

Smile, Sara! and Other Stories: Creating Children's Picture Books Exploring Emotional Regulation

Vania Jovita Fariman¹, Stefanny Irawan²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: a11200003@john.petra.ac.id¹, stefanny@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

As the emotional regulation process has already happened since childhood, it is a crucial phase to learn to manage emotions with different strategies. This paper explores emotional regulation strategies performed by children in five children's picture book stories. The theoretical framework is derived from Emotional Regulation Theory by James Gross. Using antecedent-focused strategies such as situation modification shows better effects than a response modulation strategy such as expressive suppression has negative consequences. As a result of performing expressive suppression strategy, each child character in the stories experiences unpleasant effects such as stress, pessimism, and discomfort with the people around them. The characters then switch to a situation modification strategy by modifying aspects of their initial situation that trigger their negative emotions. All these lead to better consequences of emotional regulation such as experiencing a happier mood and lower levels of negative mood.

Keywords: children's picture book, emotional regulation, expressive suppression, response modulation, situation modification

INTRODUCTION

Negative emotion is often perceived as a form of inappropriate responses, and pleasant emotions are the resolution that matters most. However, piled-up suppressed emotions can be an emotional burden. It turns out that this burden eventually will find a way to the surface in the form of compulsion, addiction, or obsession that results in suppression or repression (Banyan, 2003). Having the long-term effect of suppressed emotion, such as self-doubt or anxiety that came out years later is predicted to inhibit one's sense of controlling emotions and intensify the unpleasant emotions (Nyklíček et al., 2010). This shows the importance of emotion regulation in people's lives. However, research on emotional intelligence in Eastern countries, including Indonesia, has not garnered sufficient attention (Bangun & Iswari, 2015). Since it is important to allow individuals to understand the need not to suppress negative emotions as early as possible (Macklem, 2007), it is crucial for children to learn this.

Due to the fact that emotions develop gradually (Zelazo & Cunningham, 2007), emotion regulation is defined as the activation of a goal to impact the emotion trajectory (Gross et al., 2011). Occasionally, this objective serves as the intended result in and of itself; for instance, we might control sadness to feel less depressed (Gross, 2015a). Sometimes, though, an emotion regulation aim is just a means to achieve some other valued end (Gross, 2015a). For instance, we might be driven to appear more interested in a conversation than we are in order to land a job (Gross, 2015a). The school setting is often the initial context in which the development of other essential elements of emotional regulation and the ability to manage emotions is connected (Carlson, 1993 as cited in Sala et al., 2014). When children are faced with a problem that elicits a feeling of devastation, those people who say those words further disapprove of children expressing their real emotions (Kojongian & Wibowo, 2022). The expressed positive words then corner someone's feelings rather than acknowledge and support them (Kojongian & Wibowo, 2022).

When children's responses to guilt or failed expectations are hiding emotions and keeping a smile on the cover, they are doing an emotional regulation strategy called expressive suppression. Expressive suppression is an emotional regulation strategy when a person conceals the display of emotions (Gross & Cassidy, 2019). The long-term consequences of this can affect social and health functioning (Butler et al., 2003), as well as storing more negative memories than positive ones (Goodman, 2022). Children who are forced to suppress their emotions while the people around them express positive sentences are more likely to be quiet and closed to tell their problems and feelings (Putra et al., 2023). It is best to set a good example by naming feelings, acknowledging that they are valid, and finding the best ways to express them so that children can learn the state of emotional maturity. Emotional maturity is the ability to know when to control children's anger, learn to take turns, and share emotions (Bakken et al., 2017).

