

Research article

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Do Preschool Teachers' Beliefs About Age-related Emotional Development Impact Preschoolers' Emotion Understanding?

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Abstract

Introduction. Beliefs of preschool teachers about specific characteristics of children's emotional development have been studied mainly in the context of the used methods for teaching children. However, the relationship with the development of emotion understanding in preschoolers remains underexplored. Children's emotion understanding includes such components as recognizing emotions, understanding the effect of external causes, the role of desires, beliefs, memories, and moral rules in the formation of emotions, and understanding that emotions may be hidden and mixed and that they may be regulated. This study aims to identify the influence that teachers' beliefs about the development of certain components of children's emotion understanding exerts on the actual level of emotion understanding in 5–6-year-olds.

Methods. The study involved 16 senior kindergarten groups; in total 16 preschool teachers we interviewed, and 324 children were assessed. To identify teachers' beliefs about children's emotion understanding, we used the method of structured interview. Children's emotion understanding was assessed using the Test of Emotion Comprehension.

Results. Preschool teachers were quite accurate in their estimation of the age when children master the majority of components of emotion understanding (except for understanding the role of beliefs, the role of moral rules in the formation of emotions, and mixed emotions). At the same time, in groups where teachers believed that understanding of these aspects was not yet available to children, preschoolers coped with the tasks testing these abilities more successfully than children in groups where teachers believed that these skills had already been formed.

Discussion. We can assume that preschool teachers who believed that children in their groups had not yet mastered these skills were more focused on teaching children these components of emotion understanding.

Keywords

developmental psychology, preschool age, children, kindergarten, preschool teachers, preschool teachers' beliefs, emotions, emotional development, emotion understanding, emotion recognition

Highlights

- Preschool teachers' beliefs about the development of emotion understanding in 5–6-year-old children partially correspond to the actual level of the components of emotion understanding in children.
- If preschool teachers believe that 5–6-year-old children do not understand that emotions may be related to beliefs and moral meanings of their actions and that emotions may be mixed, children from their groups demonstrate higher scores in these aspects of emotion understanding.
- Presumably, preschool teachers' beliefs that certain aspects of emotion understanding are not yet available to children enable them to create the relevant zone of proximal development for children from their groups.

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Introduction

Emotion understanding is the ability to comprehend the causes and consequences of one's own emotions and emotions of others (Pons & Harris, 2000). Numerous studies have shown that emotion comprehension is a significant predictor of social adaptation (Camodeca & Coppola, 2016), socially approved behavior (Larsen, To, & Fireman, 2007; Gordeeva, 2019), cooperation with peers (Kholodova & Loginova, 2020), and academic performance (Denham & Brown, 2010). At the same time, insufficient development of emotion understanding in children leads to such problems as anxiety, social maladjustment, etc. (De Rosnay, Harris, & Pons, 2008).

The issues of preschoolers' emotion understanding are presented in theories developed by Russian and foreign researchers. In the context the cultural and historical concept of L. S. Vygotsky, formation of emotion understanding in preschoolers is associated with the "anticipation of emotions and consequences of one's actions" (Zaporozhets, 1986, p. 283). Studies of emotion understanding were influenced by J. Piaget's cognitive theory, in which the researcher identified the stages of emotional development, similar to intellectual ones, which lead to intellectualization of emotions (Piaget, 1997). In their five-stage model of understanding mixed emotions, Harter & Buddin formulated logical errors in children's explanations, when "children believe that two emotions can simultaneously co-occur. However, they do not yet have the cognitive skills to integrate their responses into a compelling story" (Harter & Buddin, 1987, p. 398). The development of mixed emotion understanding was among other things associated with the development of multiplication operation. In the context of the *theory of mind* paradigm, "understanding one's own mind and the mind of another becomes the basis of social cognition, social interaction, and predicting the behavior of other individuals and social groups" (Sergienko, 2015, p. 266).

In the model of children's emotion comprehension, Pons & Harris (2000) distinguish nine components of emotion understanding, which can be combined into three components depending

on their complexity – namely, External, Mental and Reflective. The External component is formed in preschool children aged from 3 to 5 years old. It is a set of components that includes emotion recognition and understanding the influence of external causes and desires on emotions. The Mental component is formed in preschoolers in the interval between 5 and 7 years old. It consists of three components – understanding the role of beliefs and memories as causes that affect emotions and understanding hidden emotions. The Reflective component is formed in the period from 7 to 9 years old. It includes the following components: understanding of mixed emotions, ability to regulate emotions, and the impact of socially approved (moral) or disapproved actions on emotions (Pons & Harris, 2000). To the present day, this is the most developed model in the field of studying children's emotion understanding. Hence, we used it as a foundation for our study.

