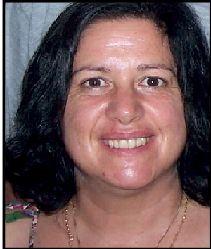


# A Comparative Study Of Children's Fears And Fear Displays In Canada And Australia: What Are They Afraid Of and How Do They Show It?

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## Abstract

While a number of emotions are considered to be innate or present from a very early age, the way they are understood and displayed is determined by social and cultural as well as biological factors. Adults or "expert others" from the environment in which children live can facilitate young children's development of emotion understanding and display. Yet adults do not always recognise emotion and emotion display in children.

This paper discusses a cross-cultural study of the emotion of fear. In Canada and in Australia caregivers were asked to name fears that preschool-aged children (3-5 year olds) experience, and to describe how these children show fear. While some differences were found in fears and fear displays, a much greater difference was found in their incidence. For example, 55% of Canadian caregivers reported young children to have a fear of loud noises, whereas only 11% of Australian caregivers reported this fear. Forty-five percent of Canadian caregivers reported that children display fear through their body language, while only 10% of Australian caregivers reported this fear display. Issues of similarity and difference in fear and fear display as reported by caregivers in both countries are examined and recommendations made for early childhood pedagogical practice.

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## Introduction

Emotions play a significant role in our lives. When we look at any situation, we gain information not only from the facts of the situation, but also from how we and other people feel and respond to it. Emotion expression, regulation and understanding are linked to and develop alongside cognitive processes, and play as important a role in human development (Rodd, 1999). In this article the term Emotion Education is used in a similar way to the terms, Values Education, and Peace Education – in other words, it refers to education about the emotions. While the importance of emotions to development is becoming more widely recognised, there has been a lack of research and information about the role of culture in children's emotion understanding and behaviour (Cole, Bruschi & Tamang, 2002). This research hopes to present some insight through a study of fear and fear display in preschool-aged children in Canada and in Australia.

## Emotion and Culture

A number of emotions are considered to be discrete, innate and universal (Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Moore & Isen, 1990). They have both personal functions, such as to help us to monitor events, configure mental resources and make us ready for action (Oatley in Parrott & Harre, 1996) and social functions, such as to signal changes to social interactions with others (Oatley in Parrott & Harre, 1996, p. 312), to appraise situations (Crawford et al, 1992), and to confirm societal roles and values (Frijda and Mesquita in Kitayama & Markus, 1997).

Any particular emotional state is meaningless unless it is placed in a cultural context, where meaning is provided by cultural rules, constructs and language (Harre & Parrott in Parrott & Harre, 1996). Embarrassment, for example, contributes to social control by providing a disincentive for violating the social consensus.

People's emotional lives are very much influenced by the culture to which they belong (Ellsworth in Kitayama & Markus, 1997). Some similar patterns of expressive behaviour occur across cultures (Ellsworth in Kitayama & Markus, 1997; Laird & Apostoleris in Parrott & Harre, 1996), but there are cross-cultural differences in beliefs about emotion display and the appropriateness of various emotion displays. Cultures tend to define the kinds of situations that call for par-

ticular emotions and the kinds of emotion displays that will be recognised and experienced, based on the group's social behaviour (Markus & Kitayama in Kitayama & Markus, 1997; Moore & Isen, 1990). Language plays a part in this. There are about 400 words for emotion in English, and many words in other languages that name emotions for which there are no English equivalents. Other groups, such as the Taiwanese work with approximately 750 emotion words, yet there is an absence of emotion words in the language of the Ommura people of Papua New Guinea (Bamberg, 1997).

Children's understanding of emotion and expression develop alongside other areas of development and within a cultural niche that includes the physical and social setting, and customs and beliefs about child care and development (Cole, Bruschi & Tamang, 2002). Crawford et al (1992) state: "*Emotions are produced in [children's] interaction with others and much of this interaction is likely to be with adults – parents, teachers, nurses – although sometimes 'others' may be involved*" (p. 123). Yet there is a worldwide trend in the current generation of children to be more troubled emotionally than the previous generation; more lonely, depressed, angry, unruly, nervous, prone to worry, impulsive and aggressive (Goleman, 1995). Goleman (1995) notes that as adults "*we leave the emotional education of our children to chance, with ever more disastrous results*" (pp xii – xiv).

