

Dorota Zdybel  
ORCID: 0000-0003-3322-7570  
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

Magda Śliwa  
ORCID: 0000-0002-3340-6934  
Montessori Kindergarten "Muszelka" in Krakow

# Language in the Process of Developing Child's Emotional Sensitiveness: Empirical Study

## ABSTRACT

Emotional sensitivity is a complex, unclear and multidimensional concept, entangled in interpersonal relations, as well as linguistic and situational factors. In this article, the main points of attention are cognitive and linguistic aspects of emotional sensitivity defined as the ability for affective decentration, i.e. taking the perspective of an interlocutor, being able to imagine how he/she perceives and understands a particular communicative context, and how he/she interprets the emotional content of the situation. The key to such emotional sensitivity is not only the knowledge of linguistic expressive resources, but also—or perhaps mainly—metacognitive monitoring of interaction, and the ability to reflect on one's own communicative effectiveness in terms of "getting tuned" to the interlocutor's emotions. The main aim of this article is to present methodological consequences of such empirical perspective. The theoretical part of the article contains psychological and linguistic perspectives in defining emotional sensitiveness as an important area of children's communicative competence. The empirical part presents the research on children's ability to build

## KEYWORDS

emotional sensitivity,  
communicative  
competence, affective  
decentration,  
comforting  
communication,  
language of emotions

SPI Vol. 23, 2020/4  
ISSN 2450-5358  
e-ISSN 2450-5366  
DOI: 10.12775/SPI.2020.4.008  
Submitted: 15.12. 2019  
Accepted: 12.10.2020

emotionally sensitive utterances in the context of cognitive conflict, i.e. the clash of different ways of coping with the same communicative situation/experience by two different interlocutors. In order to check children's reactions, the test designed by Brant R. Burlleson was used, along with his scale of evaluating the level of emotional sensitivity of a supporting utterance. Finally, the consequences of neglecting children's emotional sensitivity by contemporary education were described.

## Introduction

Emotional sensitivity is often associated with weakness: a sensitive person can be easily hurt, touched or smothered. Such a person is shy, unable to fight for himself/herself, and his/her feelings are too long and too intense, which is inadequate to the strength of the stimulus. However, it is emotional sensitivity that constitutes the basis for soft competences which are getting more and more important in the modern world dominated by computers and robots. In the most general sense, emotional sensitivity may be described as the area of a person's competences which make it possible for him/her to recognize their own and others' emotional states and to cope with them through self-regulation. In this sense, emotional sensitivity is a broad and multidimensional concept with unclear borders located within areas shared by the scientific fields of philosophy, anthropology, psychology, pedagogy and linguistics. The main objective of the article is to make the readers familiar with the cognitive, emotional and linguistic constituents of this notion, and to show them the opportunity to use it in the methodology of the research on children's communicative competence. Such a research may include the diagnosis of children's ability to formulate utterances that are sensitive to the interlocutor and recognize his/her different emotional perspective. In other words, the diagnosis can refer to the circumstances in which the same communicative situation/experience is perceived in a different manner by two interlocutors. The test prepared by Brant R. Burlleson was used in the research. The author assumed that the basis for emotional sensitivity is cognitive-affective decentration. The research presented in this article are a fragment of a broader scientific

project on the basis of which the bachelor's thesis of Magda Śliwa was written.<sup>1</sup>

## Cognitive and affective components of emotional sensitivity

From the psychological point of view, the essence of “emotional sensitivity” is the organism’s ability to feel and respond to stimuli, to receive impressions and to experience strong psychological feelings (WSJP 2019). Włodzimierz Strus distinguished two complementary areas of sensitivity understood in this way (2012: 52). On the one hand, sensitivity is the sign of the organism’s emotional responsiveness, which is expressed in the intensity of a response to a stimulus that generates emotions. This means that a sensitive person responds to the surrounding reality more often and more strongly than others, and the intensity of his/her reactions depends on his/her level of emotional stability. The second aspect of emotional sensitivity refers to the scope of stimuli that evoke a person’s emotional response. This aspect includes sensitivity to the factors that may generate emotions. A sensitive person tends to respond to the factors that are subtle, hard to notice or unimportant for other people. In this approach, emotional sensitivity is clearly related to temperament. If such sensitivity is to become the basis for emotional stability, it must be supported by certain skills such as emotional control (the tendency to regulate everyday emotions) and coping with difficult emotions (resistance to stress) (Strus 2012: 58–59).

