

GOING TO THE SOURCE: PRESCHOOLERS' OWN NARRATIVES ILLUMINATE EMOTION CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

AUTHORS

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THE CUB LAB

- Effort to bridge the gap between research on effective educational practices and the real-world problems confronting children, caregivers, and teachers.
- Collaborating teachers and caregivers noted a lack of opportunities to understand how children are feeling over the course of the busy schoolday, while researchers noted an absence of naturalistic data on how children actually give voice to their feelings.

GOING TO THE 'SOURCE'

- Open-ended interview questions give children the opportunity to describe their emotional experiences and demonstrate their understanding of emotion-words.

BACKGROUND

- Emotion concepts are often understood as innate and universal that unfold over the course of development or as “undifferentiated affective sentiments” – shaped by social factors.¹
- Prior work on children's emotion-concept acquisition (*happy, sad, angry*) has relied on constrained tasks—often labeling faces or story characters' emotions² – revealing a protracted trajectory with errors persisting into middle childhood.



Fig 1. Facial stimuli from Widen & Russell (2002). happy, sad, angry, scared, disgusted, surprised, neutral).^{3,4}

METHOD



Figure 2. Preschoolers Zoom with 'Foxy the Feelings Friend' multiple times over the course of the school year

- Can you show me what face you make when you're [EMOTION]?
- When do you feel [EMOTION]?
- What do you do when you feel [EMOTION]? How does that make you feel?
- Can you tell me about the last time you felt [EMOTION]? What happened?
- How do you know when someone else is [EMOTION]? What do you do?

- Participants (partial sample): (N=19; 3.12–5.67yrs, M=4.59, SD=0.83)
- Open-ended interviews: N=70, 1-6 sessions/child, (M=2.64, SD=1.36)



STANDARDIZED TESTS

Our sample showed a broad range of performance:

- language (40%–98% correct on the QUILS; M=69%, SD=18%)
- emotion comprehension (labeling the correct emotion in face stimuli: 0-0.80, M=0.49, SD=0.28)
- narratives (0.20-1.00, M=0.62, SD=0.24)