### **Emotional Literacy and Fear**

An alternative, particularly within the education system, is to educate the heart as well as the mind. This is often deemed "emotional literacy" or "emotional intelligence": learning to understand one's own and others' emotions and to express emotion in an appropriate way.

Emotional literacy develops as the product of cultural learning and knowledge. "*As the child comes to use the language and to participate in the culture, the*

*affective [emotional] element becomes so locked in with the knowledge that it requires such major institutions as schooling, science, and a written language to create a new set of rational concepts that can be operated upon by those famous (but non-natural) rules of right reasoning*" (Bruner in Bearison & Zimiles, 1986). Part of children's developmental task is to learn the appropriate emotional repertoire suitable to the culture in which they live (Moore & Isen, 1990).

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This research examined the emotion of fear in two cultural contexts, Australia and Canada. While these cultures share a common language, they differ in a number of cultural practices. Melles humorously asks, "*How many Canadians put food on the barbie? Then again, Australians don't sit on the chesterfield,*" but continues on a more serious note: "*The confusion for people moving between seemingly similar cultures where English is spoken usually arises because they are simply not prepared for the difference in culture and communication*" (p.1).

Fear became the focal emotion of this study for a number of reasons. First, fear has both positive and negative impacts on children, but its negative effects can impede self-esteem, as well as cognitive and social development, and these problems can carry through to the adult years (Sorin, 2002). Second, fear can be used as a form of social control, particularly in child rearing, where it is a means of controlling and limiting behaviour. Fear of punishment in the school setting has

long been viewed as an effective means of discipline (Crawford et al, 1992). So, how teachers recognise and respond to fear often helps to determine children's development of emotional literacy. This also applies to other emotions, in that recognition of and response to emotion displays helps children to form their understanding of emotion.

For adults who work with and relate to young children, awareness of situations that elicit fear, ways that children display fear, and ways of responding to fear can lead to a richer understanding of fear and indeed of all emotions. Looking at these issues cross-culturally not only gives insight into another culture's ways, but may also provide a forum through which cultures can learn ways to facilitate better practice in emotion pedagogy from each other.

### **The Study**

Research was conducted in urban settings in Canada and Australia. In each country, four preschool (education and care for 3 to 5 year olds) settings were included: an independent, community-operated preschool, a preschool attached to an elementary school, a preschool room in a long day care setting, and an Indigenous preschool. The populations of each venue ranged, from Indigenous children to children of families who had lived in each country for a number of generations, to migrant children, who were either born in another country or whose parents were born in another country and migrated shortly before their births. This is noted since cultures of origin could have an effect on the issues of fear and fear display as perceived by caregivers. Caregivers (trained and untrained adults working in each venue) were also from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and this could affect what and how they perceived fear and also how much of this information they would be willing to share in an interview. For these reasons, similar early childhood venues were chosen and similar numbers of caregivers were surveyed and the results

are discussed based on the whole group response. Future studies could examine more closely each of these cultural groups within one country, however this research took its focus on comparisons across the two countries.

Caregivers in each of the 8 preschool venues were interviewed, totalling 20 caregivers in Canada and 21 caregivers in Australia, using a series of open-ended questions about children's fears and fear displays, and caregivers' responses to children's fears. This paper compares children's fears and fears as reported by caregivers in Canadian and Australian settings. In Australia, caregivers were also given an emotion survey and some of the items on the survey listed specific fears, such as a fear of being left at preschool. This may have suggested some fears to Australian caregivers, and this fact must be considered when examining the results. All participants are referred to by pseudonym only.

