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The Role of Emotion Regulation in Predicting Life Satisfaction in the Pre-School Period

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Abstract: This research was conducted to examine the life satisfaction of pre-school children in terms of emotional regulation. The study group comprised a total of 456 children, including 265 girls (58.1%) and 191 boys (41.9%), attending pre-school education institutions in the central district of Denizli /Türkiye during the 2024-2025 academic year. The research was designed using a correlational survey model. The data for the study were obtained using the Emotion Regulation Scale and the Psychological Well-Being Scale for 5/6 Year Old Children. The data obtained from the research were analysed using correlation and stepwise linear multiple regression. The analyses were tested at significance levels of .01 and .05 using the SPSS 22.0 software package. The findings from the research indicate that positive and negative emotion regulation skills are predictive of life satisfaction. The research results have been discussed in relation to the existing literature.

Keywords: Preschool period, life satisfaction, emotional regulation.

1. Introduction

The word emotion comes from Latin as the equivalent of the words 'to express, to animate and to excite' and refers to a strong mental reaction that occurs involuntarily in the brain in response to stimuli and influences from the outside world (Mayes & Cohen, 2006). Although people generally tend to think of emotion as merely a feeling, emotion is an important concept that concerns both the body and the mind. In this context, emotion can be defined as a complex form of physical and mental changes that include feelings, cognitive processes, physiological arousal, behavioural responses to a situation, and observable expressions such as facial expressions and posture (Gerrig & Zimbardo).

Emotional understanding in early childhood has been linked to a child's overall socio-emotional competence (Cole et al., 2009). The development of emotional competencies is a lifelong process that runs parallel to physical, cognitive and social development (Thompson, 2015). Understanding and regulating emotions, along with the ability to express one's own feelings appropriately, are important aspects of social-emotional competence that contribute to young children's social and academic adjustment over time (Di Maggio et al., 2016). Emotion regulation, one of the fundamental determinants of social-emotional competence, is the ability to control and manage emotional states in an adaptive manner, thereby facilitating the alignment of emotions with situations (Denham, 2010 & Izard et al., 2008). Emotional regulation consists of internal and external processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional responses. Emotional regulation involves not only suppression but also the enhancement of emotional arousal and the maintenance of emotions (Thompson, 1994).

Studies conducted on the development of emotion regulation have shown that the pre-school years are of critical importance. Emotion regulation strategies begin to develop from an early age. During the pre-school period, children become capable of using strategies such as self-distraction to regulate their negative emotions (Blankson et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2009). Indeed, nursery and school are often the first contexts in which emotional regulation skills are associated with the development of peer socialisation and other fundamental aspects of emotional cognition (Carlson, 1993). For this reason, acquiring emotion regulation skills is considered one of the fundamental developmental tasks of early childhood (Kopp, 1989). Because when individuals experience their emotions in a controlled and gentle manner, in a sense, when they are able to regulate their emotions, it has been observed that they make progress in areas such as establishing positive social relationships with others, maintaining self-respect, and securing the motivation necessary for their goals (Roque & Verissimo, 2011). It is also noted that individuals who possess the ability to manage and regulate their emotions have increased opportunities to develop a healthy, harmonious psychological and emotional structure, and that this positively impacts their life satisfaction (Esmaeilinasab et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2022).

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In contrast to psychology's traditional emphasis on negative emotions, positive psychology has begun to focus on the positive end of the emotional spectrum (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and studies focusing on subjective well-being have come to the fore (Diener, 2012). Research has posited a three-component structure for subjective well-being. These are positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction (Arthaud-Day, et al., 2005; Diener et al., 2009). Life satisfaction, one of the components of subjective well-being, can be expressed as whether the child is satisfied with their life as a whole or with specific areas of life such as family, friends, and the environment in which they live (Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Life satisfaction is an important indicator of mental health and predicts physical health and longevity (Bowling & Grundy, 2009; LightseyJr et al., 2013). It is stated that life satisfaction is a distinct concept, although it is related to the emotional components of subjective well-being (Diener et al, 2009).

Concepts such as life satisfaction, subjective well-being and quality of life are sometimes used instead of happiness (Bekhet et al., 2008; Lu, 2000). While the concept of happiness is mostly used in the field of philosophy, researchers in the field of psychology prefer subjective well-being. However, life satisfaction differs from both concepts in many ways. For example, while happiness is used for objective well-being, life satisfaction mostly means subjective judgement (Güler & Emeç, 2006). Numerous studies have shown that positive emotions, self-esteem and optimism are positively related to life satisfaction (Chang et al., 2004; Kang et al., 2003; Steger et al., 2006). Similarly, negative affect predicts life satisfaction in the opposite direction (Kortte et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2007).