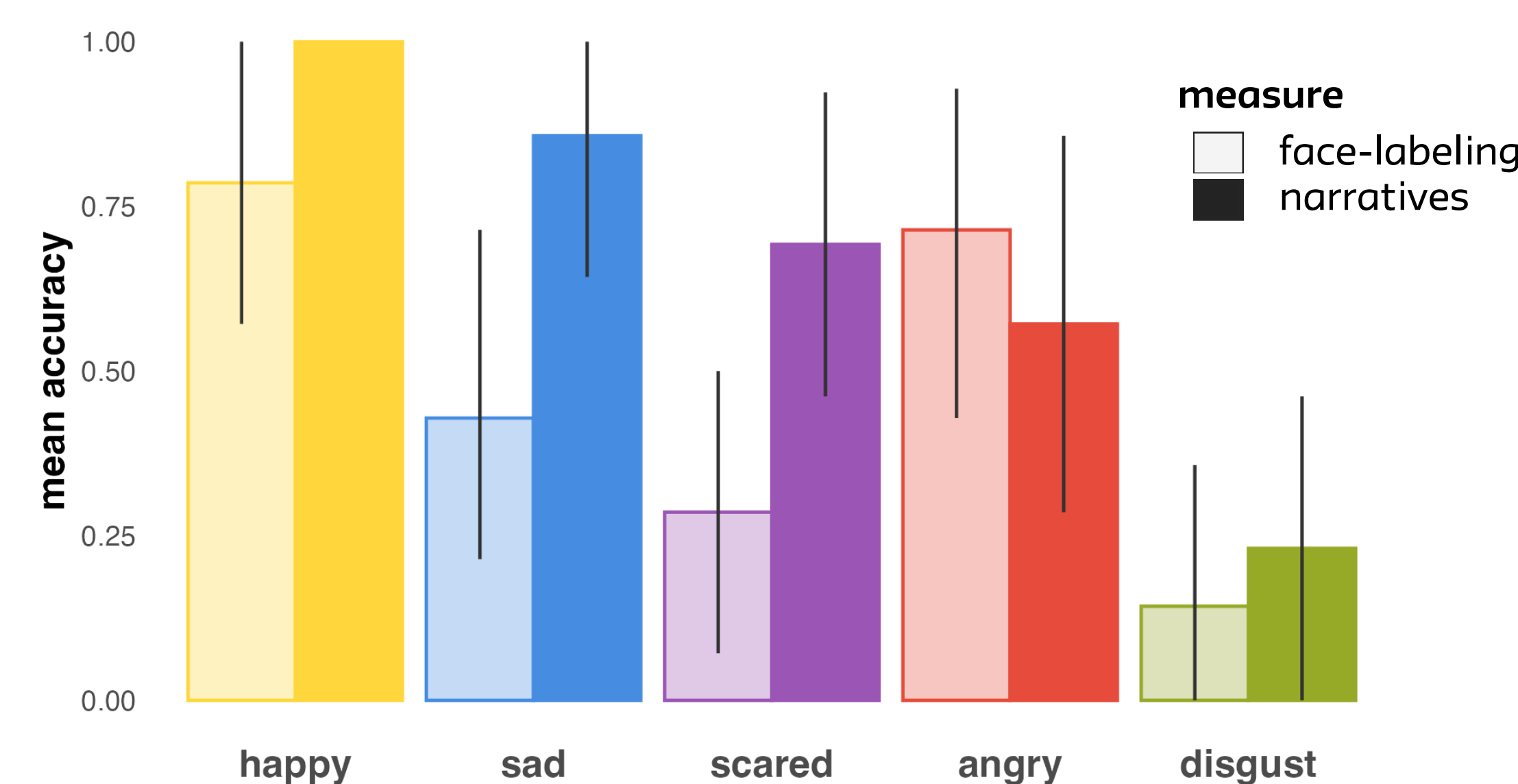


Figure 3. Performance on two standardized measures of emotion category comprehension.

TOP-REPORTED CONTEXTS

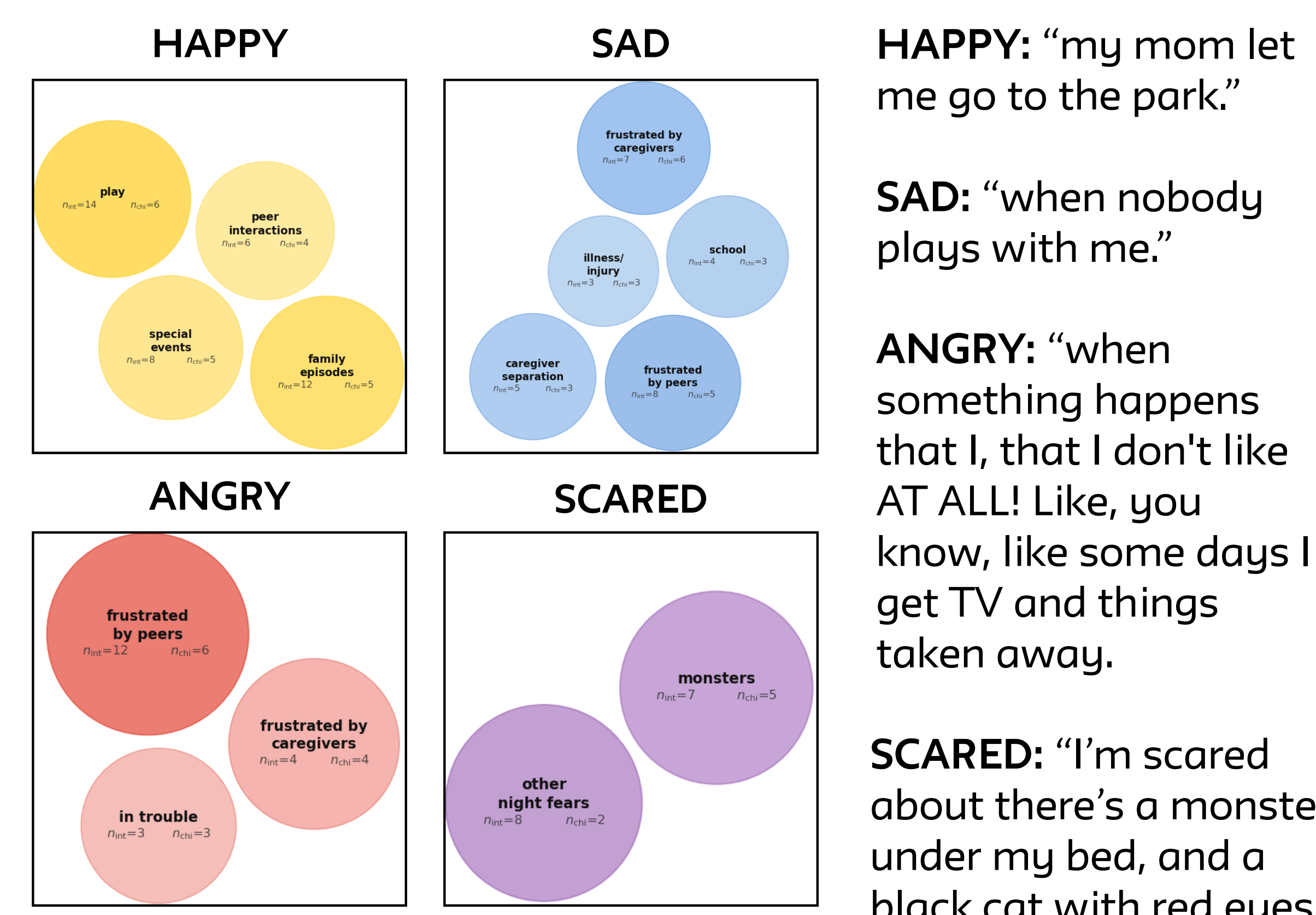


Figure 4. Top contexts associated with each emotion (Questions 2-4 in Figure 2).

