of stages, in which gradually move from an egocentric, self-centered, "always thinking about me" perspective to one in which they not only care about the other person but also can feel and understand the other person's view. Hoffman (Rieffe et al., 2010) distinguished four levels of children's empathy.

The first level is identified as 'Global Empathy', which others labelled 'emotion contagion' (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993) which happens in the first year of life. At this level, infants attend to others' emotions but no effort to relieve distress. It is likely caused by a combination of mimicry and conditioning, with each getting an assist from imitation. The child can not clearly distinguish between himself and his world, so he is unclear as to who is experiencing the distress and interprets it as his own (Borba, 2002). For example, the six-month-old baby heard another baby cry and began to cry too.

The second level is labelled as 'Attention to others' feeling' starts at about one year of age. At this level, children become aware that another person's discomfort is not their own. Infants become more aware of other people's emotions which can be observed because they direct their attention to affective displays of others. The own response to the distress of another child may now be transformed into concern for the victim. However, even though children are having the desire to help another, but they will be doing a favor based on their own point of view. For example, the two-year-old saw her mommy crying, so she sat next to her and softly patted her arm.

At the third level, which will be labelled as 'Prosocial Actions' argues that children in preschool age become more responsive to others' emotional displays and start to react prosocially. Children develop the capacity to intervene on behalf of others, including helping, sharing and comforting. They can now see things from another person's perspective, so there is a noticeable increase in her efforts to support and comfort those in need. While children recognize that someone's feeling may be different from his, they are better able to decipher the source of another person's distress, and finds simple ways to offer comfort or show support. For example, the five-year-old saw her friend's bicycle broke, then she offers her friend to use her bike.

The fourth level is 'Empathy for another's life condition' which develops during late childhood. It refers to empathic responses not only confined to the situation but also with another's general level of distress or deprivation. This empathic level may motivate to feel empathy for people who live in the unfavorable circumstances, and support them by. For example, donating money to charity funds.

With empathy emerges naturally and quite early, our children are born with a huge built-in advantage for their moral growth (Borba, 2002). However, whether children will develop this capacity to feel for others is far from guaranteed. Although children are born with the capacity for empathy, it must be properly nurtured, or it will remain dormant. Thus, children can not be taught in a few short lessons for having empathy. Parents or caregivers should give an example from their own behavior for what it means to have empathy. Caregivers should spend their time on helping children to imagine what it would be like for being in someone else's shoes.

Empathy, according to Islam was stated in the Noble Qur'an Al-Hujurat (13)

"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah Knows and Acquainted." It is explaining that a child born without prejudice. Thus, parents who think through how they want their children to turn out usually simply because they planned their parenting efforts.

Al-Isra (24):

"My Lord, forgive my sins and the sins of the father and mother, have mercy on them as they cherished me when I was a child."

It is explained that if we raised our children with empathy all along their life, they will feel sensitive to their surroundings. All along this growing up process, there must be some conflicts between the children and their parents. Empathy will surely help the children to overcome this conflict much easier because they are able to feel how the parents feel. So the friction between parents-children won't take a long time and less destructive.

Kestenbaum, Farber, and Sroufe (2006) have investigated individual differences in empathy among preschoolers. They found that children with secure attachments at twelve and eighteen months of age are more empathic and prosocial towards another. Next research by Scrimgeour (2007) has studied the correlation between empathy and physical aggression in preschoolers. The hypothesis confirmed in that the more empathic participants were less physically aggressive in comparison to the less empathic participants. These findings underline the importance of the development of empathy and prosocial behavior and their ability to inhibit aggressive acts towards others in preschool children.

Another research of preschooler's empathy has also been done by Belacchi and Farina (2012) which examined the affective and cognitive components of empathy in relation to both emotion comprehension and prosocial/hostile behaviors. Pupils' empathy and hostile/prosocial roles were assessed by teacher reports and children's emotion comprehension by a nonverbal test. The result showed a significant influence of gender, with girls being more empathic than boys, according to all teachers' perception.