Studies have shown that the development of emotion understanding depends not only on internal (De Stasio, Fiorilli, & Di Chiacchio, 2014) but also on a number of external factors, including relationships with parents, communication with peers, parental beliefs about children's emotion understanding (Garrett-Peters, Castro, & Halberstadt, 2017), and parents' emotional vocabulary (Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Gavazzi, 2011; Iskhakov et al., 2019). Despite numerous studies on the influence of parents and peers on the development of children's emotion comprehension (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002; Karabanova, 2019), only several studies have examined the impact of kindergarten teachers' beliefs on the development of emotion understanding in preschoolers (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Morris, Denham, Bassett, & Curby, 2013). Notably, preschool teachers attach great importance on their own and children's emotions in the learning process (Poulou, 2005). For example, a study by Denham & Kochanoff (2002) demonstrated that teachers who considered emotional learning important for children's development contributed to the formation of more adaptive patterns of emotion regulation in preschoolers. Teachers who discussed emotions in the classroom were more likely to help preschool children to identify causes of their negative emotions and teach them constructive ways to express them (Ahn, 2005a).

Some researchers identify emotional manifestations in preschool teachers as a type of emotional labour (Brown, Vesely, Mahatmya, & Visconti, 2018; Mahasneh & Gazo, 2019). This type of labor is associated with a certain level of emotional response, which depends on the expectations of the educational organization. For example, if the teacher is tired and irritated, he/she is expected to restrain these emotions and be calm when interacting with children. Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad (1998) emphasized the importance of a positive reaction to children's emotions, implying that negative responses ultimately lead to heightened emotional turmoil in children. Ashiabi (2000) formulated strategies for kindergarten teachers that promote childhood socialization. These strategies included labeling emotions, explaining emotions within a context meaningful to the child, and providing support in regulating negative and positive emotions. Thus, emotions play an important role in the pedagogical activity of a preschool teacher. On the one hand, teachers' emotions need to correspond to their role; on the other hand, the way teachers support children's emotions determines their subsequent development in children.

In the context of the cultural and historical approach developed by L. S. Vygotsky, an adult plays a key role in mental development of a child. It is the adult who guides development of the child and creates the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1984) as a special form of interaction, due to which the child first solves the problem with the help of the adult and then proceeds independently. We assume that in the process of communicating with kindergarten

children, the teacher creates the zone of proximal development in terms of not only cognitive, but also emotional development of children.

Ahn & Stifter (2006) analyzed specific characteristics of interaction of kindergarten teachers with toddlers and preschoolers and identified that teachers expected preschool children to have more developed regulation of their behavior compared to toddlers; therefore, they were more likely to explain the causes of emotions to children and taught preschoolers constructive or alternative ways of expressing negative emotions. According to these researchers, the differences in relationships with toddlers and preschoolers are associated with teachers' beliefs that preschoolers have better cognitive abilities.

As observed by Ahn (2005b), in their day-to-day work, preschool teachers use a variety of ways to develop children's emotion understanding: (a) reading books and then holding post-reading discussions, which enable children to identify emotions, discuss their causes, and enrich their vocabulary with 'emotional' words; (b) holding situational conversations, in which teachers help children to identify positive and negative emotions, as well as emotions experienced by the peer or the child himself/herself; (c) teaching children to verbalize their emotions instead of screaming and crying; (d) helping to find constructive ways of emotion regulation; (e) modeling situations, such as role-playing and puppet theater, aimed at not only recognizing and labeling emotions, but also at their correct expression (Honig, 1999); (f) indicating causes and consequences of emotions; (g) interacting with children informally, which has a significant impact on children's understanding of emotions (Raver, 2003); and (h) organizing discussions about opposite emotions using open-ended questions.