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU FEEL [EMOTION]?

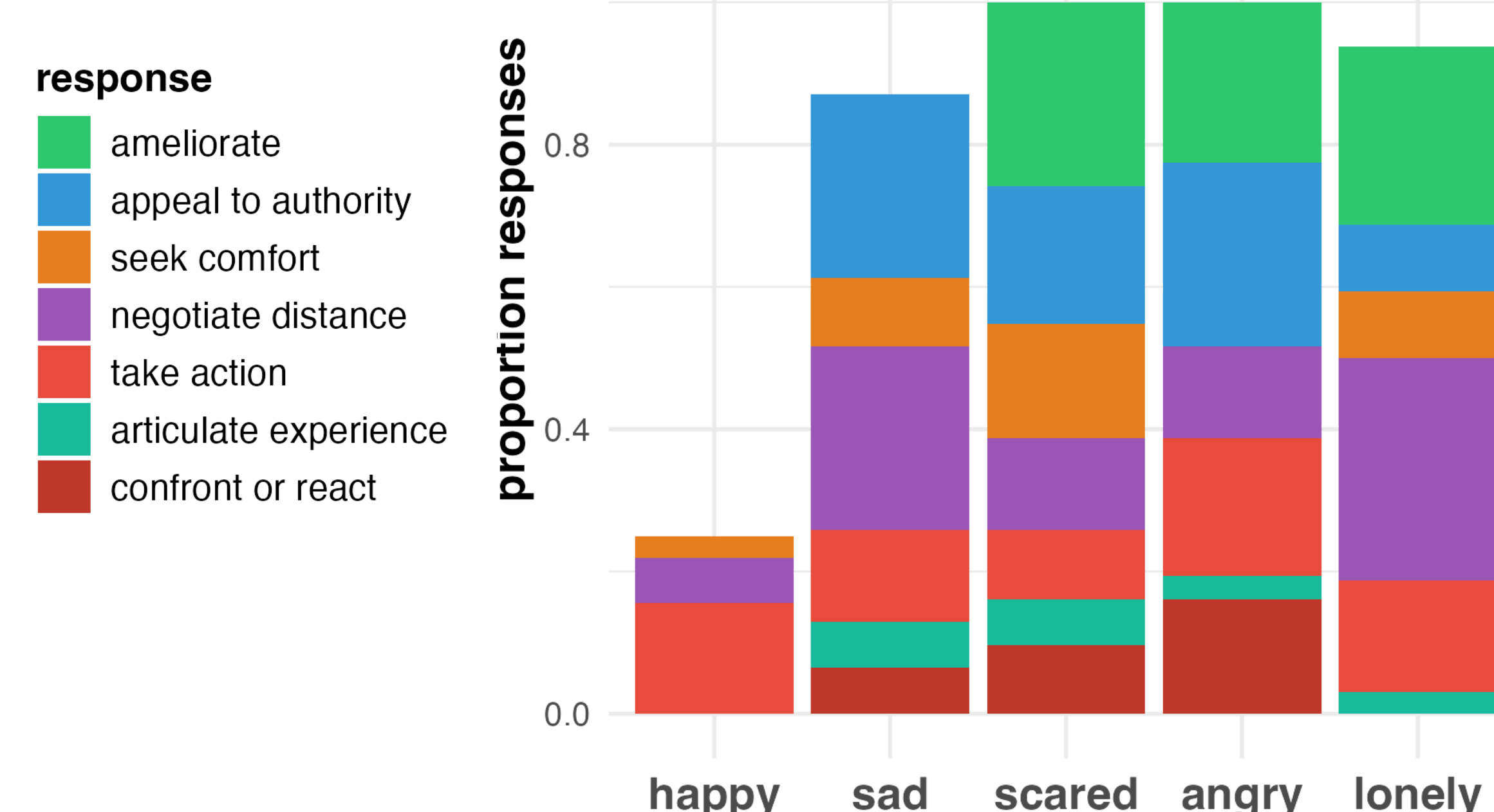


Figure 5. Children's responses to "What do you do when..." (Questions 3 & 5 in Figure 2).

