

Kids 'affected by an adult's response to situations'

NTU study shows adult's positive or negative reactions have impact on child's confidence

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An experimental study of pre-schoolers here – the first of its kind in the world – has found that an adult's negative reactions to situations affect children's motivation and confidence levels adversely. Conversely, levels improve slightly when an adult responds positively.

The study, led by Assistant Professor Qu Li from the Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) psychological division, involved 81 pre-schoolers aged five and six. It is the first study of its kind to manipulate scenarios to elicit reactions from children. Previous studies in this field used surveys and interviews.

The study, which was conducted in 2013, was published in international academic journal *Child Development* last month. The project was funded by the Early Childhood Development Agency and NTU.

Prof Qu said the findings shed light on how parents, caregivers and teachers can better react to daily situations in front of young chil-

dren, particularly in times of stress. The pre-school age is when children are developing most rapidly in self-regulation, which refers to processes such as making decisions, solving problems and regulating emotions and behaviour, she said.

During the study, the children were given a pre-test in the form of a picture-matching game to assess their cognitive ability.

They were also asked to indicate, on a scale of one to five, how happy they felt, and how confident and willing they were to play a new game.

Next, an adult, the study's co-author, Mr Tony Lim, would introduce to the child the new game, which consisted of squeezing a stress ball and a magnetic design ball.

The latter, which is made up of 64 pieces, can be taken apart and reshaped in many ways, but children do not know this, so the ball breaks when they squeeze it, said Prof Qu.

The children typically react with some disturbed surprise, she added.

In the moments after the "accident", Mr Lim would react in three ways for three groups of children.



Kinderland @ Ministry of Manpower teacher Komalgeet Kaur Sandhu playing with some of her pupils. The pre-school was one of the centres that participated in the NTU psychology study in 2013. PHOTO: KINDERLAND PRESCHOOL AT MOM

For the first, he would pretend nothing had happened and continue sitting beside the child.

For the second, he would be more encouraging and reassuring, and explain how the toy is meant to be taken apart and reshaped into something new.

The third group received negative reactions from Mr Lim, who would say things such as "This is terrible! It is broken into pieces" or "Don't touch it, please. I need to fix it now".

After the two-minute episode, the children went through a similar post-test.

Those who were exposed to the negative reactions showed a signifi-

cant weakening across all indicators – their mood, motivation, confidence and cognitive performance.

For instance, they experienced a 22 per cent deterioration in their mood, a 13 per cent weakening in motivation to try another new game, and a 21 per cent fall in their confidence.

Their performance in the cognitive test fell by 33 per cent.

The children who did not receive any adult response also experienced a decline across most indicators, although not as much as those who received negative reactions.

On the other hand, those who experienced positive adult responses

showed an improvement compared with their peers.

Prof Qu said the adult's negative reaction was meant to mimic real-life scenarios, such as when a child breaks a toy or glass accidentally and is scolded or blamed immediately by parents or teachers.

"At this age, children will think they played a role and (the fault) is attributed to them. So they begin to doubt themselves," she said. "That is why they don't want to do a new task; some of them are hesitant or afraid they will make more trouble."

Repeated experiences of adult positivity or negativity can have long-lasting effects in a child's life in

terms of behaviour, cognitive abilities and control of emotions, she added. "Adults can influence children's immediate response to a situation... and subsequent situations."

Parents themselves have to be more positive, flexible and creative in dealing with difficult situations, so that children can think beyond the current moment, she added.

It is important for parents to help children cope with problems in a better way, she said. "How they deal with daily hassles when they are young can influence how they deal with stress when they are older."

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