A lot of researchers identify the notion of emotional sensitivity with empathy. According to the *Słownik psychologii* [*Lexicon of Psychology*], empathy is an “alternative affective response to another person’s emotional experience, which consists in reflecting or imitating that emotion. In this sense, an obvious implication is the fact that an empathic experience is sharing someone’s emotions,” sympathizing with someone (Reber 2000: 192–193). However, according

<sup>1</sup> Magda Śliwa (2019). *Poziom wrażliwości emocjonalnej dzieci sześć- i ośmioletnich na przykładzie podopiecznych wybranych placówek edukacyjnych w Krakowie* [*Emotional Sensitivity of Six- and Eight-year-olds Based on the Example of Students of Selected Educational Institutions in Krakow*]. Bachelor’s thesis written at the Faculty of Education of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, supervised by Dorota Zdybel, PhD.

to the research, empathy has both cognitive and affective constituents (Każmierczak, Plopa, Retowski 2007: 10–11). The essence of affective empathy includes “emotional processes that result from other people’s behaviour (conscious and subconscious emotional responses which reflect the emotions of the person we are watching)” (Ciechomski 2014: 8). Such empathy is based on the ability to reconstruct other people’s emotional states and following them. The essence of cognitive empathy, in turn, is decentration, i.e. the ability to reconstruct another person’s point of view, notice differences in the way of interpreting the situation, and understand that the same situation may be perceived, understood and experienced in different ways by different people. Based on such division, Kaźmierczak, Plopa and Retowski (2007: 12) prepared the Empathic Sensitivity Scale by distinguishing its three main constituents:

- (a) Adoption of a perspective, i.e. the ability and willingness to spontaneously adopt someone’s point of view in everyday situations; the ability to “go beyond one’s egocentric ‘I’” in the process of communicating with others.
- (b) Empathic concern, i.e. being “oriented at others”; the tendency to sympathize with people who experience suffering, failure, etc.
- (c) Personal distress, i.e. “self-oriented” feelings; the tendency to experience fear, anxiety, distress or psychological discomfort as a response to strong negative experiences (suffering) of other people.

Thus, although it seems that the concepts of emotional sensitivity and empathy are close and overlapping, we cannot use them as synonyms.

Another perspective of analysis is suggested by scientists rooted in psychology and sociology of communication, who define emotional sensitivity in the categories of supportive communication oriented, on the one hand, at noticing and understanding the interlocutor’s feelings; on the other hand, at opening in front of others, revealing oneself and building mutual trust (Weber, Johnson, Corrigan 2004; Burleson 2010; Rittenour, Martin 2008). According to many scientists, “emotional sensitivity to the interlocutor” is based on the maturation of the mind’s cognitive structures that are responsible for such factors as the acquisition of the theory of intellect and the ability

for affective-emotional decentration (Burlleson 2010). In psychology, the “theory of intellect” means a complex and internally consistent system of causative-explanatory beliefs that are used for interpreting and predicting social behaviours of other people (Bialecka-Pikul 2012). It is based on the awareness that the reason for human actions is not the reality as such, but an individual’s beliefs and images of that reality, irrespective of the degree to which they comply with the actual status. Explaining other people’s behaviours, we refer to the area of psychological causativeness which, as such, is impossible to notice directly: to the interlocutor’s feelings, desires, beliefs and intentions which we guess indirectly, on the basis of our previous experiences. The ability to recognize other people’s emotions is an integral part of the process of shaping the theory of intellect, because it is based on the interpretation of people’s inner states, especially in an unspecified situation in which knowledge, feelings and convictions of the participants are significantly different. In such a situation, adopting the partner’s perspective consists in imagining the way in which he/she perceives, understands and defines a given communicative situation, what he/she feels like and why, and to which degree his/her feelings are different than ours. This affective decentration (the ability to understand and respect other people’s feelings) determines the adequacy of reception and interpretation of other people’s utterances, i.e. it helps us “get tuned” to the interlocutor and understand his/her point of view, which is the crucial condition for speaking about emotions in an effective manner (more: Burlleson 1982; 1984; 2010). Rebecca B. Rubin and Matthew M. Martin specify emotional sensitivity of communication as “being oriented at others” (1994: 36) and they define it as the ability to listen carefully, become interested in the partner’s needs, notice not only what has been spoken directly, but also what has not been said, as well as respond to the interlocutor’s feelings and adjust one’s reactions to them. Malcolm R. Parks (1997: 36), in turn, defines sensitivity to the interlocutor as a style of communication that confirms the image of other people (not judging), is empathic (not imposing distance), equal (not exalted) and focused on solving problems and not controlling the partner.

## Language as a tool of emotional sensitivity: linguistic perspective<sup>2</sup>

In linguistics, emotional sensitivity is discussed in the categories of the ability to express emotions in the form of an expressive utterance. It is assumed that an expressive utterance is an utterance characterized by the intention to express and open oneself in front of another person. Also, in such an utterance, the need to express one's feelings determines the form and shape of the utterance, dominating over other aspects and shaping the tone of the whole utterance. According to Renata Grzegorzczkova, expressive utterances "are not oriented at the interlocutor; they do not aim at informing or influencing the partner. They are pure expressions of the will, emotions or judgments," usually placed within the modal frame of "I feel..." (Grzegorzczkova 1991: 24). However, at the same time, such utterances may be complex and multilayer, mainly due to the fact that an expressive intention is not always verbalized directly. Stanisław Grabias notes that, from the linguistic point of view, there are three possible ways of revealing emotions in utterances (1997: 294). The speaker's emotional states may be:

