

Having and showing emotions

AN INTERNATIONAL STUDY ON CHILDREN’S AND ADOLESCENTS’ EMOTIONS AND THEIR EXPRESSION

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For an international IZI study 5,190 children and preteens between 6 and 15 in 17 countries were surveyed whether and how they have and show emotions.

THE STUDY

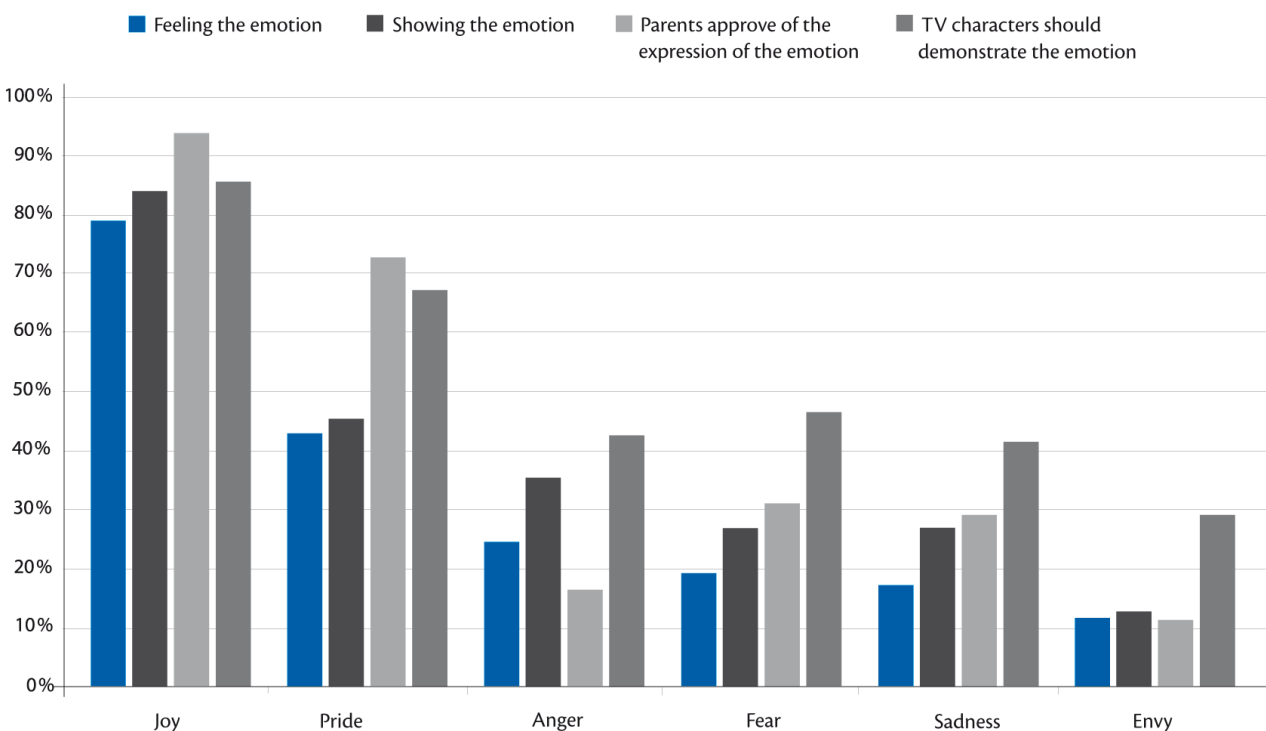
In order to be able to provide up-to-date basic data about children’s having and showing of emotions in everyday life and in television and to improve quality in children’s television, the IZI together with colleagues from further 16 countries surveyed

5,190 children and preteens between the ages of 6 and 15, using the same questionnaire.