### Findings

Caregivers in both countries were asked to report issues and events that caused fear in their preschool-aged students. The types and particularly the incidences of fear reported varied considerably between Canada and Australia. For example, in Canada, 55% of caregivers reported a fear of loud noises while only 11% of Australian caregivers reported this fear. The most widely reported fear in Australia was a fear of preschool, with 59% of caregivers reporting this fear while no caregiver in Canada reported this fear. The top ranking fears reported by caregivers in Canada and Australia are listed in Table 1.

### Similarities

While the types of fears reported in Canada and in Australia were similar, incidence of the fears reported were similar for a few fears, but quite different for others. The three fears whose incidences were most similar between countries were: fear of separation from the primary caregiver, fear of strangers and fear of insects.

Separation from a primary caregiver, whether that is a parent or the adult in the preschool who is the identified "primary caregiver" of particular children, was reported similarly in both countries, with up to thirty percent of the caregivers in each country reporting this fear. Australian caregiver, Kelly, said "*the most obvious [fear] is separation anxiety, the fear of being left alone.*" This was echoed by Canadian caregiver, Annette, who said she had observed "*a lot of separation anxiety if there's a new staff person or a new person that comes into the centre. We have some maintenance people that come in. There is a fear particularly of men. Some children are looking at the person and going towards the caregiver for that comfort and that reassurance that it's okay.*"

As demonstrated in Annette's comments, separation from primary caregivers can often be linked with a fear of strangers. About 1/3 of Canadian and Australian caregivers similarly reported this fear. Australian caregiver, Laura, noted, "*once in a while you find a child who responds really obviously if a stranger comes in the room or if a man comes into the room. Their reaction can be quite obvious that that's a fearful situation.*" Annette added, "*Whether strangers or sometimes a parent can be scary for children... could be the approach like the way they're approaching them but you can see children sort of feeling fearful.*"

The third similar incidence of fear reported by caregivers in both countries was a fear of insects. In Canada, this fear was reported by 20% of caregivers and in Australia by 15%. In Canada, this tended to include flies, spiders, bees, moths and butterflies, while in Australia, with a more temperate climate and ultimately more time spent outdoors, this fear was more focused on spiders, some of which are poisonous. Interestingly, a Canadian caregiver noted that with a child who was afraid of spiders, "*I had picked up the spider and let the spider crawl on me and showed her that it was kind of tick-*

*ling and there were lots of other children that she could see that were interested.*" Yet in Australia, a response to spider fear was quite different: "*We go and have a look at the spider and talk about spiders and also try and say 'We're very big in comparison to that spider and he's going to be really, really scared of us as well. And he wants to just get away from you rather than hurt you.' But then also to allay the concerns that you don't play with spiders because there are spiders in Australia that bite and can hurt you. So you've got to be careful and respect them as well.*"

Other fears that were reported similarly in Canada and in Australia were the fear of getting hurt and fear of the dentist, with approximately 5% of caregivers in each country reporting this fear.

### Differences

While fear of separation, strangers and insects was reported in similar proportions by Canadian and Australian caregivers, a number of other fears were reported very differently between the two countries.

In Canada, fear of loud noises was reported by 55% of caregivers. Canadian caregiver, Hayley said, "*When we have the fire drills, the alarm sounds off for them. It really upsets the little guys if they're not expecting it.*" Yet in Australia, only 11% of caregivers reported this fear. The second most reported fear in Canada was a fear of dogs, with 35% of caregivers noting this. Other animals, such as cats, birds and squirrels were reported by 25% of Canadian caregivers as fears they had noticed in preschool-aged children. Yet in Australia, only 13% of caregivers reported fears of dogs or other animals, such as snakes or lizards. There are no squirrels in Australia, and animals such as snakes and lizards are a common occurrence in the environment. In Canada, snakes and lizards are more commonly seen in a zoo or restrained animal environment.