The aim of the current research was to investigate whether empathy has a significant effect on emotional and behavioral strength among Islamic

preschoolers. Furthermore, this research wants to determine whether there were significant sex differences among preschoolers.

METHOD

Respondents and Procedure

Of the 107 preschool children were evaluated through their parents' reports ranging 3 years to 5 years in age. Based on gender, 51.4% were male and 47.7% were female. Based on age categorization, 6.5% were 3 years old, 4 and 5 years old were both 46.7%. Children were recruited from two Islamic kindergartens (RA. Al-Muhajiriyah Cinere & TK Aisyiah Bustanul Athfal 12 Setiabudi Pamulang). There were 21 fathers (19.6%) and 86 mothers (80.4%) completed the questionnaires at home through a paper-and pencil version. All of the parents were given the EMQue and PreBERS scales to complete for each child.

Instruments

The Preschool Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (PreBERS; Epstein & Synhorst, 2009) is a standardized test design to assess the emotional and behavioral strength and competencies of children 3 to 5 years of age. The test has 42-items and is to be completed by other adults who are familiar with the child (parents, teachers, etc). PreBERS assesses four domains of emotional and behavioral strengths:

- a. Emotional Regulation (ER) - measures ability to control emotions, or behaviors, in social situations. The Emotional Regulation subscale consists of 13 items that assess a child's ability to interact with others in social situations (e.g., "shares with others", "accepts responsibility for own behavior").
- b. School Readiness (SR) - focuses on language and attentions skills critical for preschool success. The School Readiness subscale consists of 13 items that assess a child's behaviors that are associated with being ready to learn in school (e.g., "pays attention to task", "persists with tasks until completed").
- c. Social Confidence (SC) - measures a broad sense of the child's ability to develop and maintain positive interactions with peers, parents and others. The Social Confidence subscale includes 9 items that assess a child's ability to understand his or her own functioning and relationships with others (e.g., "asks for help", "makes friends").
- d. Family Involvement (FI) - measures participation in relation to the family. The Family Involvement subscale consists of 7 items that measure a child's relationship with their family (e.g., "interacts positively with siblings")

Parents who are familiar with the child judge a series of statements on a Likert type scale (0 = not at all like the child; 1 = not much like the child; 2 = like the child; 3 = very much like the child).

The Empathy Questionnaire (Rieffe et al., 2010) is used to measure everyday empathic behavior in young children through parents' report. The EmQue consists of 20 items, representing three facets of empathy:

- a. Emotional contagion – measures whether a child automatically emulates another's feelings (e.g., "when another child cry, my child gets upset too")
- b. Attention to others' feeling – measures whether a child becomes more aware of other people's emotion, which can be observed because they direct their

attention to affective displays of others (e.g., “ when my child sees other children laughing, he/she starts laughing too).

- c. Prosocial actions – measures whether a child becomes more responsive to others’ emotional displays and start to react prosocially (e.g., “when two children are quarreling, my child tries to stop them”).

Parents can rate the degree to which each item, reflecting a type of behavior, applied to their child over the past two months on a 3-point scale (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by Multiple Regression in order to determine whether Empathy predicted Emotional and Behavior Strength within the Islamic preschoolers. The Hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULT

Internal consistency reliability of The EmQue total score scale was estimated using Cronbach’s Alpha, with an obtained alpha of .776 and of .872 for PreBERS scale. The alpha value indicated good reliability considering that .70 is the cut off value of being acceptable. The results suggest that when parents are the primary respondents, the EmQue and the PreBERS are valid and reliable measure for assessing empathy and emotional-behavioral strength in preschool children.

Table 1. ANOVA Result

Empathy (emotional contagion, attention to others’ feeling and prosocial actions) with Emotional & Behavioral Strength

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean of Square	F	Sig.
Regression	2675.773	3	891.924	8.704	.000
Residual	14861.325	104	102.470		
Total	13230.206	106			

From ANOVA table, it is evident that Sig (p value) = .00 which is less than .05. The result indicated that empathy has a significant effect on emotional and behavioral strength (F(3) = 8.704, p< .05).