On the other hand, children are possibly able to make an effort to also modify situations to target their emotional experience. Situation modification is an emotional regulation strategy that is done on a situational alteration, involving actions taken to change the emotional impact (Gross, 2015b). The situation modification strategy has been primarily investigated in children as social support seeking, which is adopted equally by 3-to-4 and 5-to-6-year-olds (Sala et al., 2014). Despite that, situation modification may require other processes, such as problem-solving, which has thus far only been addressed in Cole et al.'s (2009) study. Furthermore, the strategy has been connected to problem-focused coping (Gross, 2007 as cited in López-Pérez et al., 2016), which is more commonly used by older children and adolescents (aged 8 and up) than younger children (e.g., Band & Weisz, 1988 as cited in López-Pérez et al., 2016).

To invite children to learn about emotion regulation, children's picture books are chosen as the form. A picture book is "a book that depends on illustrations to help relate the story. The amount of text is equal to or less than the number of illustrations" (Matulka, 2008, p.264). A picture book will provide both text and graphics side by side and is intended to be read to children. To be specific, picture books are created to pique the imagination of the child's mind with a subtle issue packed with a simple plot and theme (Reeser, 2010). A study suggested that children can adapt their behavior in daily life from picture books' moral knowledge (Schoppmann et al., 2023). Picture book reading can facilitate cognitive development and increase social behavior in children (Schoppmann et al., 2023).

The target readers are children at the age of 5-8 years old. Children in this age range can better manage daily social interactions because they have acquired a strong emotional foundation and can anticipate, talk about, and use their awareness (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Sanya Pelini (2023), an education researcher argued that many secondary emotions come into play at the age of middle childhood (5-8 years old) as a child's emotions are either validated or not, influencing future emotional reactions. Children can understand and differentiate appropriate from inappropriate emotional expressions, but they still find it difficult to express their emotions, especially if they have not learned yet to be aware and identify the emotions (Pelini, 2023).

Realistic fiction is chosen as the genre of these picture book stories. Realistic fiction is about people and events that illuminate life in a believable setting (Guarneri, 2018). The genre acts as a window of the real world and focuses on the validity of the emotions presented. It can help the readers to participate in the story, feel a sense of belonging, and reflect on life instead of being confused with modern fantasy which may use a lot of imaginary elements contrary to reality (Norton, 2011).

The theoretical framework will use the Emotional Regulation theory by James Gross, a leading American researcher, and psychologist well-known for his psychophysiological work on emotion, particularly emotional regulation and analyses of emotion regulation processes.

Gross's research on emotional regulation primarily focuses on the underlying concept and the control of emotions (Gross, 2015b). Additionally, Gross research with Oliver P. John (2003) is used to give a better understanding of expressive suppression as one of the studied forms of response modulation strategies.

Gross defined emotional regulation as a strategy to modify or influence the process of emotions (Gross, 1998b as cited in Gross, 2015b). At the broadest level, there are two models of the emotion regulation process: antecedent-focused strategies and response-focused strategies (Gross & John, 2003).

Antecedent-focused strategies refer to things we do before the emotion response tendencies have become fully activated and have changed our behavior and peripheral physiological responding. Response-focused [strategies] refers to things we do once an emotion is already underway, after the response tendencies have already been generated (Gross & John, 2003, p. 348).

There are five families of strategies that specifically belong to both antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies (Gross & John, 2003). "The first four of these processes [situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, and cognitive change] are antecedent-focused, whereas the fifth [response modulation] is the response-focused [strategy]" (Gross & John, 2003, p. 349). This shows that expressive suppression, being one of the studied forms of response modulation strategies, belongs to the response-focused strategies, while the rest of the aforementioned others belong to the antecedent-focused strategies.

Emotion regulation processes change across the lifespan (Kopp, 1989; Saarni, 1990; Thompson, 1991 as cited in Gross, 2015b). As older children can control their minds and their body matures, they are capable of doing emotional regulation by themselves and are more complex than infants doing gaze-shifting (Gross, 2015b). Children's growing language abilities also introduce them to a new set of emotion regulation strategies such as situation modification and response modulation (Gross, 2015b). Language allows the child to better control the immediate environment and permits caregivers to explain, forecast, and issue direct emotion regulation instructions (Gross, 2015b). For this reason, two strategies such as situation modification and response modulation will be the main focus of the emotional regulation strategies performed in middle childhood.