*Table 1.  
Top ranking fears reported by caregivers in Canada and Australia*

Canada		Australia	
Loud noises	55%	Preschool	9%
Dogs	35%	Teasing	39%
Strangers	35%	Strangers	32%
New experiences	35%	Separation from primary caregiver	26%
Separation from primary caregiver	30%	New experiences	24%
Monsters, masks, clowns	30%	Punishment	2%

*Table 2: Comparative Fear report conducted in Canada and Australia-using Sorin's Fear Categories (2002)*

Fear Category	Examples	Canada	Australia
<b>Fear of Separation from Attachment Figure</b>	Fear of school/ preschool Fear of being lost Fear of being alone Fear of being left with a babysitter	Fear of separation 30%	Preschool (separation from parents) 59% Separation 26%
<b>Fear of the Unfamiliar</b>	Fear of strange people, places and objects Fear of the dark Fear of loud noises	Strangers 35% New experiences 35% The dark 20% Loud noises 55%	Strangers 32% New experiences 24% The dark 9% Loud noises 11%
<b>Fear of Being Harmed</b>	Fear of injury accident, illness or death Medical fears Fear of deep water, fire, carnival rides and burglary Fear of heights or falling from high places	Getting hurt 5% Heights 15%	Accident, illness, death 7% Doctor, dentist, hospital 13% Heights 2%
<b>Fear of Failure, Criticism and Embarrassment</b>	Fear of being teased Fear of being in a fight Fear of making mistakes Fear of adults arguing	Embarrassment 5%	Teasing 39% Fighting 9% Adults arguing 4%
<b>Fear of Insects or Animals</b>	Fear of spiders or other insects Fear of snakes Fear of dogs, cats, bats, etc.	Dogs 35% Animals 25% Insects 20%	Dogs/Animals 13% Insects 15%
<b>Fear of the Intangible</b>	Fear of bad dreams or nightmares Fear of ghosts, monsters or spirits	Monsters, masks, clowns 30%	Bad dreams, nightmares 17% Ghosts, monsters, spirits 15%

*Table 3. Comparison of fears display reports by country*

Cry	70%	Cry	67%
Verbalize	50%	Verbalize	29%
Withdraw and hide	35%	Withdraw and hide	71%
Body language	45%	Body language	10%
Get close/ cling to adult	25%	Get close/ cling to adult	38%
Scream/ vocalize	10%	Scream/ vocalize	29%

New experiences, such as field trips to new places, were also reported as a fear by 35% of Canadian caregivers. Canadian caregiver, Sheila described a field trip the class had taken to a fire station: *“One little girl, coming back from the fire station, had nightmares for a couple of weeks, scared that her house was going to catch on fire.”* In comparison, only 24% of Australian caregivers reported this fear. Reasons for this difference could be the number of excursions taken by each group or the way children are prepared for excursions. Other fears more widely reported in Canada than in Australia, were fear of monsters and fear of the dark, with twice as many reports in Canada than in Australia. This might suggest different messages coming to children from other people, or the media in each country. Fear of heights was much more prevalent in Australia, with 15% of Australian caregivers reporting this fear as compared to 2% of Canadian caregivers. This may be partly due to children in Australia spending more time outdoors and often gaining confidence with hills and steep terrain.

Australian caregivers’ incidence of reporting fears of failure, criticism and embarrassment was far greater than their Canadian counterparts. While an emotion survey item presented to Australian caregivers included fear of teasing and punishment, 39% of Australian caregivers reported that preschool-aged children are afraid of being teased and 22% reported that they are afraid of punishment. Neither teasing nor punishment, were suggested as fears by Canadian caregivers, although one reported a fear of embarrassment and another a fear of the teacher not liking the child. Perhaps if these items had been explicitly mentioned the Canadian figures might have reflected this. See Table 2.

The fear items that Canadian caregivers reported more strongly than their Australian counterparts were fear of loud noises, fear of new experiences, fear of dogs and other animals, fear of monsters

and other intangible things, fear of the dark and fear of heights. This is despite their mention in the Australian caregivers’ emotion survey. This may suggest that Canadian caregivers are more aware of young children’s fears or that children in Canada actually do have a wider range of fears than children in Australia.