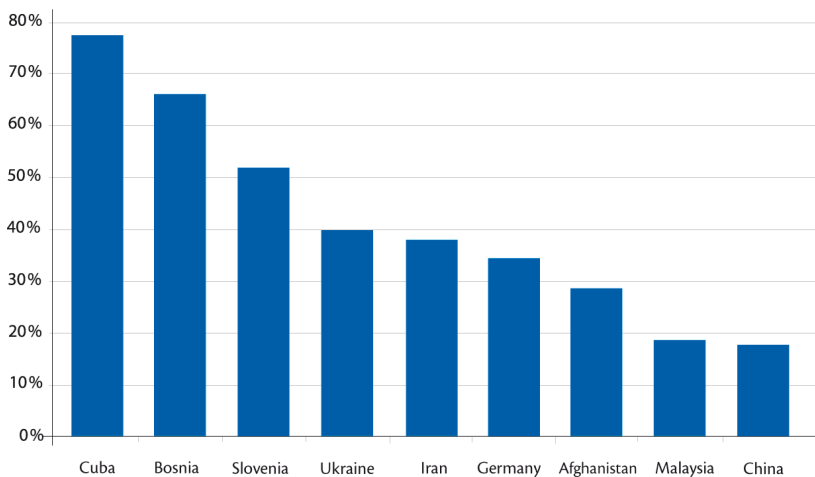
The questions centred on the respondents’ self-evaluation of what emotions they had recently experienced, how often they had felt certain emotions “within the last 7 days”,¹ and to what extent they had shown these emotions to others. In addition, respondents were asked to self-evaluate how their parents reacted to the demonstration of emotions, which emotions they felt when watching television, and to what extent television characters should honestly show how they feel (cf. Ill. 1).

In 9 countries larger samples of 400 or more children could be gathered: Malaysia, Ukraine, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Slovenia, China, Iran, Cuba, and Germany. In the following the data from these countries will serve as the primary comparison material.

Smaller samples of 43 to 240 children were inquired in 8 further countries. They expand the international perspective and allow at least a first insight into the topic “having and showing emotions” in Canada, Australia, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, Argentina, and Thailand. In the following we will present a first summary of the main results.



Ill. 1: Overview of children’s having and showing of emotions worldwide (n= 5,190 6- to 15-year-olds from 17 countries)²



Ill. 2: Children experiencing pride (n= 4,191 6- to 15-year-olds)

Children’s emotions

Joy

In all the surveyed countries children experience joy most often. On average, a good 3 quarters of children perceived themselves as “constantly” or “often” joyful. Particularly many children in Cuba and particularly few in Afghanistan. 8 out of 10 of the 6- to 15-year-old children have laughed out loud, the younger ones more than the older ones.

In most of the countries, joy, when it is experienced, is also clearly demonstrated, in particular in Bosnia and Cuba. In China, in contrast, joy is showed the least, and a third did not demonstrate it or only hardly. Parents in all of the countries approve when their children show joy; in Afghanistan, however, a fifth of the children assume that their parents would barely or even not accept that their children demonstrated their happiness.

Pride

The emotion of pride evidences the most

extreme international differences in this study. While in Hong Kong and Malaysia not even 1 in 5 children felt proud of themselves within the previous week, this figure is 8 out of 10 in Cuba and 6 out of 10 in Bosnia (cf. Ill. 2). Almost all of the children and adolescents reported that they showed their pride in the manner that they experienced it. In many countries most parents approve when the children demonstrate their pride, in other countries, however, only 4 out of 10 children are certain of this (e.g., Malaysia, Hong Kong, Afghanistan).

Anger

In most of the countries only 2 out of 10 children remember having been angry in the last week. In some countries,

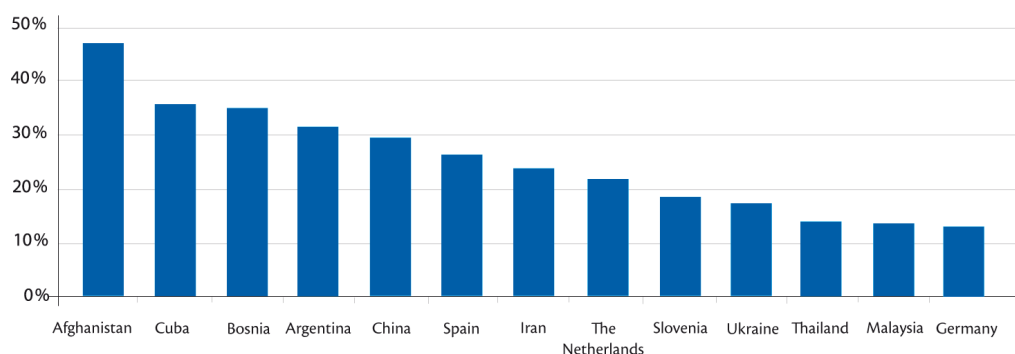
e.g. Germany, boys feel angry twice as much as girls. Children and adolescents in Bosnia experienced much more anger, and also showed this, but this was not approved by hardly any of the parents. This contrasts with Afghanistan, where the expression of anger is more accepted by some parents.