It is noted that research on predictors of subjective well-being and life satisfaction in children is relatively insufficient (Holder, 2012). Huebner (2004) emphasised the importance of life satisfaction for optimal adjustment and the necessity of monitoring this component from childhood onwards. Studies conducted on adults have established a comprehensive literature on the internal predictors of subjective well-being. For example, Cohn et al. (2009) emphasised the effect of positive emotions on adults' perception of life satisfaction. In this context, it has been noted that when an individual experiences positive emotions and utilises their personal characteristics to cope with difficulties and take advantage of opportunities in life, their level of satisfaction increases. In addition, it is stated that life satisfaction is predicted by higher levels of positive emotions rather than lower levels of negative emotions (Businaro et al., 2015).

It is emphasised that positive emotions have a compensatory and protective function (Cohn et al., 2009). In this context, it is stated that positive emotions can help people cope with negativity and negative emotions. In addition to studies on the functions of positive emotions in human life, numerous studies have examined the importance of emotion regulation strategies for well-being (Eisenberg & Spinrad 2004; Erisman & Roemer, 2010; Kraiss et al., 2020; Nelis et al., 2016). In particular, some studies emphasise the relationship between the capacity to regulate emotions and life satisfaction (Gross & John, 2003; Gross, 2007). It is emphasised that regulating negative emotions may be a potential determinant of life satisfaction. This emphasis becomes even more important when considering that individuals who lack the ability to regulate negative emotions may face pathological conditions (Gratz & Roemer 2004; Gross et al., 2006).

Recent studies on early childhood years have examined emotion regulation (Lucas-Molina et al., 2020; Özcan et al., 2017), social-emotional development (Alwaely et al., 2021; Rademacher & Koglin, 2019), emotional intelligence (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018; Poulou et al., 2018), subjective well-being (Koch, 2018; Meng et al., 2025), happiness (Izzaty, 2018; Pranoto, 2020), psychological well-being (Özcan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). However, it is evident that studies addressing the possible positive relationships between emotional regulation and life satisfaction in children during the pre-school period are insufficient. Studies conducted on this subject have mostly been carried out with adolescents and adults (Benita et al., 2020; Chervonsky & Hunt, 2019; Sağar & Özçelik, 2022). It is understood that there is a need for research findings examining emotion regulation and life satisfaction together in pre-school children. From this perspective, the current research is expected to contribute to this need in the field. In light of these theoretical explanations, the aim of this study is to analyse the effect of emotion regulation by focusing on life satisfaction, one of the components of well-being in pre-school children. To this end, the study sought to answer the question: “Do the emotional regulation skills of pre-school children significantly predict their life satisfaction?”

2. Method

2.1. Study Group

In line with the aim of the research, the study was conducted in accordance with the correlational survey model. The study group comprised a total of 456 children, including 265 girls (58.1%) and 191 boys (41.9%), attending pre-school education institutions in the central district of Denizli/Türkiye during the 2024-2025 academic year. 204 children are in the 5-year-old group (44.7 %) and 252 are in the 6-year-old group (55.3 %). The working group was selected using cluster sampling. Cluster sampling is a sampling method in which all clusters in the population have an equal chance of being selected individually (Karasar, 2016). The sample size required has been calculated based on the number of children aged 5-6 living in the province of Denizli. A sample size of 456 children with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence interval is considered sufficient (Cohen et al., 2007).

2.2. Procedure

The research data was obtained from children attending pre-school education institutions in the city centre of Denizli during the autumn term of the 2024-2025 academic year. Appointments were made with six randomly selected nursery school principals from different nursery schools in the district centre, and these schools were visited. During the visits, school principals were informed about the research. Interviews were conducted with teachers included in the scope of the research, and information regarding the content of the study was provided. During the meeting, it was emphasised that voluntary participation in the study was essential, and the necessary information regarding the measurement tools was provided to the teachers. It has been stated that the scale forms should be assessed by parents and teachers. Informed consent has been obtained from the participants. Scale forms have been delivered to teachers to be given to parents who have expressed their willingness to participate in the study. These forms include an assessment guide for parents on how to complete the scale and an informed consent form. The teachers distributed the scales to the parents and collected them back a week later. During this process, the teachers completed the life satisfaction scale. Of the 513 scales given to teachers by the researcher, 479 were returned. It was observed that some of the 479 scales obtained were not filled in at all, some were filled in incompletely, and some contained significant errors. After removing incorrect/incomplete forms, an analysis was performed on 456 forms.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Personal Information Form

The demographic information of pre-school children and their parents was obtained using a personal information form prepared by the researcher. This form contains information about the ages, genders, educational backgrounds of the mothers and fathers, etc. of the children sampled.