At the same time, Ahn (2005a) discovered that in the process of interacting with preschoolers, teachers reacted differently to children's emotions: (a) evoked positive emotions in children during interaction and tried to respond positively as well; (b) expressed empathy for children's experiences and encouraged them to express empathy for each other; (c) reacted to children's negative emotions, emphasizing that it is normal to experience them; (d) provided children with physical comfort, when they were experiencing negative emotions; (e) switched child's attention to another situation; (f) taught children to verbalize the emotions they were experiencing instead of using physical force; (g) focused children's attention on the cause of the problem; (h) intentionally or unintentionally ignored children's emotions, if they did not consider it necessary to pay attention to negative behavior or were busy; (i) made negative and sarcastic remarks, mistrusted emotions, and punished children for expressing their emotions. This means that teachers had certain beliefs about the development of emotions in preschool children and interacted with them differently. However, in the study the author did not assess children's emotional development depending on teacher's experience.

Therefore, we assumed that teachers' beliefs about the development of the components of emotion understanding in preschool age would affect the way they cultivated children's emotions. Preschool teachers' beliefs about emotional development have been considered in the studies on the quality of education (Papadopoulou et al., 2014), organization of the educational process (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009), and importance of social and emotional functioning in child's development (Kowalski, Pretti-Frontczak, & Johnson, 2001). However, to our knowledge, there are no studies on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and the development of components of emotion understanding in preschool children. *The purpose* of our study was to identify the influence of preschool teachers' beliefs about the age when children start to

understand certain aspects of emotions on the efficacy of emotion understanding in 5–6-year-old children. *The first objective* was to determine the accuracy with which teachers estimated the abilities of 5–6-year-old children to understand emotions. *The second objective* was to study the differences in the efficacy of emotion understanding by 5–6-year-olds in groups where, according to the teachers, children either could or could not understand emotion components.

We formulated several *hypotheses*. First, we assumed that in general, preschool teachers were fairly accurate in determining the age when emotion understanding becomes available to children. Secondly, we expected that there were differences in the development of children's emotion understanding, depending on teachers' beliefs that 5–6-year-old children could understand emotions. Moreover, we assumed that in groups where teachers believed that children could understand emotion components, children would be more successful in completing the Test of Emotion Comprehension compared to children whose teachers thought they were not ready yet.

Methods

Sample

The study involved 324 children of late preschool age ($M = 62.57$ months, $SD = 3.8$). By the start of the study, all children have been attending kindergarten groups in Moscow ($N = 16$) for an average of 2–3 years. For the entire period, principal preschool teachers in these groups did not change and spent at least 35 hours a week with the children. All the teachers ($N = 16$) were women with higher professional education in the field of preschool pedagogy, aged from 27 to 61 years old ($M = 44.68$ years old, $SD = 9.08$ years old), with 6–38 years of work experience. The procedures for examination and obtaining participants' consent were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at Lomonosov Moscow State University (statement No. 2020/61).

The children passed an individual assessment of emotion understanding using the Russian version of the Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC) (Pons & Harris, 2000). This test assessed nine different components of emotion understanding: (a) recognizing emotions by facial expressions ('emotion recognition'); (b) understanding the external causes of emotions ('external causes'); (c) understanding the influence of desires ('desires') on emotional experiences; (d) understanding the influence of beliefs ('beliefs') on emotional experiences, (e) understanding the influence of memories ('reminder') on emotional experiences; (f) understanding the discrepancy between real and expressed emotions ('hiding emotions'); (g) strategies for regulating emotions ('regulation'); (h) understanding mixed or ambivalent emotions ('mixed emotions') and (i) moral emotions ('morality'). For each of the nine components, the scores were in the range from 0 to 1. Earlier, the Russian version of the TEC was successfully adapted on a Russian sample of children aged 5–6 and 6–7 years old (Veraksa, Veraksa, Gavrilova, Bukhalenkova, & Tarasova, 2021). A structured interview was conducted to obtain information on preschool teachers' beliefs about the age when, in their opinion, certain aspects of emotion understanding became available to children. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis with teachers from 16 kindergarten groups and contained questions about the same nine components of emotion understanding, described in the Test of Emotion Comprehension.

Teachers were asked questions about the age when children begin to understand emotions in terms of each component: *emotion recognition*, *external causes*, *desires*, *beliefs*, *reminder*, *hiding*

emotions, regulation, mixed emotions, and morality. The questions were the following: "At what age do children begin to understand: (a) emotions based on facial expressions; (b) that external circumstances may impact emotions; (c) that two people in the same situation can experience different emotions because they have different desires; (d) that an individual's beliefs may impact his/her emotional response to a situation; (e) that memories may influence emotional experiences; (f) that emotions can be regulated using psychological strategies; (g) that there is a discrepancy between real and expressed emotions; (h) that people can have conflicting emotional reactions to a situation; (i) that morally unacceptable behavior can evoke negative emotions, whereas approved behavior – positive ones?"