Fear

On average, a fifth of the children experienced fear in the last 7 days. In Germany only 7%, in Hong Kong and Malaysia about 30%, in Thailand and Argentina even more. The children and adolescents in most of the countries showed their fear and in almost all of the countries (except for Malaysia) they had the feeling that their parents would approve of that.

Sadness

The question of whether they were sad continuously or often during the last 7 days was answered positively by almost a fifth of children and adolescents. In addition to the primary comparison countries, in the Netherlands, Thailand, and Argentina as well. According to their self-evaluation, children and preteens also showed this emotion to others. Noticeable international differences were evident in to what extent parents approved of the expression of sadness. While parents in Afghanistan and Germany valued that their children showed this emotion, the expression of sadness is not well-seen among 9 out of



Ill. 3: Children stating that they had cried in the last 7 days (n=4,865 6- to 15-year-olds from all countries with n>100)

RESEARCH

10 parents in other countries (Bosnia, Malaysia).

In the last 7 days almost a fourth of children had cried a little bit or a lot (cf. Ill. 3), mostly because of sadness, but also often because of physical pain or anger. While crying for joy is particularly unusual in Iran and Germany, it is three times as common in the Slavic countries (Ukraine, Bosnia, Slovenia).

Envy

Of the emotions studied, envy is the one least experienced (or remembered). Particularly in Cuba and in Ukraine it is hardly experienced. Showing envy is unaccepted by most parents, in Afghanistan, however, the demonstration of envy is comparatively accepted.

Emotions and television

We also asked the children in 17 countries about the emotions that are connected with watching television, as well as to what extent they wanted television characters to honestly display emotions.

Happiness

It was demonstrated that around the world television for children is especially associated with the feeling of happiness; particularly in Cuba, where only every tenth child was “not” or “not at all” happy when watching television during the previous week. Children in Ukraine were with 43% especially less happy while watching television. The open questions reveal that this fact can be traced back to the reception of several blockbusters but also to reports on the political unease at the time of the study (spring 2014).

Fear

Experiencing fear occasionally when watching television is least frequent in Germany; this contrasts with Afghanistan, where half of the children report this. The result is understandable in light of the events in the country.

Connected with the fears when watching television are nightmares (cf. Holler & Müller in this issue). 4 out of 10 children and adolescents occasionally have nightmares from watching television. This figure is highest in Iran, at 53%, but also in Cuba and Slovenia it is 48% and 47% respectively, in Germany it is particularly low.

Sadness, anger, and envy

The most frequent emotion when watching television – besides joy – is sadness, which girls experience more strongly than boys (or possibly seek out the corresponding programmes). Sadness occurs most frequently in connection with what one watches on television in Bosnia and Afghanistan; it is especially infrequent in Iran.

About 1 out of 4 children and adolescents experienced anger while watching television during the previous week, particularly often in Bosnia and Afghanistan. 1 out of 5 children and adolescents experience envy when watching television. It is especially frequent in Afghanistan and especially seldom in Germany.

Pride

One of the most pronounced international differences occurs in the answer to the question of whether children occasionally feel pride in themselves when they watch television. In Slovenia 86% of children reported this about themselves, in Cuba 77%, while in Hong Kong only 11%.

Television characters and emotions

The response to the question, to what extent television characters should clearly demonstrate how they feel, produces a very clear answer worldwide. Children want television characters to show their emotions – more than they demonstrate them themselves and usually many more times than their parents approve of this.³

Particularities in different countries

With all due caution, the samples do not allow conclusions about the entire country. The study allows a cautious glance at national tendencies of emotional cultures from the children’s and adolescents’ perspective.

Children in [Afghanistan](#) are in comparison the saddest ones, including when watching television, and cry the most. They have to face difficult emotional worlds. Almost half of the respondents had cried in the previous week, 12% of them a lot. They experience less happiness, laugh less, and it is the only country where a number of parents do not approve at all when their children demonstrate joy.

In [Iran](#) children and adolescents experience fewer emotions. Television is for many not a very happy experience and nightmares from watching it are particularly frequent here.

Children and adolescents in [Malaysia](#) are particularly seldom sad and angry and cry nearly the least. They are also hardly proud of themselves. They assume that the showing of fear, anger, and grief – the problematic emotions – are not approved of by their parents. Their assumption of what is socially accepted can be summarised as “Show your happy face!”