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#### **Fear Displays**

Both Canadian and Australian caregivers were asked to describe how children show fear. In neither case was there a survey item that described various fear displays, yet for the large part similar responses were elicited. They were: crying, verbalizing, withdrawing and hiding, body language, clinging to an adult, and screaming or vocalizing. The difference, as with fears themselves, was the extent to which each response was reported by caregivers in both countries. Table 3 compares fear display reports by county.

While a great percentage of both Canadian and Australian caregivers reported that children show fear by crying (70% and 67%), the extent of other fear displays varied considerably between countries. Canadian children were reported as more likely to verbalize

or use body language to show their fear, while Australian children were reported to more likely withdraw and hide, get close to or cling to an adult, or scream and vocalize.

Fifty percent of caregivers in Canada reported that children verbalize, or talk about their fears. Linda, a caregiver in Canada, said: *“Depending on their age and if they have language and social skills, they might tell you [about their fear].”* This is compared with only 29% of Australian caregivers who reported this fear display. Alternatively, 29% of Australian caregivers reported that children scream or vocalise to show their fear. Australian caregiver, Helen, said that children show their fear by *“crying, getting upset and screaming.”* While only 10% of Canadian caregivers noted this fear display, it was often related to a lack of language skill. Canadian caregiver, Tina explained, *“the child who is afraid of dogs is actually a child who doesn’t have much speech, so he’s not telling us with his words. He’s making a noise, showing us he’s afraid.”*

Forty-five percent of Canadian caregivers said that children show fear through their body language, yet this was only reported by 10% of Australian caregivers. Canadian caregiver, Paula, noted *“Usually you can tell [that children are afraid] by their body language, their face.”* Canadian caregiver, Carrie added: *“Sometimes you can just tell by a certain child’s reaction that they’re nervous. They...do some physical thing like hold onto their mouth, or pace...If they have a look of fear or nervousness, you can tell they want to say something or do something and they’re just trying to figure what to do at that time...so it’s usually something in their physical characteristics.”* Yet one of the very few mentions of body language as a way of showing fear in Australia came from caregiver, Liz, who said that children showed fear *“through verbal and non-verbal cues and it also comes out through their body language.”*

According to caregivers' reports, Australian children were more prone to withdraw and hide, and to get close or cling to an adult. Seventy-one percent of Australian caregivers said that children show fear by withdrawing and hiding, while only 35% of their Canadian counterparts mentioned this fear display. Likewise, 38% of Australian caregivers reported that children who are afraid get close to or cling to an adult, while only 25% of Canadian caregivers reported this fear display. Canadian caregiver, Brad said, "they'll hold onto a leg or grab onto an arm for some reassurance that things are going to be okay." Australian caregiver, Kelly reported that children display fear "either with lots of crying or clinging to parents. Or sometimes when children are withdrawn, reluctant to join the group, scared to become part of the larger group."

### Conclusion

While young children in Canada and in Australia experience a number of similar fears, there are variations in the extent to which they experience them. While both groups seem to be similar in the extent to which they experience *the fear of being harmed and fear of the intangible*, Canadian children are reported to experience *fear of the unfamiliar and fear of insects and animals* to a much greater extent than Australian children. Conversely, Australian children are reported to experience *fear of separation from attachment figures and fear of failure, criticism and embarrassment* to a much greater extent than their Canadian counterparts.

For the most part fear displays are similar in both countries. It is the extent to which they are used or noticed that varies. In both countries the majority of caregivers reported that children cry when they are afraid. However, in Canada children are reported to verbalize their fear and use body language to display their fear to a much greater extent than was reported in Australia. In Australia, children are more widely

reported to withdraw from the feared situation and to hide or cling to an adult much more so than children in Canada. This could be due to children being more encouraged to express themselves verbally and through body language in Canada, or to differences in the way that caregivers recognize children's fear displays in the two countries.

This study was undertaken to determine whether young children experience and display fear in similar ways cross-culturally, or whether there are differences. Through insights gleaned from this research, it is hoped that caregivers can expand their understandings of what young children are afraid of and how they might express their fear. Through this richer understanding of issues, we can anticipate better pedagogical practice in response to children's emotions.

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