Analysis of the data obtained enabled us to determine the accuracy of preschool teachers' estimation of the age when nine components of emotion understanding become available to children, relative to the periodization established by F. Pons. After that, the teachers' answers were binary encoded (yes/no) in accordance with the fact whether the teacher thought that 5–6-year-old children (age of the studied sample) could/could not understand each of the nine emotion components from the Test of Emotion Comprehension. '0' referred to that emotion components were not yet available for children's understanding, '1' referred to that, according to the teachers, 5–6-year-olds could understand these components. Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to measure the degree of agreement between teachers' beliefs about children's emotion understanding and children's results of completing the Test of Emotion Comprehension in terms of these components. Next, ANOVA Welch's statistic was applied to analyze the differences in the assessments of children's TEC results, depending on whether their teachers considered them ready/not ready for understanding each of the nine components. We used ANOVA Welch's test, since we took into account covariance and unequal sample sizes. Data analysis was performed in SPSS v. 26 software.

Results

As a result of statistical analysis, we observed that preschool teachers accurately estimated the age when children developed understanding of such components as Recognition, Desire, Hiding, and Mixed. Next, we identified the differences between preschool teachers' estimates of five components of emotion understanding and corresponding children's scores according to the Test of Emotion Comprehension (Table 1). The use of Cohen's kappa revealed a weak agreement between teachers' estimates of children's ability to understand the aspects of emotions and children's performance in terms of such components as Belief ($k = -0.33$, $p = 0.012$), Mixed ($k = -0.181$, $p = 0.001$), and Morality ($k = -0.143$, $p = 0.008$). That means that teachers' estimation of 5–6-year-old children's understanding of emotion components is inversely associated with their performance on completing the Test of Emotion Comprehension.

At the next stage, one-way ANOVA Welch's was used to analyze the differences between the results of children's emotion understanding, depending on whether a preschool teacher believed that 5–6-year-old children from her group could understand each of the nine emotion components or not. Significant differences were observed in children's results in terms of three components of emotion understanding: 'beliefs' ($F = 7.2$, $p = 0.008$), 'mixed emotions' ($F = 15.7$, $p < 0.001$), and 'morality' ($F = 7.30$, $p < 0.007$) (see Table 2).

Table 1

Preschool teachers' estimates of children's ability to understand emotion components (in %) and efficacy of children's emotion understanding (in %) (Cohen's Kappa, n = 324)

<u>TEC components</u>	<u>Preschool teachers</u>		<u>Children</u>		<u>Cohen's k</u>	<u>P</u>
	Children already understand the component	Children do not yet understand the component	Correct answer	Incorrect answer		
Recognition	100	0	97	3	–	–
External causes	95	5	74	26	0.014	0.713
Desires	70	30	68	32	–0.16	0.768
Beliefs	65	35	77	23	–0.133	0.012*
Reminder	85	15	52	48	0.064	0.115
Hiding	46	54	48	52	0.89	0.105
Regulation	55	45	63	37	0.21	0.701
Mixed	24	76	26	74	–0.181	0.001**
Morality	64	36	51	49	–0.143	0.008**

Note: children already understand or do not yet understand the component – teachers' belief about whether a certain component of emotion understanding is available to 5–6-year-old children; correct or incorrect answer – child's results of completing the test; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2

Mean values and standard deviations depending on teachers' beliefs about 5–6-year-old children's understanding of emotion components (one-way ANOVA, $n = 324$)

TEC components	<u>Children understand the component</u>	<u>Children do not understand the component</u>	<u>One-Way ANOVA Welch's</u>		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	F	df1(df2)	p
Recognition	0.96 (0.17)	–	–	–	–
External causes	0.75 (0.43)	0.71 (0.47)	0.11	1(17.6)	0.735
Desires	0.67 (0.47)	0.69 (0.46)	0.09	1(183)	0.786
Beliefs	0.73 (0.44)	0.85 (0.35)	7.23	1(277)	0.008**
Reminder	0.54 (0.49)	0.42 (0.49)	2.50	1(64.5)	0.119
Hiding	0.67 (0.47)	0.59 (0.49)	0.15	1(314)	0.702
Regulation	0.49 (0.50)	0.47 (0.50)	2.61	1(305)	0.107
Mixed	0.12 (0.32)	0.30 (0.46)	15.7	1(180)	0.001***
Morality	0.46 (0.49)	0.61(0.49)	7.30	1(248)	0.007**