- revealed in an unconscious manner, unintentional, expressed outside the meaning of the utterance. In fact, such revelation/disclosure of a speaker's feelings occurs in each human utterance. Whenever we listen to someone and watch his/her behaviour, we can find some signs showing what the person feels and how he/she is, even if they do not reveal it directly;
- expressed in a conscious manner, i.e. they can be implicitly included in the meaning of the utterance, although the speaker may not use the name of a given emotion openly. In this sense, we express our emotions through choosing linguistic resources that are marked by certain emotions, e.g. the expression: "What a lovely puppy!" expresses acceptance and admiration, while: "What a hideous dog!" reveals disgust and loathing;

---

<sup>2</sup> The below fragment of the article was based on the work by Dorota Zdybel (2011). "Językowa sprawność ekspresywna – społeczno-kulturowe mechanizmy rozwoju," in *Społeczne uwarunkowania dobrostanu w niepełnosprawności*, ed. K. Markocka-Mączka, Lublin: Wydawnictwo NeuroCentrum, pp. 121–137.

- communicated to the interlocutor with the support of the names of feelings that exist in language.

The range of linguistic resources and forms, used to fulfil the expressive function of an utterance, is rich and diversified. Such forms and resources are different in terms of the meaning, the degree of grammatical complexity (lexemes—phrasemes—sentences) and the motivation for using them (real or metaphorical one). All of them, however, have the same communicative function. According to Iwona Nowakowska-Kempna, speaking about emotions includes (1995: 15–16):

1. naming feelings, including naming the emotions of the person who experiences them: the so-called *experiencer* (I am sad, I miss someone, I am touched), as well as naming the feelings of the person who evokes them: the so-called *agens* (I made someone sad, angry or irritated);
2. naming the symptoms of feelings, which often takes the form of idioms, e.g. “he is as pale as death,” “he turned red with anger,” “he is green with envy,” “he pulled a face,” “he pouted his lips,” etc.;
3. naming action and behaviours related to feelings, e.g. he “wept” for joy, he “screamed” with anger, he was so happy that he was “dancing.” This group of resources makes it possible to carry out a more detailed characteristics of feelings, taking into account their intensity;
4. naming feelings-experiences related to a given emotion, from the point of view of the person who experiences them (*experiencer*), i.e. talking about what I feel when I experience a particular emotion, e.g. “my hair stood on end” (because of fear), “it made my blood run cold” (I was frightened), “my heart beats like a drum” (with joy). Such idioms maintain their meaning even without the formula which names the emotion directly; they are associated with a given emotion on the basis of a cultural convention.

Despite the richness and vividness of linguistic means of expression, it is believed that speaking about emotions is very difficult, complex or even impossible: “when we want to tell other people, especially those we love the most, what we feel; when we want to ‘share’ our feelings or ‘show what is in our hearts’, more frequently than ever

we experience the overwhelming feeling of the lack of words—the insufficiency of language. What we say is very distant from what we actually want to express” (Pajdzińska 1999: 83). According to Anna Wierzbicka, this basic difficulty with expressing emotions can be explained by transitory and subjective nature of emotional experiences: “a feeling is something we feel, and not something we experience in words. We can write down our thoughts, but not our emotions. The structure of a thought can be reconstructed with words. A feeling, as such, is void of a structure, so it is inexpressible” (quoted in: Pajdzińska 1999: 83). This is probably why, when trying to “put our feelings into words,” we often use metaphors. A metaphor makes it possible to, in a vivid and unconventional manner, to capture the “inexpressible” through a reference to things and phenomena that are known and familiar.

To sum it up, although emotions are not experienced in language, it is language that provides the most important resources/tools to reveal and express emotions in the process of communication. Linguistic expression of emotions is the basis for building close, intimate relationships with another person; for negotiating emotional meanings which we ascribe to shared experiences. On the other hand, according to the hypothesis by Sapir-Whorf, language influences our emotional sensitivity, i.e. it shapes our perception and interpretation of emotional experiences: it is a kind of an interpretative filter which the interlocutors place on the reality and through which, more or less consciously, they categorize phenomena and events from the world of emotions (Schaff 1982: 24). Olga Tokarczuk expressed it in this beautiful paragraph:

In this sense, the world is made of words. How we think about the world and—perhaps even more importantly—how we narrate it have a massive significance, therefore. A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes. This is a fact well known to not only historians, but also (and perhaps above all) to every stripe of politician and tyrant. He who has and weaves the story is in charge (Tokarczuk 2019).

The same truth can be applied in the world of emotions in the gentle and transitory layer of which we can best notice what we can name, capture in language, or verbalize. Unnamed areas of emotions escape our perception; they are not subject to conscious reflection and valuation, i.e. they create the foundations for communication



barriers, both in the process of “talking to oneself” (self-reflection on our own feelings) and in the dialogue with others.

## Emotional sensitivity of children in the situation of a cognitive conflict: empirical study

The main objective of the research that was carried out was recognizing children’s ability to formulate emotionally sensitive utterances in the situation of an emotional-cognitive conflict. In the article we will also present a small part of the research aiming at finding the answer to the following two questions:

- To which degree the analysed children can formulate an utterance that supports the interlocutor emotionally in the situation of an emotional-cognitive conflict?
- Is there a connection between the level of emotional sensitivity of the researched children and their age?