In [China/Hong Kong](#) the experiencing and expressing of emotions is similar to that of other countries. Girls and boys, however, show that they are happy less often and experience fear more frequently. The clearest difference is in pride in oneself which is very rare.

Children and adolescents in [Cuba](#) are particularly proud of themselves. They are scarcely envious and seldom experience fear. The surveyed children demonstrate their feelings of pride, grief, fear and anger more openly and cry more often than others. They can be described as emotionally expressive. The children in [Bosnia](#) laugh a lot, but their prominent emotion is anger. In comparison to the other children and

German representative comparative sample

In order to acquire an overview of changes during the ageing of children as regards emotions, the IZI surveyed, in addition to the international samples, 1,458 representatively selected children and adolescents between 6 and 19 years of age in Germany.⁵ This demonstrated that, on the whole, the positive reports of having intensively experienced emotions during the last 7 days dropped the older the respondents became, in particular as regards pleasant emotions. The proportion of those who perceive themselves as continuously happy already starts to fall with 8-year-old children and reaches its low point among those 16 to 17 years old. Over half of 6- to 7-year-old children (65%) truly laughed out loud during the previous week; in comparison, those who laughed out loud least were the 14- to 15-year-olds. Puberty is not funny. Pride and joy reach their relative low points, envy appears, anger and sadness reach their highpoints.

adolescents, the Bosnians are more often angry and show this, even though they assume that their parents don't like it at all. This differs with pride: girls and boys in Bosnia experience it, but hardly demonstrate it, yet they know that their parents would approve of it. German children and adolescents are emotionally reserved and are exceptionally seldom sad, angry, or fearful. In their own self-assessment they demonstrate these emotions clearly when they experience them and their parents approve of this.

CONCLUSIONS

Emotions and quality in children's TV

Children and adolescents feel a variety of emotions. Of them, joy is the

most commonly experienced one. In all of the 17 surveyed countries there are above all similarities in most areas and differences in some. Some of the international differences can be readily understood as due to the contemporary political situation, such as in Afghanistan or Ukraine. In other countries the differences arise from cultural peculiarities, as in socialist Cuba, where there is much less crime and less discrepancy between social classes as regards material wealth than in other countries. The basic assumption that southern countries (South American, Slavic) are more emotional, northern countries (Germany, the Netherlands) are more reserved emotionally, and (southeast) Asian cultures show emotions less, is confirmed to a certain extent, but also differentiated. The role of television in terms of children's having and showing of emotions touches 3 dimensions:

1. TV transfers the social reality into the children's homes. It can be threatening to children, as was the case in Ukraine and Afghanistan at the time of the study. Quality TV presents less emotionalised but comprehensible news for the target group.
2. TV triggers emotions, pleasant ones such as happiness, those supporting the identity such as pride, but also fear. Quality TV offers age-appropriate and culturally sensitive emotional worlds that enrich the children instead of causing traumatic experiences.
3. TV represents emotional worlds and is able to contextualise them and show socially compatible ways of dealing with emotions. In this sense, quality TV can contribute significantly to emotional competence, especially in those fields where it is socially unaccepted to have and show emotions.

Children and adolescents desire a markedly more honest expression of feelings than they allow themselves or believe their parents will approve of. A

clear indication: They look for models and acceptance of the living out of emotions. Cultural sensitivity here means perceiving and respecting the particularities of emotional cultures, in order to purposefully expand them if so desired. In Hong Kong this could mean, for example, searching for opportunities so that Chinese children can also feel proud of themselves when watching television, in Afghanistan this would mean creating opportunities so that Afghan children have more reasons to laugh. ■

NOTES

¹ Based on Schmidt-Atzert, Lothar & Hüppe, Michael (1996). *Emotionsskalen EMO 16. Ein Fragebogen zur Selbstbeschreibung des aktuellen emotionalen Gefühlszustandes*. Diagnostica, 42(3), 242-267.

² The answers from Iran regarding whether the parents approve of the expression of emotions are not included in the graph.

³ The exception here is Iran where for all the questions children very strongly agreed that their parents would approve of the open expression of their emotions.

⁴ This could be traced back to the political turmoil at the time of the study.

⁵ The survey was carried out by IconKids & Youth, Germany, between autumn 2013 and spring 2014.

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