ABSTRACT THEMES

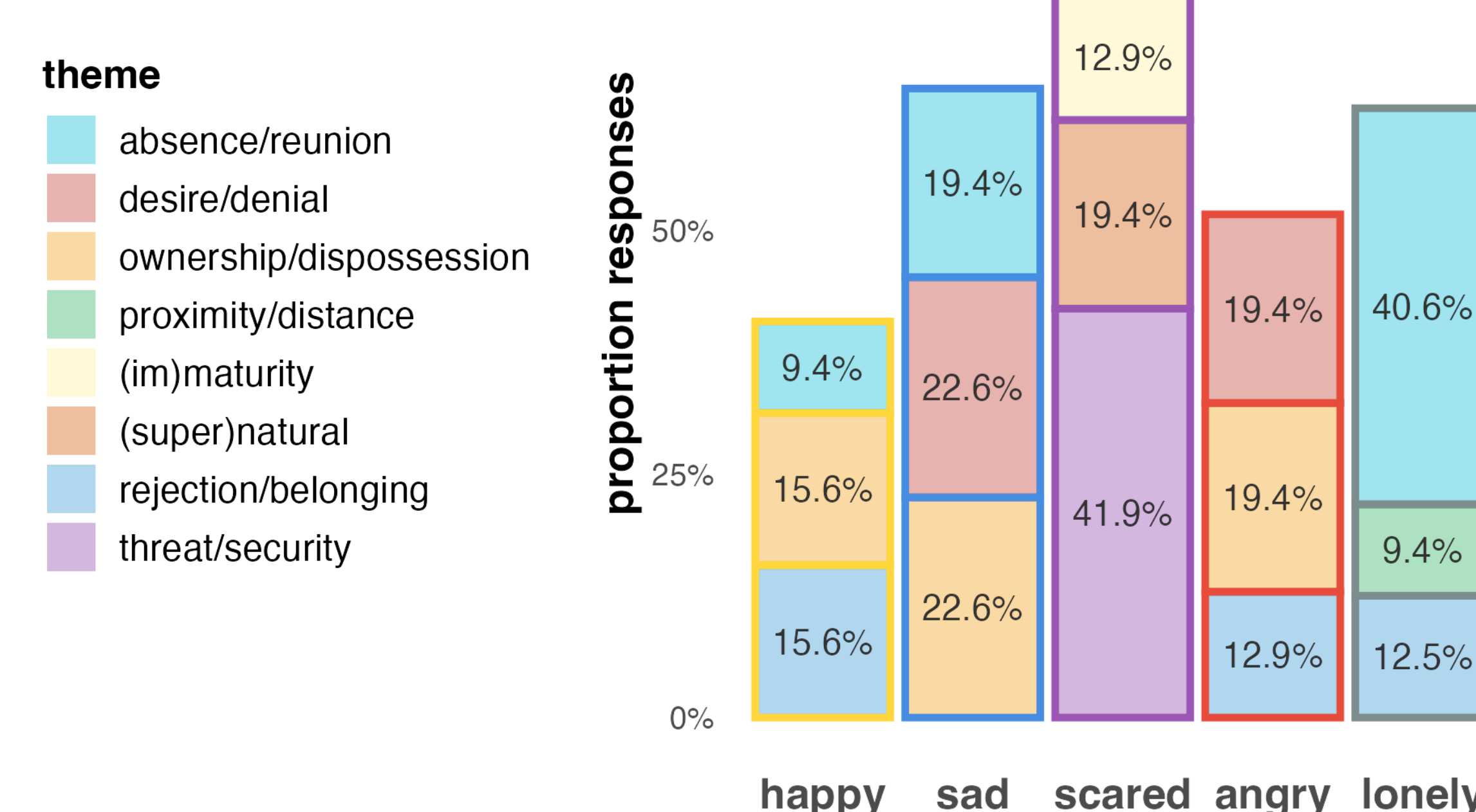


Figure 6. Top three themes in children's responses regarding each emotion (Questions 2-5 in Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

- Despite wide variation in performance on categorical measures of emotion understanding, children's open-ended responses were overwhelmingly sensible
- Emotion descriptions were often relational: 'happy' narratives centered social connection (e.g., peer play), while negative emotions evoked social misalignments (e.g., sharing violations).
- General contexts and routines were commonly cited (sad when caregiver leaves for work), though children sometimes describe specific events (angry because a peer "stole my magic wand").
- Findings reveal the value of children's 'own words' for informing theory and curriculum, by clarifying the relationships and interactions that already ground children's emotional understanding.
- Compare emotion concept understanding for questions about oneself vs. others: children often point to observable behavioral cues to identify what emotion someone else is experiencing.
- Explore within-subject stability of responses longitudinally. Many children's narratives are consistent across interviews, despite the multi-week interval between sessions.
- Empirical measures of 'adult-like' emotion description

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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