Expressive suppression is a strategy that involves an intentional reduction of the facial expression of an emotion (Gross & John, 2003). It inhibits ongoing emotion-expressive behavior and works by decreasing the behavioral expression of negative emotion but might have unintended effects to decrease positive emotional experiences as well (Gross & John, 2003). On the other hand, the strategy of situation modification includes altering aspects of a situation to influence a specific emotion (Gross, 2015b). This strategy targets external and physical environments that call for a new situation (Gross, 2015b).

Much of the research of expressive suppression strategy has been pointing to negative outcomes. Users who use the strategy can experience stress and pessimism (well-being aspect), or even be uncomfortable with the people around them (social aspect) (Gross & John, 2003). Meanwhile, according to John and Gross (2003), antecedent-focused emotional strategies are more successful and produce better results than response-focused regulation. Situation modification strategy, being one of the sets of antecedent-focused assessment items, was independently linked to higher life satisfaction, positive mood, and lower levels of negative mood (Schutte et al., 2009). Therefore, compared to response modulation, antecedent-focused emotional regulation overall was substantially associated with higher subjective well-being (Schutte et al., 2009).

To deliver the topic of emotion regulation strategies, five picture book stories with five different primary school children's characters namely Sara, Arya, Kirana, Indra, and Gita are designed. All of these characters are going to explore the negative effects of implementing expressive suppression strategies. When they are suppressing their emotions, they will start to develop negative consequences which will be shown through their responses such as being pessimistic, feeling stressed, and uncomfortable with other people around. Next, these characters will use situation modification strategies to regulate their emotion rather than expressive suppression strategies. They will learn to modify an aspect of a situation to target the emotional experience they want to feel to not feel the negative consequences of regulating emotions by suppression.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme focuses on children being able to reappraise situations to regulate their emotions better than them suppressing their emotions. To apply the theme, the five main characters will have to go through different cases and processes while suppressing their negative emotions. They will finally understand the unpleasant effect of the suppression and the importance of regulating their emotions in a non-suppressing way. The characters will learn to reframe their thoughts, situations, and attention to regulate their emotions better.

Plot

Since the creative works span over five picture book stories, five different plots are created.

Smile, Sara!

Sara is appointed unanimously to represent the class in a photo contest because of her bright smile. Although Sara is hesitant because she has never been on stage alone, she hides the discomfort and agrees to take part. Sara's suppression of her discomfort results in her not being able to focus all day, losing her appetite, and being unable to sleep. The next day, she tries to avoid going to the contest by finding excuses to convince her mother, teacher, and friends that she cannot do it. However, her attempts fail and Sara is pushed to go on stage. She feels overwhelmed by the situation as she hears people shouting, cameras clicking, and no one except her is going to be standing on stage. Before entering the stage, Sara modifies the situation by admitting to her friends that she is too scared to go alone and asking whether they can go with her. Her friends comfort her and agree to walk on stage together, resulting in positive reactions from the audience.

Arya and Riang

Arya desperately wants a pet, but his mother insists he needs to take better care of himself before being a pet owner. Arya can only agree and watch his friends play with their pets, making him even sadder and pessimistic that he will never get a pet. One day he discovers an injured puppy and decides to care for it to prove his responsibility to his mother. Arya named it Riang. He struggles to treat Riang's wound, get the right food for Riang to eat, and wash Riang without making a mess. Arya feels frustrated after Riang makes a mess inside the house. He admits to his mother that he sneaks in a puppy and finds it hard to take care of a pet. However, Arya still expresses his willingness to take care of Riang until it is healthy without forcing his idea about asking for a pet afterward. His mother allows him to care for Riang and Arya learns to be more responsible and positive too.