Table 2. Model Summary

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std Error of Estimate.
1	.450	.202	.179	10.123

The table Model Summary 2 reports a statistic that measure ‘goodness of fit’. Table 3 indicates that there was 20.2% of the variation in Emotional and Behavioral Strength (dependent variable) was explained by the Empathy (independent variable).

Table 3. Coefficients

Model	Un-standardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient		
	B	Std error	Beta	t	Sig

Constant	87.405	3.710		23.561	.000
Emotion Contagion	.164	.411	.039	.399	.691
Attention to Others' Feeling	.328	.396	.081	.828	.409
Prosocial Actions	1.966	.436	.412	4.513	.000

By the coefficients of the table above, it shows that only Empathy of Prosocial Actions is significant with the Emotional and Behavior Strength ($p=.000$), while the other two empathy: Emotion Contagion and Attention to Others' Feeling are not significant with the Emotional and Behavior Strength.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA
Gender Differences among Preschoolers' Empathy

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	39.882	2	19.941	.662	.539
Within Groups	3336.884	104	32.085		
Total	3376.766	106			

In an effort to further investigate gender differences in preschoolers' Empathy, another One Way ANOVA was conducted.. The result shows Empathy did not differ according to the gender ($F(2) = .662$; $p > .05$).

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the literature, Goleman (2001) explained that the presence of empathy can boost both emotional and social skills of children. When children learn how to get their emotional and social lives under control, they can pay better attention. These skills were begun from the moment of their first interaction with another human being – so that, infants start learning how to be a human being too.

However, based on the result, only Empathy of Prosocial Actions was significant with the emotional and behavioral strength among preschoolers. Nonetheless, this finding gives additional evidence for the research. It is explaining the theory of empathy developmental stages previously which showed the third level of empathy has made children become more responsive to others' emotional displays and more able to see things from another person's perspective so that they start to react prosocially (Hoffman, 1971).

Preschool-age children are developing the ability to organize thoughts and actions, and exhibit a range of immediate or delayed emotional response (Ravitch, 2013). When children learn and develop their empathy, they may take the perspective of others and thinking about it before acting. As children grow more aware of their surroundings and begin to develop a sense of community, they start to understand the importance of rules to govern groups of people, and become more willing to make personal sacrifices to support the community (Epstein, 2009), such as sharing foods and taking turns. Moreover, they can

identify ways to comfort people and alleviate their distress, and the desire to work toward positive interactions increases sharing and helping behaviors.

The result also found no sex differences in empathy among preschoolers which was inconsistent with previous research (Litvack-Mille, McDougall, & Romney, 1997; Holmgren, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998). In the literature, empathy is considered a gendered belief (Shields, 1995) that entails the assumption that women are more emotional and more caring than males. Although there appears to be a significant difference between male and female, but the results were still varied. Usually, consistent differences between males and females do exist with respect to the cognitive or the affective dimensions (Hoffman, 1977b).

It is obvious that children will struggle with many problems, but the presence of empathy made them be easier to understand and follow rules. Thus, it will serve the foundation for school readiness, friendship with peers, and relationship with family.

CONCLUSION

Although empathy is naturally given, it must be delivered over and over as children grow, in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Parents are an excellent resource for providing useful information about the child's development, and social and emotional functioning (Lynch, 2005).

Based on these findings, it can be considered to improve the next research: (1) Characteristics of the children sampled are representative of the larger Islamic preschoolers' population; (2) The study uses more sample of parents in order to achieve the nature of the results. Furthermore, it should be taken into account that our data based on parents' reports. Thus, future studies could be used to more closely examine the unique predictive value of the different levels of empathy to children's emotional and social functioning; and examine how these levels contribute to different aspects of children's development.

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والله أعلم بالصواب