Emotion Regulation Scale

It was developed by Shields and Cicchetti (1997) to assess children's emotion regulation skills. The Turkish adaptation was done by Batum and Yağmurlu (2007). The scale consists of 24 items and is a four-point Likert scale. The Emotion Regulation Scale was completed by the children's mothers within the scope of this research. It consists of two sub-dimensions: 'Emotion Regulation' and 'Variability-Negativity'. High scores on the scale indicate a high level of emotional regulation. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients for the Turkish adaptation of the scale developed by Batum and Yağmurlu (2007) were calculated as .73 for the emotion regulation subscale and .75 for the negativity-variability subscale. The reliability analysis of the scale was re-conducted for the present study. The analysis revealed that the Cronbach's alpha for the "Variability/Negativity" sub-dimension was .77, while that for the "Emotion Regulation" sub-dimension was .74.

Psychological Well-Being Scale for 5/6 Year-Old Children (PWBSC)

This scale was developed by Atan (2020) to assess psychological well-being in children aged 5 to 6 during the preschool period. The scale is a 5-point Likert scale and consists of a total of 66 items and 9 sub-dimensions. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found to be .95. The fit indices for the PWBSC were calculated as follows: $x^2/sd=2.00$, RMSEA=.040, RMR=.047, GFI=.83, AGFI=.82, CFI=.91. The scale can be completed by the mother, father or teacher. The scale total score can be calculated or the sub-dimensions can be calculated individually and scored separately. In this study, only the life satisfaction sub-dimension was used and completed by the teachers. The internal consistency coefficient calculated for the life satisfaction scale in this study's sample was found to be .89.

2.4. Data Analysis

Before the analysis, the skewness and kurtosis coefficients were examined to determine whether the data were suitable for parametric statistics. It is stated that for data to show a normal distribution, it is sufficient for the kurtosis and skewness values to be within the range of '-1.5' to '+1.5' (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). It can be said that the data from the current study show a normal distribution. The Durbin-Watson coefficient was used for the autocorrelation analysis between variables. The calculated Durbin-Watson coefficient was found to be d=1.980. As the Durbin-Watson coefficient takes a value between 1.5 and 2.5, it can be said that the present study does not have an autocorrelation problem (Kalaycı, 2010). In the study, multicollinearity was analysed among the independent variables in light of the variance inflation factor. It is stated that the variance inflation factor must be less than 10 in order to assert that there is no multicollinearity issue among the independent variables. The variance inflation factor values for the independent variables range from 1.000 to 1.029. These values indicate that there is no multicollinearity problem that would hinder regression analysis (Büyüköztürk, 2009).

A t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in life satisfaction between boys and girls in the pre-school period. A stepwise linear multiple regression analysis was conducted to reveal the predictive power of preschool children's variability/negativity and emotion regulation skills on life satisfaction. The analyses were conducted using computer software and the SPSS 22.0 package program, tested at significance levels of .01 and .05.

2.5. Ethical Statement

This study has been approved by the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of Pamukkale University with its decision dated 03.03.2025 and numbered E.662283.

3. Findings

This section first presents the arithmetic mean and standard deviation values for the variables, followed by the results of the analysis conducted to determine whether children's life satisfaction differs according to gender. Subsequently, the results of the correlation analysis for the variables are presented, and finally, the results obtained from the multiple linear regression analysis are provided (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the T-test for children's life satisfaction according to gender variable

Dependent Variable	Gender	n	$\bar{X}$	Ss	t	p
Life satisfaction	Girl	265	33,20	5,11	,643	,521
	Male	191	32,88	5,59		

When Table 1 is examined, the average scores for girls' life satisfaction are ($\bar{X}$=33.20), while the average scores for boys' lifesatisfactionare ($\bar{X}$=32,88). According to the t-test conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference between the mean scores, there is no significant difference in children's life satisfaction based on gender $t(454) = .643$, $p>.01$.