Kirana and the Gold Medal

Fariman; Irawan: Smile, Sara! and Other Stories:
Creating Children's Picture Books Exploring Emotional Regulation

Kirana wants to get a gold medal for the Math competition to make her mom proud, so her mom suggests she join the Math club after school for more practice. Kirana begins attending the Math club but is never satisfied with her score as it keeps getting lower. She starts to sacrifice time with friends and her sleep to keep on attending the club every day so that she will not disappoint her mom. As a result, Kirana feels drained and she decides to skip the Math club for one day when her friends invite her to hang out. Afterwards, feeling guilty, Kirana tells her mom that she skipped the Math club. She then asks whether she can attend the Math club only for a few days a week, to which her Mom agrees. This turns out well with Kirana having enough funtime and winning the gold medal.

I Am the Big Brother

Indra has a little brother, Surya, who is three years younger than him and he is proud to take care of his brother. The conflict starts when Surya always gets more things than Indra, which makes Indra jealous. He begins to load up his jealousy by being reluctant when around his little brother or avoiding him. Indra's ignorance to look after Surya causes Surya to try a toy by himself, leading to him falling off his tricycle, hurting his knee. Indra cannot bear to stay still and rushes to help Surya. Soon, he teaches Surya to ride the tricycle to avoid more accidents. Since Indra still feels envious of Surya's toys yet avoiding him bears a risk of injury, he then asks whether he can also play with them. Surya is willing to share his tricycle and other toys. Indra's resentment recedes and he becomes grateful to be able to play with Surya again without being jealous.

Gita's Perfect Stage

Gita dreams of performing perfectly on stage by being a singer. She auditions for the choir and volunteers to do the solo part. It turns out that Gita struggles to hit the high note, causing her classmates to laugh. She feels embarrassed but she suppresses it by snapping out and stating her confidence that she will be able to hit the note. Gita then feels uncomfortable when she sees her friends because she gets reminded of the comments or laughs again. So, she starts making excuses to avoid rehearsal as well as her peers and teacher. As the performance day is getting closer and she is not getting any better, she overhears her friend, Maya, singing the solo part perfectly in an empty classroom. After some hesitation, Gita decides to ask Maya to sing together with her for the performance. She also proposes later to the choir members that she will sing the solo part with Maya. Finally, on the performance day, Gita can sing her part with Maya and the group's performance goes well without any mistakes.

Characters

Main characters:

Sara, 6 years old, is a primary school girl. Sara is adored by everyone around her, especially for her smile. Despite all the attention, she is an introvert who is not used to having a lot of eyes on her. She is also a people-pleaser, meaning she often finds it difficult to reject an offer she dislikes and says yes instead. She likes the color yellow, sunflowers, and dolls. She likes to wear dresses and always puts on pigtails.

Arya, 8 years old, is an only child. He does not get mad easily and tends to solve things by himself. He is keen on animals and never gets the chance to have one. He likes to wear green clothes. His hobbies are doing outdoor activities because he likes anything nature-related. Despite his adventurous nature, he still has a hard time taking care of himself properly, sometimes forgetting to shower or eat properly.

Kirana, 7 years old, is a second-grader who is good at Math lessons. She is a perfectionist who tends to be ambitious when things do not go as expected. Not only does she have a fear of disappointing herself if she did bad at something, but also she does not want to disappoint her mother. She is the type who keeps things to herself and is uncomfortable to bother others. However, she is regarded as a caring friend to others. She likes the color blue. Kirana likes to wear sweaters or knitted tops, and she has to wear glasses.

Indra, 6 years old, just entered primary school and is the first-born in his family. As the big brother, he takes pride in taking care of his little brother who is still a toddler. He is a responsible big brother who can get impatient at times. Indra likes the color red and has a habit of folding his hands together in front of his chest. He is almost hairless, so he likes to wear hats even when he is in his house. He is into sensory games like push-around car toys.

