Social Learning Theory: Emotional Regulation in Hospitalized Children

Allison Baker

Texas Woman's University

HDFS 5113-70: Theories of Child Development

Dr. Kirkwood

October 10, 2024

INTRODUCTION

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences appropriately (Sobol et al., 2021). Wilson et al. (2023) discuss emotional regulation in the context of self-regulation, referring to one's ability to control emotions by using different strategies to feel calm and more comfortable. Emotional regulation is a skill that can develop throughout the lifespan and in various settings. Hospitalization can cause a mix of emotions in children as it disrupts their everyday life. In relation to children's emotions, hospitalization challenges a child's ability to regulate their emotions due to the fear and stress they experience (Rokach, 2010). Li et al (2016) found that children experience high levels of anxiety upon hospital admission. Play has been shown to be a useful tool for reducing anxiety and other negative emotions associated with hospitalization. The types of play used in clinical settings include preparation play, medical play, distraction play, and developmental play (Li et al., 2016). Emotional regulation is particularly challenging for children during significant life changes, such as hospitalization. Depressive symptoms may arise if their experience in the hospital is not positive (Sobol et al., 2021). Mental health in children is crucial, and learning how to regulate emotions can promote positive mental health outcomes. Early interventions in emotional regulation can have a beneficial impact on long-term developmental outcomes. Mindfulness techniques, for instance, can assist children in developing their ability to regulate their emotions (Wilson et al., 2023).

THEORY

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains how children learn from others through observation, imitation, and modeling. According to Bandura, behavior can be learned through "direct experience or by observing the behavior of others" influenced by reinforcements

and consequences (Bandura, 1971, p.13). This theory combines behaviorist and cognitive learning theories by acknowledging the role of mental processes in learning. Bandura emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in helping children form new ideas about behaviors, which then guide their actions (Newman & Newman, 2023). This aligns with Bandura's assumption that behavior is influenced by consequences, with rewards and punishments being key factors that determine the likelihood of a behavior being imitated.

Social Learning theory centers around five key concepts: observational learning, modeling, imitation, reinforcement or punishment, and self-efficacy. Observational learning explains how individuals learn new behaviors by watching others. According to Bandura, after a child observes a modeled behavior, they can often reproduce it with high accuracy (Bandura, 1977). Models, whether real or symbolic, are the individuals observed during the modeling process (Newman & Neman, 2023). Imitation follows observation, as children attempt to replicate the behavior they have seen. The likelihood of imitation increases if the observed behavior is rewarded or if the model is seen as admirable (Bandura, 1977). While direct reinforcement is not required for learning, observing the consequences of behavior influences whether it will be imitated. Lastly, self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to imitate the modeled behavior (Newman & Newman, 2023).

Personal guidelines develop through observing one's environment, with society playing a crucial role in teaching individuals to recognize and interpret relationships, which significantly influence behavior (Fryling et al., 2011). Bandura (1977) explains that children are active participants in their learning process, engaging with their environment by observing others and making decisions about which behaviors to imitate. This gradual process illustrates that Social

Learning Theory can occur at any age, and in settings like hospitals, it may intensify due to the increased opportunities for observational learning (Newman & Newman, 2023).

Social Learning Theory evaluates behavioral change by observing whether individuals adopt new behaviors after exposure to models. It takes a holistic approach by considering cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors to explain how learning occurs. Bandura's Bobo doll experiment demonstrated that children who observed aggressive behavior were more likely to imitate that behavior, highlighting the interaction of cognitive, social, and environmental influences on learning.

Quantitatively, Social Learning Theory measures behavioral changes after exposure to a model, such as reduction of anxiety in hospitalized children following play interventions (Li et al., 2016). Qualitatively, the theory also examines cognitive processes and social contexts that shape learning. For instance, Wilson et al. (2023) studies how mindful breathing interventions influenced children's attention and self-control using qualitative methods to evaluate emotional self-regulation.

Social Learning Theory can help explain emotional regulation in hospitalized children, as they observe and imitate coping mechanisms modeled by parents, nurses, or peers. Jyska et al. (2023), studied the effects of virtual reality (VR) environments on stress reduction during pediatric treatment. Guided deep breathing exercises modeled in VR helped children lower their stress levels by providing them with opportunities to observe and practice these techniques. This alligns with Social Learning Theory, as children learned and adopted new behaviors through modeling and observation.

However, Social Learning Theory overlooks certain internal cognitive processes, such as problem-solving and self-reflection, which are not crucial to emotional regulation. It also does

not address biological factors, such as temperament, which can influence behavior. These limitations suggest that while Social Learning Theory offers valuable insights into learning through observation and modeling, it doesn't fully capture the complexity of cognitive development in emotional regulation (Fryling et al., 2011).

APPLICATION

Social Learning Theory helps explain emotional regulation in children by emphasizing observational learning and how it acquires emotional responses. Hospitalized children can learn to manage and express their emotions by observing others, such as adults using coping strategies during stressful situations. For instance, children may observe medical professionals using medical play, which can help them cope with the stress of a procedure and reduce negative emotions (Li et al., 2016). Gradually, through repeated observation, children internalize emotional regulation techniques and learn to manage stress independently. When they see others being rewarded for positive emotional regulation, they are more likely to adopt similar strategies themselves (Bandura, 1977).

While Social Learning Theory is effective in explaining emotional regulation through observational learning, it does have limitations in measuring emotional regulation. It overlooks internal cognitive processes and biological factors, which are important in a comprehensive understanding of emotional regulation. Integrating Social Learning Theory with Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development and Bowlby's Attachment Theory could provide a more holistic understanding of emotional regulation in children. This theory recognizes how one's social environment and cognitive processes like attention, memory, and motivation which is useful information when focusing on emotional regulation in children.

CONCLUSION

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory provides a clear understanding of the role observational learning plays in emotional regulation in hospitalized children. Empirical studies by Jyska et al., Wilson et al., and Li et al., demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions involving modeling coping strategies, mindfulness techniques, and play to reduce stress and anxiety in hospitalized children. These interventions support Bandura's idea that children who observe and imitate positive emotional regulation strategies are more likely to adopt these behaviors themselves.

REFERENCES

Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Fryling, M. J., Johnston, C., & Hayes, L. J. (2011). Understanding observational learning: An interbehavioral approach. *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*, *27*(1), 191–203. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03393102

Jyskä, I., Turunen, M., Chaychi Maleki, A., Karppa, E., Palmu, S., Viik, J., Mäkelä, J., & Puura, K. (2023a). Effects of using guided deep breathing exercises in a virtual natural environment to reduce stress during pediatric treatment. *Healthcare*, *11*(24), 3140. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11243140

Li, W. H., Chung, J. O., Ho, K. Y., & Kwok, B. M. (2016). Play interventions to reduce anxiety and negative emotions in hospitalized children. *BMC Pediatrics*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-016-0570-5

Rokach, A. (2010). The Physical, Psychosocial, and Emotional Needs Of Hospitalized Children. *Psychology Journal*, *7*(3), 94–102.

Sobol, M., Woźny, M., & Czubak-Paluch, K. (2021). Emotion regulation and social support as related to depressive symptoms: A study of healthy and hospitalized adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *174*, 110665. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110665

Wilson, K., Wright, D., & Jack, A. (2023). Investigating Emotion Exploration, Mindful Breathing and Self-Regulation in Young Children. *Journal of Innovations in Teaching and Learning*, *3*(1), 1–6.

Newman, B. & Newman, P. (2023). Theories of human development (3 rded.). New York: Taylor & Francis.