Table 2. The relationship between children's emotion regulation skills and life satisfaction

	1	2	3
1. Life satisfaction	1		
2. Emotion regulation	.47**	1	
3. Variability negativity	-.23**	-.18**	1
Arithmetic mean	33.05	24.70	7.70
Standard deviation	5.33	3.22	4.39
Kurtosis	1.10	.228	1.01
Skewness	.114	-.177	.114

**p<.01; *p<.05

When examining the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables prior to the analysis, it is observed that the values range from 1.10 to -0.177. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), for data to be considered normally distributed, the skewness and kurtosis values must fall within the range of "-1.5 to +1.5". Based on this, it can be stated that the normality assumption regarding the variables is satisfied. An examination of the analysis results in Table 2 reveals that there is a moderately positive relationship between life satisfaction and emotion regulation ($r=.472$, $p<.01$) among preschool children, and a low-level negative relationship between life satisfaction and variability/negativity (r=-.233, p<.01). Furthermore, Table 2 shows that there is no correlation value above .80 among the predictor variables. This situation is important in that it demonstrates that there is no multicollinearity problem among the variables.

Table 3. Results of stepwise linear multiple regression analysis regarding emotion regulation and variability/negativity variables predicting life satisfaction

Model	Predictor Variables	B	Stan. Error	Beta	t	P	R	R²	Tol.	VIF	Durbin-Watson
1	(Constant)	14.112	1.713	-	8.237	-	.464	.215	-	-	1.980
	Emotion R.	.767	.069	.464	11.150	.000			1.000	1.000	
2	(Constant)	16.527	1.822	-	9.071	-	.486	.241			
	Emotion R.	.725	.069	.439	10.527	.000			.971	1.029	
	Varia.Negativ	-.180	.051	-.149	-3.568	.000			.971	1.029	

Model 1: F(1-454)= 124,317, p<.01
Model 2: F(2-453)= 70,129, p<.01

* p< .01

The study examined whether the assumptions regarding the regression equation were met. The tolerance values for the variables of life satisfaction, emotion regulation, and variability/negativity ranged from .97 to 1.00; the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were found to be between 1.00 and 1.029. Tolerance values greater than .20 and VIF values less than 10 indicate that the conditions are met (Büyüköztürk, 2009). Furthermore, the absence of autocorrelation in the model is evident from the Durbin-Watson test result.

The results of the stepwise regression analysis are presented in Table 3. The analysis has been completed in two stages. Emotion regulation skills and variability/negativity variables appear to be predictors of life satisfaction. In the first stage, the emotion regulation variable, which explained 21% of the variance in the life satisfaction variable, was included in the analysis (R=.46, R2=.21, F(1-454)= 124,317, p<.01). There is a positive relationship between emotion regulation and life satisfaction. As emotional regulation skills improve, life satisfaction increases. In the second stage of the analysis, the variability/negativity variable contributing 3% to the variance was included, thereby increasing the explained variance to 24% (R=.47, R2=.24, Model 2: F(2-453)= 70,129, p<.01). There is a negative relationship between the variability/negativity variable and life satisfaction. As the variability/negativity score increases, life satisfaction decreases.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Life satisfaction among pre-school children does not show any significant differences based on gender. The results obtained in this study are generally consistent with the studies conducted in the literature. Studies conducted on children and adolescents have revealed that there are no gender-related differences in life satisfaction among children and young people in grades 3-12 (Ash & Huebner, 2001; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Hammen & Rudolph, 1996; Huebner & Alderman, 1993). A small number of studies in the literature have concluded that children's life satisfaction differs according to gender (Geng & He, 2022; Chen et al., 2018, Güngör, 2023; Wang & Zhou, 2017). However, numerous factors influence life satisfaction, including family and school (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Shek et al., 2019), socio-economic status (Leung & Shek, 2020), peer relationships, and temperament. For this reason, explaining life satisfaction solely in terms of gender is both inadequate and quite difficult. Therefore, in line with the literature and based on the results of the present study, it can be said that boys and girls are generally equally satisfied with their lives.

Another finding obtained in this study indicates that there is a positive correlation between the emotional regulation skills of pre-school children and their life satisfaction, and a negative correlation between their level of variability/negativity and their life satisfaction. Furthermore, the research findings revealed that levels of variability/negativity and emotion regulation skills are predictive of life satisfaction. It was concluded that the level of emotion regulation positively predicted life satisfaction, while the level of variability/negativity predicted it negatively. Based on this result, it can be said that as children's emotional regulation levels increase and their variability/negativity levels decrease during the pre-school period, their life satisfaction will increase.