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Thus, children from the groups where teachers consider that 5–6-year-old preschoolers are not ready to understand the influence of beliefs perform significantly better on the task, aimed at assessing this indicator in the Test of Emotion Comprehension, compared to children whose teachers assume that this aspect of emotion understanding is already available to children at this age ($M = 0.851$ and $M = 0.73$, respectively) (Fig. 1a). Children whose teachers consider that they are not ready to understand mixed emotions perform significantly better on the task, aimed at

assessing the 'mixed' component (Test of Emotion Comprehension), compared to children whose teachers assume that this aspect of emotion understanding is already available to children at this age ($M = 0.304$ and $M = 0.12$, respectively) (Fig. 1b). Children whose teachers consider that they are not ready to understand that moral rules can affect emotions perform significantly better on the task, aimed at assessing the indicator 'morality' (Test of Emotion Comprehension), compared to children whose teachers assume that this aspect of emotion understanding is already available to children at this age ($M = 0.61$ and $M = 0.461$, respectively) (Fig. 1c).

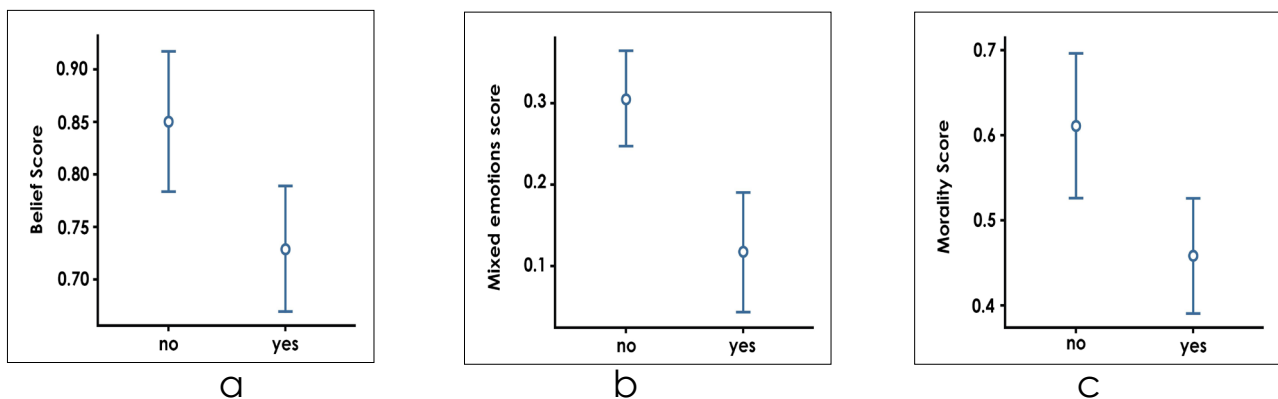


Figure 1. Mean values for the components: (a) beliefs; (b) mixed; and (c) morality in children depending on their teachers' beliefs about emotion understanding in 5–6-year-olds (yes and no, respectively)

Discussion

This study examined preschool teachers' beliefs about age-related specific characteristics of emotion understanding in children and possible effect of these beliefs on the development of children's emotion comprehension. We formulated the main objectives of our research: (a) to determine the accuracy with which preschool teachers estimate the abilities of 5–6-year-olds to understand emotions; (b) to analyze the differences in the efficacy of children's emotion understanding in groups where, according to their teachers, children either could or could not understand certain emotions.