Sixty children took part in the research, including thirty-six-year-olds and thirty-eight-year-olds. The children attend several educational institutions in Krakow. Most children in the group, i.e. 55%, were girls. The majority of them were from full families (78.3%) the socio-cultural status of which was high (46.7%) or medium (28.3%). There were only 15% of families with a low social status. Most of the children started preschool education between the age of 3 and 4 (86.7%).

In order to verify the ability to understand different emotions of the interlocutor (conflict of emotions) and to comfort him/her (provide emotional support), three tasks based on the linguistic test prepared by Burleson (2010) were used (2010)<sup>3</sup>:

- I. Imagine that your best friend was not invited to the birthday party of a friend from the preschool group you both attend. You were invited, all other children were also invited, but your best friend was not invited. Now he is sitting with his head bent down, and he does not want to play with you. What do you think he feels? What will you say to make him feel better?

<sup>3</sup> Translation of the test, the text of the tasks and the criteria for evaluating their fulfillment – Dorota Zdybel.

- II. Imagine that your best friend had a bad day at preschool/ school. The teacher wrote a bad remark about him in the class register! It was because one of the flower pots standing on the sill fell down. The pot crashed and the plant got broken. The teacher said it was your friend's fault, because he was playing nearby. You were the class monitor that day and you knew your friend was not guilty, but the teacher did not want to listen to your explanations. After the classes, your friend did not wait for you in the cloakroom and he ran home. What do you think he feels? What will you say to make him feel better?
- III. Imagine that your class prepared a Christmas performance for your parents. You and your best friend were to say a poem. You practiced it many times, but, during the show, your friend got so stressed that he forgot the text! Now he is sitting on the bench with a strange face, and he is not even looking at you. What do you think he feels? What will you say to make him feel better?

The children's responses were analysed taking into account as follows: (a) the general number of support strategies used; (b) the degree of their content diversity (the number of different types of applied strategies), and (c) the level of emotional sensitivity of the utterances. Burleson distinguishes three main types of support strategies according to their sensitivity to another person's perspective. His suggestion was adjusted to the needs of this research in quite a reduced form, because not all types of supportive arguments separated and described by Burleson were identified in children's utterances (table 1).

According to Burleson's intention, the above-mentioned system of coding assumes the existence of a hierarchical relationship between particular categories, which is why it makes possible not only to distinguish particular strategies based on some features of information or their absence, but also to evaluate a given strategy as more refined, subtle or sensitive, etc. based on its place in the hierarchy. However, it does not mean that the strategies defined as "those with a higher level of emotional sensitivity" in the coding system are also generally more effective than those which are "less sensitive." Everything depends on a specific situation, the conditions for the occurrence of emotional tension, its reason, the person of the recipient, etc. From the communicative point of view, placing a specific strategy

in a particular place of the above-mentioned hierarchy makes it only possible to presume the scope of the ways of reacting or patterns of linguistic behaviours that are known to the individual. It is because, as Burleson says:

Using a specific level of a strategy assumes the ability to use all strategies that are lower in the hierarchy. It means, for example, that a person able to apply the strategies of a high level of sensitivity (...) can, in a specific situation, use the strategy of diverting someone's attention away from the source of stress (level 2c) if they decide that the recipient's emotions are relatively temporary and pondering on them could only worsen the situation (Burleson 1984: 73–74).

**Table 1:** The hierarchical system of coding the level of emotional sensitivity of supportive utterances

The level of emotional sensitivity of the supportive utterance	Types of arguments
<p><b>1<sup>st</sup> level of sensitivity (1 point)</b> – rejecting another person's perspective, i.e. an egocentric attitude focused on one's own point of perceiving and feeling the situation</p>	<p>Rejection may be clear/direct/explicit or hidden/indirect/implicit:</p> <p>A. The speaker denies the existence of feelings other than his/her own (<i>Then she will not be my friend anymore</i>).</p> <p>B. The speaker questions the adequacy of someone's feelings (<i>Don't worry, it is just a birthday party</i>).</p> <p>C. The speaker ignores another person's feelings (<i>There will be other parties in future</i>).</p>
<p><b>2<sup>nd</sup> level of sensitivity (2 points)</b> – silent (indirect) recognition of someone else's perspective. The child recognizes another person's feelings and/or responds to them, but he/she cannot describe, explain or name them directly</p>	<p>Acceptance is provided in an indirect manner:</p> <p>A. The speaker is trying to divert the recipient's attention from the unpleasant situation and related feelings (<i>When it's my birthday, I will surely invite you</i>).</p> <p>B. The speaker recognizes the interlocutor's feelings, but he/she does not try to help the interlocutor understand why they occurred and how to cope with them (<i>I am sorry you were not invited</i>).</p> <p>C. The speaker searches for an explanation outside the area of feelings, trying to overcome/reduce the sense of emotional tension (<i>Perhaps your invitation got lost, or the place was too small to invite all the children from the group?</i>).</p>

