

ABSTRACT

Previous studies on self-conscious emotions with adults have successfully identified unique features related to guilt, shame and embarrassment. However, researchers failed to obtain consensus as to when children begin to appreciate these distinctive features. The present study explored the normative trends and patterns of Chinese children's development of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. A total of 118 Hong Kong children aged 6, 8, and 10 years old and their parents participated in the study. Children were tested on their knowledge of situational antecedents, attribution patterns, and action tendencies related to guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Factors that may contribute to children's self-conscious emotion understanding (including children's knowledge of rules, theory of mind, basic emotion understanding and parents' socialization on moral issues) were also examined. Results showed that children performed better in recognizing the distinctive features related to guilt than those to shame and embarrassment. Overall, children were good at telling the action tendencies related to guilt, shame, and embarrassment, but the 6-year-olds were less competent in understanding the antecedents and attribution patterns of these emotions than the 8- and 10-year-olds. Children's individual differences in their understanding of guilt were predicted by their rule understanding, whereas their understanding of shame was predicted by parents' use of conditional approval. The normative trends found in the present study were used to explain previous controversial findings. In addition, they highlight the importance of examining the various components of self-conscious emotion development.