Emotions play an important role in human life; in addition to their physiological and behavioural characteristics, they also have a psychological dimension. In daily life, emotions play an important role in shaping an individual's behavioural responses, decision-making processes and interpersonal interactions; in this context, they provide the individual with various advantages. In this context, flexibility and control skills, which play a role in emotional regulation, are critical in enabling the individual to adapt to different situations in line with their goals. These skills enable the individual to determine the intensity of their emotions and develop appropriate responses accordingly (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Gross, 2014). Emotion regulation is recognised in the literature, clinical psychological practice and scientific research as an important factor in well-being. It is stated that cognitive reappraisal, one of the stages of emotion regulation, reduces negative emotions and increases positive emotions and adaptive behaviour, which manifests itself in increased interpersonal functioning and positive mood (Gross & John, 2003). Additionally, the use of effective positive emotion regulation strategies has been associated with higher positive emotion (Jose et al., 2012), well-being (Katana et al., 2019), and life satisfaction (Livingstone & Srivastava, 2012; Quoidbach et al., 2010), lower stress and negative emotion (Doorley & Kashdan, 2021; Kearns & Creaven, 2017). In contrast to positive emotion regulation, inadequate or dysfunctional emotion regulation has been shown to lead to negative outcomes such as lower well-being (Gross & Muñoz, 1995) and somatic illness (Denollet et al., 2008; Gross & John, 2003). Furthermore, a study conducted by Fredrickson and Levenson (1998) concluded that positive emotions may have a protective effect on negative emotions, and that regulating positive emotions can neutralise negative situations. It is stated that positive psychology interventions aimed at increasing positive emotions, cognitions and behaviours associated with this outcome have positive effects on well-being and mental health (Bolier et.al, 2013).

The role that emotion regulation skills play in the life satisfaction of preschool children in the current study can also be seen in the study conducted by Tsujimoto et al. (2024). This study examined the relationships between positive and negative emotion regulation skills and health, affect, life satisfaction, attention control, and continuous awareness. The research findings revealed that both positive and negative emotion regulation skills showed significant positive correlations with positive affect and life satisfaction. The study also employed multiple regression analyses to investigate the relationship between positive and negative emotion regulation abilities and positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. The analyses revealed that emotion regulation ability is a significant predictor of life satisfaction and positive affect. Another study supporting the research findings was conducted by Aydoğdu, Gürsoy and Aral (2024). This study found a positive and significant relationship between the social-emotional well-being and psychological resilience levels of pre-school children and their emotion regulation skills. The study also found that emotion regulation skills mediate the relationship between social-emotional well-being, psychological resilience, and behavioural problems. A finding supporting the current research result is also seen in the experimental study conducted by Petersen and Holodynski (2020) with 52 children aged 3-6. This study concluded that there is a correlation between children's emotion regulation skills and their levels of happiness. In recent years, it has also been stated that emotion regulation is a process linked to mental health. For example, Berking and Wuppernam (2012) state that many people with mental health problems have difficulties regulating their emotions. In a patient sample, a significant relationship has been identified between negative emotion regulation skills and well-being (Kraiss et al., 2020). It has also been determined that emotional regulation skills developed during childhood continue to influence an individual's life in later years. Regarding this topic, Robson, Allen and Howard (2020) concluded in their meta-analysis study that emotional regulation skills in pre-school and school years are a predictor of life satisfaction thirty years later, including mental health, success, healthy living, anxiety and depression.

In conclusion, the research findings reveal the role of preschool children's emotional regulation skills and levels of negative affect variability in their life satisfaction. The present study should be evaluated in light of certain limitations. Firstly, the data in the study were obtained through quantitative measurement tools. Due to the correlational nature of the data, causal interpretations of these relationships could not be obtained, and causality remained limited. Therefore, experimental, controlled and longitudinal studies are needed to examine this relationship in greater depth. Secondly, quantitative research methods were used in this study. A qualitative study is required to address the relationships between variables in a more comprehensive manner. The sample for the study comprised a total of 456 children, including 265 girls and 191 boys attending pre-school education institutions in the central district of Denizli. This situation may limit the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, the applicability of the study in different educational settings, countries and cultural contexts should also be assessed. In addition, the present study did not include comparisons based on demographic characteristics such as children's age, birth order, or number of siblings. Future research may evaluate the relationship between emotion regulation and life satisfaction by taking into account demographic variables commonly reported in similar studies. The current study focused on children with typical development; therefore, future studies could investigate this relationship among children with special needs and those living in disadvantaged areas. Finally, in-service training programs could be organized for teachers to enhance their awareness of the importance of emotion regulation skills and life satisfaction in child development.

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