The level of emotional sensitivity of the supportive utterance	Types of arguments
<p><b>3<sup>rd</sup> level of sensitivity (3 points)</b>            – clear recognition and description of someone else’s perspective. The child clearly perceives different points of view, accepts them, describes and justifies the interlocutor’s feelings, i.e. he/she is trying to show and explain them, transforming them into a linguistic form</p>	<p>The speaker is trying to help the interlocutor understand the situation and find a more general explanation. He/she can also offer some strategies of coping with unpleasant feelings:</p> <p>A. The speaker clearly recognizes and names the interlocutor’s feelings, but he/she does not discuss their source or the nature of the situation (<i>I know it is hard for you, but you are my friend and many children like you. When it is my birthday, I will invite you</i>).</p> <p>B. The speaker is trying to clearly describe and explain the interlocutor’s feelings (<i>I am really sorry about this party; I did not mean to hurt you by mentioning this, but I knew I did. It is not funny to be left aside like this. Perhaps this is just a mistake. I will talk to him, ok?</i>).</p> <p>C. The speaker is trying to explain the interlocutor’s feelings and help him/her look at them from a distance/see them in a broader context, e.g. against the background of other people’s feelings (<i>I understand what you feel. Once I was not invited to a party either, and I know how it hurts: you may feel hurt or rejected</i>).</p>

Source: Burluson 1984: 74–75; translation and editing by Dorota Zdybel.

Thus, a person with a larger, richer and more internally diversified collection of behaviour models is likely to be more flexible, effective and sensitive in situations that require support than a person with a relatively low repertoire of behaviours. That is why, an additional criterion was adopted in analysing children’s utterances: content diversification of the arguments used by the children. The following scale was adopted to score it:

- A. Low level of content diversification—when the child mentioned only one type of argument in one utterance (1 point);
- B. Average level of content diversification—when the utterance contained two different types of arguments (2 points);
- C. High level of content diversification—when the child was able to include three or more types of arguments in one utterance (3 points).

For both of the described assessment criteria, each child could receive the maximum of 18 points. The results are included in the table below:

**Table 2:** The general level of emotional sensitivity of the utterances in the analysed groups of children

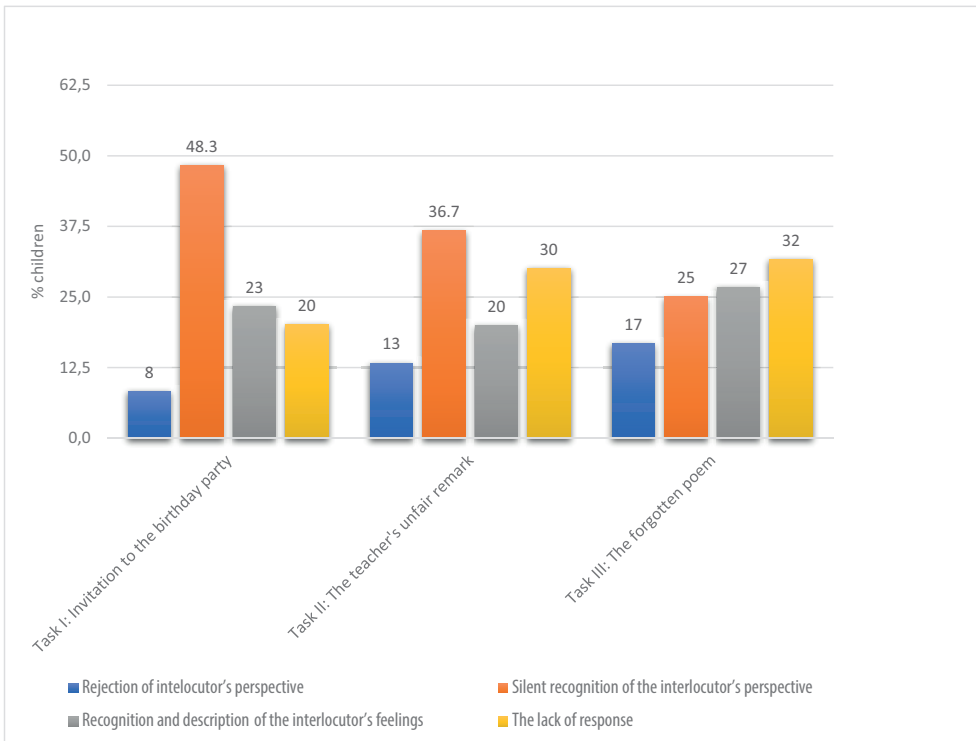
Group	N	maximum score	points obtained	average	%	general number of arguments	average number of arguments in one utterance	level of diversification of support strategies		level of emotional sensitivity of utterances	
								score	%	score	%
6-year-olds	30	540	200	6.7	37.0	90	3	85	31.5	115	42.6
8-year-olds	30	540	299	10.0	55.4	121	4	133	49.3	166	61.5
Total	60	1080	499	8.3	46.2	211	3.5	218	40.4	281	52.0

Source: the authors' own research.