The analysis of data obtained in the interviews with preschool teachers showed that they were sure that 5–6-year-olds could recognize emotions based on facial expressions, understand their external causes and that desires can influence emotions. At the same time, teachers believed that 5–6-year-olds could understand the influence of moral rules on emotions (morality). However, according to diagnostic results, this aspect of emotions was not yet available to 5–6-year-old children. This result differs from the data obtained earlier in the study by Kårstad, Kvello, Wichstrøm, & Berg-Nielsen (2014) when authors examined how accurately parents estimated the age when children start to understand certain emotion components. As opposed to preschool teachers, parents overestimated children's ability to understand external causes of emotions, as well as their ability to understand that emotions can be regulated using psychological strategies or the fact that emotions can be mixed. Therefore, preschool teachers' beliefs about children's ability to understand emotions are less generalized; they indicate gradually increasing difficulty to master

components of emotion understanding. This temporal distribution of the ability to understand emotions can be correlated with the assumption in the context of F. Pons's theoretical position about the development of emotion understanding in children (Pons & Harris, 2000). The model suggested by F. Pons describes step-by-step improvement of children's understanding of various emotion aspects – from the ability to recognize external signs of emotions to the skill of emotion regulation, from understanding external causes of emotions to understanding mixed and hidden emotions. We can assume that when preschool teachers assess children's abilities to understand emotions, they rely on their beliefs about the complexity of intellectual and emotional development, which increases, as children grow older. This assumption requires further empirical testing, aimed at assessing how a preschool teacher organizes his/her work relating to children's emotional development. Hence, our study partially confirms the hypothesis that preschool teachers accurately determine the age when children start to understand certain emotion components.

We found that if preschool teachers believe that 5–6-year-old children do not understand that emotions may be related to beliefs and moral meanings of their actions and that emotions may be mixed, children from their groups demonstrate higher scores in these aspects of emotion understanding. By contrast, we assumed that the best results in emotion comprehension would be demonstrated by children whose teachers considered them capable of understanding certain emotion components. A possible explanation of these results is that preschool teachers who believe that 5–6-year-old kindergarten children are not yet capable of understanding certain emotion components will be likely to pay more attention to the situation when such emotions arise, and they will try to explain and discuss the causes of these emotions with children. On the other hand, in groups where the teacher thinks that children can already understand certain emotion components, the situations where the teacher pays attention to such training will occur less often. This assumption is based on the principle of creating the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1984), according to which mental – in particular, emotional – development is to a great extent associated with environment conditions that an adult establishes when communicating with a child. Thus, we can assume that preschool teachers who wish to help children understand emotions enrich children's ZPD.

The limitations of this study include, primarily, a small number of groups involved. Secondly, in the interviews we asked preschool teachers to assess whether 5–6-year-old children could understand certain aspects of emotions, whereas it would clearly be more accurate to ask them about individual development of every child. However, due to high workload of preschool teachers, the collection of individual data was not possible under present conditions. Thirdly, the results could be affected by individual characteristics of teachers that were not taken into account in the study – e.g., personal traits, emotional vocabulary, emotional expressiveness of teachers, their own skills of emotion understanding.

A promising direction for future research is a more detailed study on the specific characteristics of children's emotional socialization in the kindergarten by means of observing their everyday behavior in groups and considering factors associated with individual characteristics and behavior of preschool teachers. In the future, we also plan to analyze a relationship between teachers' beliefs about emotion understanding in preschoolers and results of observations how teachers support development of emotion components in children.

Conclusion

The study shows that preschool teachers accurately determine age-specific abilities of 5–6-year-old children to understand emotions. However, we identified components of emotion understanding, in terms of which teachers' beliefs contradicted the results of children's performance on the Test of Emotion Comprehension. According to the data obtained, preschool teachers think that 5–6-year-old children do not yet understand that an individual's beliefs can affect his/her emotional reaction, an individual may experience mixed emotions, or that negative emotions may be caused by an individual's moral appraisal of his/her own actions. During the study, we identified the differences in children's development of the components of emotion understanding, depending on teachers' beliefs about children's ability to understand certain emotions. In the groups where teachers assume that 5–6-year-old preschoolers are not yet capable of understanding that moral rules affect emotions, children successfully demonstrate their understanding of these emotion components by completing the Test of Emotion Comprehension. Probably, teachers focus a lot on the development of these emotion components and create the relevant conditions for the zone of proximal development. The study results may be readily used to make recommendations for kindergarten teachers on the development of emotion understanding in preschool age.

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Bukhalenkova, Aslanova, Airapetyan, Gavrilova

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Author Contributions

D. A. Bukhalenkova supervised the study and edited the manuscript.

M. S. Aslanova performed data analysis.

Z. V. Airapetyan prepared the original draft of the manuscript.

M. N. Gavrilova developed the concept, selected diagnostic tools, carried out analysis and editing, and prepared the figures.

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