Gita, 9 years old, is a primary school student who dreams of being a singer. Gita is confident and talkative. However, she is also short-tempered. She likes to wear accessories, such as beaded bracelets or necklaces. She also likes her hair straight and short, just above her shoulders. She likes the color white. In her free time, she likes to sing sing-along songs.

Supporting character:

Surya, 3 years old, is Indra's little brother. Surya is less talkative than Indra, but he is also bright as a child. He does not have much hair yet. Surya rarely cries, but he tends to be defensive and quiet when he meets new people. He gets more courage to express himself whenever he is beside Indra as he looks up to him.

Conflict

There is one type of conflict that happens in the stories, which is internal conflict. Individuals experience internal conflict when they find themselves torn between goals that are incompatible with each other (Coombs & Avrunin, 2013). The conflict about their emotional problems will be shown through the characters' actions and interactions with others (Coombs & Avrunin, 2013). As emotional regulation theory is predominantly based on psychological studies with developmental and social studies as the minor field, internal conflict can showcase the emotional struggle that they are facing within themselves. One thing to consider is how the problems that the characters face may seem external. The problems they are facing are situational and sometimes involve external parties, in which the other characters are not on par with the main characters' goals. However, the situation they are facing is not created by their initiative and the focus of the conflict begins when the characters start to have emotional doubts. They will try to hide instead of showing their emotions to the people, which sets the course of the plot. This will be shown to have self-doubts when faced with problems they can not solve at once. All of the characters will resolve this internal conflict by taking action that is in line with their values, desires, or needs (Daisie, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper is to design children's picture book stories which show negative consequences that may happen if children suppress their emotional expressions which is part of the response-focused strategy for emotion regulation. Through the stories, the protagonists encounter unpleasant consequences as a result of suppressing their negative emotions. In Sara's story, her hiding her discomfort when she does not want to go alone due to stage fright makes her stressed and tries to fix the problem by lying. For Arya, he is shown to be more pessimistic after suppressing his sadness about not being allowed to have pets. In the story

of Kirana, her suppression in dissatisfaction and fear of failure resulted in her being stressed as she set a high standard for herself. She is also seen to suppress the fear of disappointing her mother by striving to show the best result for her Math quizzes or competitions. Next, Indra's story follows his discomfort and avoidance towards Surya as a result of his trying to suppress his envy toward his little brother. Lastly, the story of Gita shows how suppressing her embarrassment by snapping out leads to her avoidance of her choir friends, which does not solve her problem of performing her solo part well.

The stories proceed to show situation modification strategy as one strategy that yields a better result for children's emotion regulation. For Sara, she tells the truth about her discomfort and nervousness to come on stage alone and asks for her friends to join her instead. Moving to Arya, after he has experienced a little bit of life as a pet owner, he asks whether he can modify his initial request of having a pet into learning to take care of the wounded puppy he found until it is healed. From Kirana, her courage to confess what she feels about not being happy and tired while chasing achievements leads to her proposal to her mom about reducing her frequency of attending Math clubs. In the story of Indra, he asks whether he can share the things that Surya receives from their parents instead of suppressing his jealousy. Last but not least, Gita takes up the courage to come to her choir friends and stop insisting on singing the solo part alone, and instead, asking someone else to sing it with her. By changing strategy, these protagonists yield a better result of emotion regulation.