The general level of emotional sensitivity of the children's utterances turned out to be surprisingly low. The children scored slightly above 46% points (on average 8–9 points per 18). It was much easier for them to recognize different emotions of the interlocutor (emotional sensitivity—52% points) than to give this recognition a linguistic form of a supportive/comforting utterance directed to the friend who experienced a difficult situation (content diversification of the utterance—40% points). The developmental tendency was very clear: the 8-year-olds dealt with the task much better (in total, more than 55% of the maximum possible score) than their younger friends (only 37%). The elder children turned out to be much more aware of different emotions of their interlocutors (more than 61% points, comparing to only 42% in the group of 6-year-olds). Also, the 8-year-olds showed a higher linguistic ability to formulate emotionally supportive utterances (they got 49% of the maximum score, as compared to only 31% among the younger children). The utterances of 8-year-olds were longer, more diversified in terms of language, and they contained more arguments that supported the interlocutor's difficult emotions (table 2).

However, at the same time, as we can see in chart 1, the situation of an emotional conflict turned out to be particularly difficult to interpret by all the analysed children: they intuitively sensed that, in the described situations, their interlocutor feels different (worse) than themselves. However, they could not find the words to name those feelings and respond in a sensitive manner, i.e. find a way to improve the friend's mood. This is especially confirmed by the percentage of children who were not able to give any sensible reply to the questions they were asked (20% in task 1; further 30% in task 2, and 31.6% in task 3). The below chart presents the emotional sensitivity in children's utterances in the following situations: (1) being uninvited to the birthday party, (2) the teacher's unfair remark, and (3) the poem forgotten because of stage fright.

**Chart 1:** Level of sensitivity of supportive utterances in different communicative situations



**Source:** the authors' own research.

It is easy to notice that the vast majority of children's responses to all the presented situations were classified as silent recognition of the interlocutor's perspective: children felt the friend's sadness and sense of rejection intuitively, they sympathized with the interlocutor's negative emotions and they tried to help, but the utterances they offered were rather attempts to divert the friend's attention from the unpleasant situation, to rationalize the reasons, find an objective explanation, and reduce emotional tension, but without going into details and analysing the causes. In task I, 48% of the children referred to such a strategy of response (50% 6-year-olds and 46.7% 8-year-olds); in task II—36.7% children (including 43% of the analysed 6-year-olds and 30% 8-year-olds); and in task III—25% children (including 23.3% six-year-olds and 26.7% 8-year-olds).

In both of the age groups there were much less utterances that reflected high emotional sensitivity, i.e. utterances in which the children were able to name and describe difficult emotions, explain their reasons, and offer some ways to cope with them. Such a strategy was applied by: (a) in task I: in total, 23% of the researched children (including 1/3 of the 8-year-olds and only 13.3% of the 6-year-olds), (b) in task II: in total 20% of the children (including 1/3 of the 8-year-olds and only two 6-year-olds), (c) in task III: only 26.7% of the researched children (36.7% 8-year olds and 16.7% 6-year-olds).

In order to illustrate the differences in the discussed emotional support strategies, it is worth giving some examples of children's utterances. Since the examples that illustrate situation I: "Invitation to the birthday party" have already been given in the characteristics of the levels of coding the emotional sensitivity of the utterances (table 1), the following examples focus on tasks II and III. It is easy to notice that the level of sensitivity of the children's utterances was strictly related to the situation of speaking: the more the situation was known to the child (based on his/her own experience), the easier it was to understand the friend's feelings. The utterances with the highest level of sensitivity usually constituted the mixture of various ways of argumentation—as if the children were intuitively looking for the most efficient way to comfort the friend, e.g. *Don't worry, when the next performance is shown, you will say the poem correctly* (argument from level III G), (...) *I am sure tomorrow you'll be fine; today I will play with you after the classes* (argument II D) (Paweł, 8 years old).

**Table 3:** Comparison of the levels of sensitivity of the children's utterances

Task/situation of the emotional conflict of the speaker and recipient	Level II Silent recognition of the interlocutor's affective perspective	Level III Recognition and clear description of the interlocutor's perspective
<p>Task 2 The teacher's unfair remark</p>	<p><i>I would tell her/him...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>that I will tell the teacher how it really happened; next day in the kindergarten I will play with her (Karolina, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>that I will prove the teacher that he did not do this/I will comfort him and I will make the teacher listen to me (Adam, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>that I will fix everything for you (Patryk, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>that we should play together (Hela, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>that I can tell the truth to the teacher if the teacher wants to listen to me (Nadia, 8)</i></li> <li>• <i>that he broke the plant by accident (Filip, 8)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Don't worry. Tomorrow I will tell the teacher that it was not your fault because someone pushed you. It is going to be a good day tomorrow: the teacher will surely forgive you, and she will say she is sorry because she blamed you for something you didn't do (Paweł, 8)</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't worry because this is not your fault (Szymon, 8)</i></li> </ul>
<p>Task 3 The forgotten poem</p>	<p><i>I would tell her/him...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>that, no matter what she says, her parents will be happy to see her on the stage (Karolina, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>that I will just remind her this poem so that she can laugh (Weronika, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>to come with me; maybe he will feel better (Patryk, 6)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Don't worry. I sometimes forget texts, too (Tymon, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>I would tell him to believe in himself (Ludwik, 6)</i></li> <li>• <i>I would say that it was not her who spoiled the show; she just had stage fright and she got so nervous that she forgot the poem (Ola, 8)</i></li> <li>• <i>I could tell her that this text was really difficult and she had the right to forget some words (Hania, 8)</i></li> <li>• <i>I would explain that this was stage fright, and it is normal that people forget texts during the show (Zuzia, 8)</i></li> </ul>

Source: the authors' own research.

