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CHILDREN'S EMOTION REGULATION

IN UNFAIR SITUATIONS:

USING REGULATORY FOCUS THEORY

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

-Maya Angelou b.1928

ABSTRACT

Children's strategies for emotion regulation in different unfair situations were investigated using principles from Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). RFT explains how our orientations (promotion or prevention) towards self-regulatory goals can affect our selection of different strategies used for self-regulation (approach or avoidance). The thesis contains three studies that investigated children's emotional responses to different unfair situations and their strategies for regulating emotion. The four goal outcomes: no gains, gains, losses and no losses, formed the different unfair situations in this research. Novel vignettes describing different unfair situations were used in two interview studies, conducted with 162 children aged between 8 and 12 years. The vignettes elicited different intensities of happiness between the outcomes. Losses were judged most unfair, with expected happiness also lowest in this condition. By contrast, unfair gains were perceived fairer, with happiness highest in this condition. In the main vignette study, more approach strategies were reported than avoidance strategies overall and no differences were found between the outcomes. Seeking teacher support was the most frequently reported strategy for prevention-oriented outcomes (losses and no losses). Strategies for prolonging or maintaining positive emotion were frequently reported in the gain situation, and seeking another opportunity was frequently reported in the no gain situation. In a third experimental study involving an actual behavioural task, 52 children participated in a computer game that unfairly delivered erroneous scores. Under these conditions the children reported no gains were most unfair and happiness was lowest. Unlike the vignette studies, differences in avoidance and approach strategies were observed, with approach strategies more frequently reported in the gain, no loss and loss outcomes, and avoidance strategies were more frequently reported in the no gain outcome. Despite the limitations associated with

using a novel approach, the overall findings suggested children were more inclined to report approach strategies for regulation; however, some children have a preference for avoidance strategies in unfair situations. RFT was a useful framework for explaining children's emotion regulation in unfair situations. The findings of this research have implications on emotion regulation development in children, particularly for children who use avoidance strategies to cope with unfair events.

KEYWORDS: emotion regulation, approach and avoidance strategies, regulatory focus theory, self-regulatory goals, fairness

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