REFERENCES

- Bakken, L., Brown, N., & Downing, B. (2017). Early childhood education: The long-term benefits. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31(2), 255-269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285>.
- Bangun, Y. R., & Iswari, K. R. (2015). Searching for emotional intelligence measurement in Indonesia context with an innovative approach. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 169, 337-345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.318>
- Banyan, C. D. (2003). *The secret language of feelings*. Hypnosis.org.
- Butler, E. A., Egloff, B., Wilhelm, F. H., Smith, N. C., Erickson, E. A., & Gross, J. J. (2003). The social consequences of expressive suppression. *Emotion*, 3(1), 48-67. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1528-3542.3.1.48>
- Cole, P. M., Dennis, T. A., Smith-Simon, K. E., & Cohen, L. H. (2009). Preschoolers' emotion regulation strategy understanding: Relations with emotion socialization and child self-regulation. *Social Development*, 18(2), 324-352. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2008.00503.x>
- Coombs, C. H., & Avrunin, G. S. (2013). *The structure of conflict*. Psychology Press.
- Daisie. (2023, August 21). *Internal conflict: Definition, types & examples*. Daisie Blog. <https://blog.daisie.com/internal-conflict-definition-types-examples/#resolving-internal-conflict>
- Goodman, W. (2022). *Toxic positivity: Keeping it real in a world obsessed with being happy*. Penguin.
- Gross, J. J. (2015a). *Handbook of emotion regulation* (2nd ed.). Guilford Publications.
- Gross, J. J. (2015b). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840x.2014.940781>
- Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348-362. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.348>
- Gross, J. J., Sheppes, G., & Urry, H. L. (2011). Taking one's lumps while doing the splits: A big tent perspective on emotion generation and emotion regulation. *Cognition & Emotion*, 25(5), 789-793. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.586590>

- Gross, J. T., & Cassidy, J. (2019). Expressive suppression of negative emotions in children and adolescents: Theory, data, and a guide for future research. *Developmental Psychology*, 55(9), 1938-1950. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000722>
- Guarneri, C. (2018). Realistic fiction and literature: The influence of believable characters on readers. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 10(2), 1008. <https://doi.org/10.17722/jell.v10i2.407>
- Kojongian, M. G., & Wibowo, D. H. (2022). Toxic positivity: Sisi lain dari konsep untuk selalu positif dalam segala kondisi [Toxic Positivity: The Other Side of the Concept to Always Be Positive in All Conditions]. *Psychopreneur Journal*, 6(1), 10-25. <https://doi.org/10.37715/psy.v6i1.2493>
- López-Pérez, B., Gummerum, M., Wilson, E., & Dellaria, G. (2016). Studying children's Intrapersonal emotion regulation strategies from the process model of emotion regulation. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 178(2), 73-88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2016.1230085>
- Macklem, G. L. (2007). *Practitioner's guide to emotion regulation in school-aged children*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Matulka, D. I. (2008). *A picture book primer: Understanding and using picture books*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains*. Harvard University.
- Norton, D. E. (2011). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature (8th edition)*. Merrill Publishing Company.
- Nyklíček, I., Vingerhoets, A., & Zeelenberg, M. (2010). *Emotion regulation and well-being*. Springer.
- Pelini, S. (2023, July 6). *An age-by-age guide to helping kids manage emotions*. The Gottman Institute. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/age-age-guide-helping-kids-manage-emotions/>
- Putra, R. P., Ramadhanti, A., Rahajeng, A. S., Fadil, A., & Salsyabila, N. (2023). Toxic positivity in adolescents: An attitude of always being positive in every situation. *Journal of Psychology and Instruction*, 7(1), 11-21. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jpai.v7i1>
- Reeser, C. (2010). *How to write and publish a successful children's book: Everything you need to know explained simply*. Atlantic Publishing Company.
- Sala, M. N., Pons, F., & Molina, P. (2014). Emotion regulation strategies in preschool children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 32(4), 440-453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12055>
- Schoppmann, J., Severin, F., Schneider, S., & Seehagen, S. (2023). The effect of picture book reading on young children's use of an emotion regulation strategy. *PLOS ONE*, 18(8), e0289403. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0289403>
- Schutte, N. S., Manes, R. R., & Malouff, J. M. (2009). Antecedent-focused emotion regulation, response modulation and well-being. *Current Psychology*, 28(1), 21-31. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-009-9044-3>
- Zelazo, P. D., & Cunningham, W. A. (2007). Executive function: Mechanisms underlying emotion regulation. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 135-158). The Guilford Press.