## Conclusion

The development of children's emotional sensitivity is a complex and multi-aspect process connected with various cognitive, social and linguistic processes. In this process, it is also important to achieve the



ability for cognitive-affective decentration, as well as learn linguistic/cultural codes through which emotions are expressed and communicated. Education plays a special role in this process: not only does it provide the patterns of correct speaking (Bower, Casas 2016), but it also creates communication situations and opportunities for learning the languages of emotions, directing the child's attention to those communication aspects that require empathic understanding, reflecting and including into the utterance (Paulus, Wörle, Christner 2020).

Scientific research shows that the development of linguistic abilities to provide emotional support is subject to the conditions that are similar to the acquisition of other pro-social skills (Conte, Grazzani, Pepe 2018; Bower, Casas 2016). Educational support, both for parents (Giner Torrés, Kärtner 2019) and for teachers (Gardner, Stephens-Pisecco 2019), is considered to be particularly important in this respect. Such support includes modelling children's behaviours, warmth and responsiveness of adults' behaviours, paying attention to what the interlocutor says, as well as naming his/her feelings and their subtle shades (Yudina, Kotova 2017). The children who are given the opportunity to watch such adult behaviours as: selfless support given to others, sharing their resources with others, respecting the interlocutor's feelings, or comforting others in emotionally difficult situations, learn both pro-social attitudes and related linguistic strategies faster. On the other hand, experiencing emotional support from others helps children reinforce the inner strength (Sikorska, Adamczyk-Banach, Polak 2019; Gardner, Stephens-Pisecco 2019) which they need to cope with failure and frustration related to peer contacts, to overcome difficult emotions, and to achieve psychological balance. Many researchers emphasize that building the child's psychological resistance and strength is one of the key tasks of modern education that is much unappreciated by teachers.

It seems that metalinguistic awareness is what links the child's ability to understand the interlocutor's different emotional perspective and the ability to speak about it in a sensitive manner that follows the listener and provides him/her with emotional support. Metalinguistic awareness is understood as the ability to reflect on the efficiency, precision and persuasiveness of one's own utterances. What does my interlocutor feel/experience? How does he/she perceive and interpret the situation? How does, what I said, influence

his/her emotions? How can I express this in a different way? What would I like to hear in this situation? Such a reflection is the beginning of the development of meta-linguistic awareness which, in turn, influences the way a child perceives the emotional, relational, hidden dimension of human communication, and the degree to which he/she tries to understand the needs and intentions of the interlocutor, understanding that he may feel and understand an event in a totally different manner. The very fact that we start thinking about this makes us more careful in choosing the words we speak. Emotional sensitivity, i.e. noticing other people's emotions even where they are trying to hide them, is a gift which is somehow encoded in the mechanisms of the development of our cognitive-affective decentration. However, the art of speaking about such emotions in a sensitive way (to exert a good influence on the interlocutor, to comfort and support him/her, to reach for more and more sublime expressive resources and strategies) is only given to few: to those who underwent proper educational training (Paulus, Wörle, Christner 2020).

## Bibliography

- Białecka-Pikul M. (2002). *Co dzieci wiedzą o umyśle i myśleniu. Badania i opis dziecięcej reprezentacji stanów mentalnych*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Bower A., Casas J. (2016). "What Parents Do When Children are Good: Parent Reports of Strategies for Reinforcing Early Childhood Prosocial Behaviors," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 1310–1324, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-015-0293-5>.
- Burleson B.R. (1982). "The Development of Comforting Communication Skills in Childhood and Adolescence," *Child Development*, vol. 53, no. 6, pp. 1578–1588, DOI: 10.2307/1130086.
- Burleson B.R. (1984). "Comforting Communication," in *Communication by Children and Adults: Social, Cognitive, and Strategic Processes*, eds. H.E. Sypher, J.L. Applegate, Beverly Hills (CA)–London–New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 63–104.
- Burleson, B.R. (2003). "Emotional Support Skills," in *Handbook of Communication and Social Interaction Skills*, eds. J.O. Greene, B.R. Burleson, Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 551–594.
- Burleson B.R. (2010). "Explaining Recipient Responses to Supportive Messages: Development and Tests of a Dual-process Theory," in: *New Directions in Interpersonal Communication Research*, eds. S.W. Smith, S.R. Wilson, Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage Publications, pp. 159–179.

- Ciechomski M. (2014). *Wychowanie do empatii – opracowanie i ewaluacja programu edukacyjno-wychowawczego rozwijającego empatię u dzieci w wieku 9–10 lat*, Warszawa [outline of the doctoral dissertation].
- Conte E., Grazzani I., Pepe A. (2018). “Social Cognition, Language, and Prosocial Behaviors: A Multitrait Mixed-Methods Study in Early Childhood,” *Early Education and Development*, vol. 29, no. 6, pp. 814–830, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2018.1475820>.
- Gardner R.L., Stephens-Pisecco T.L. (2019). “Fostering Childhood Resilience: A Call to Educators,” *Preventing School Failure*, vol. 63, no. 3, pp. 195–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2018.1561408>.
- Giner Torrés M., Kärtner J. (2019). “Affiliation Motivates Children’s Prosocial Behaviors: Relating Helping and Comforting to Imitation,” *Social Development*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 501–513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12357>.
- Grabias S. (1997). *Język w zachowaniach społecznych*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Grzegorzczkowska R. (1991). “Problem funkcji języka i tekstu w świetle teorii aktów mowy,” in *Język a kultura*, vol. 4, eds. J. Bartmiński, R. Grzegorzczkowska, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo “Wiedza o Kulturze,” pp. 11–28.
- Każmierczak M., Płopa M., Retowski S. (2007). “Skala Wrażliwości Empatycznej,” *Przegląd Psychologiczny*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 9–24.
- Nowakowska-Kempna I. (1995). *Konceptualizacja uczuć w języku polskim. Prolegomena*, Warszawa: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna Towarzystwa Wiedzy Powszechnej.
- Pajdzińska A. (1999). “Jak mówimy o uczuciach? Poprzez analizę frazeologizmów do językowego obrazu świata,” in *Językowy obraz świata*, ed. J. Bartmiński, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, pp. 83–101.
- Paulus M., Wörle M., Christner N. (2020). “The Emergence of Human Altruism: Preschool Children Develop a Norm for Empathy-based Comforting,” *Journal of Cognition and Development*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 104–124, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2019.1693375>.
- Parks M.R. (1997). “Communicative Competence and Interpersonal Control,” in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, eds. M.L. Knapp, G.R. Miller, Beverly Hills (CA): Sage Publications, pp. 589–618.
- Reber A. (2000). *Słownik psychologii*, trans. B. Janasiewicz-Kruszyńska et al., Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Rittenour Ch.E., Martin M.M. (2008). “Convergent Validity of the Communication-based Emotional Support Scale,” *Communication Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 235–241, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970802257671>.
- Rubin R.B., Martin M.M. (1994). “Development of a Measure of Interpersonal Communication Competence,” *Communication Research Reports*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 33–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824099409359938>.
- Schaff A. (1982). “Wstęp do polskiego wydania,” in B.L. Whorf, *Język, myśl, rzeczywistość*, trans. T. Hołówka, Warszawa: PIW, pp. 5–31.

- Sikorska I., Adamczyk-Banach M., Polak M. (2019). “Zasoby odporności psychicznej dziecka – co wiedzą o nich rodzice i nauczyciele,” *Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce*, vol. 14, no. 52, pp. 23–39, DOI: 10.35765/eetp.2019.1452.02.
- Strus W. (2012). *Dojrzałość emocjonalna a funkcjonowanie moralne*, [Stare Kościeliska]: Wydawnictwo Liberi Libri.
- Tokarczuk O. (2019). “Wykład noblowski ‘Czuły narrator’,” <https://www.rp.pl/Kultura/191209471-Czuly-narrator-Pelny-tekst-noblowskiego-wykladu-Olgi-Tokarczuk.html> [access: 7.12.2019].
- Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego (WSJP)*, [https://wsjp.pl/index.php?id\\_hasla=7395&id\\_znaczenia=1907812&l=27&ind=0](https://wsjp.pl/index.php?id_hasla=7395&id_znaczenia=1907812&l=27&ind=0) [access: 12.12.2019]
- Wierzbicka A. (1999). *Język – umysł – kultura*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Weber K., Johnson A., Corrigan M. (2004). “Communicating Emotional Support and Its Relationship to Feelings of Being Understood, Trust, and Self-disclosure,” *Communication Research Reports*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 316–323, DOI: 10.1080/08824090409359994.
- Yudina T.O., Kotova T.N. (2017). “Empathic Responding in Toddlers: The Role of Experience and Observation of Comforting Behavior,” *Psychology. Journal of the Higher School of Economics*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 262–276, DOI: 10.17323/1813-8918-2017-2-262-276.
- Zdybel D. (2011). “Językowa sprawność ekspresywna – społeczno-kulturowe mechanizmy rozwoju,” in *Společne uwarunkowania dobrostanu w niepełnosprawności*, ed. K. Markocka-Mączka, Lublin: Wydawnictwo NeuroCentrum, pp. 121–137.

## ADDRESSES FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Dorota Zdybel  
 Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow  
 Institute of Educational Sciences  
 e-mail: dorota.zdybel@ignatianum.edu.pl

Magda Śliwa  
 Montessori Kindergarten “Muszelka” in Krakow  
 e-mail: madziasliwa13@gmail.com