Research Articles

Interpersonal Trust: Its Relevance for Developing Positive Emotions and Social Skills During Childhood

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Abstract

Identifying the factors that contribute to healthy child development represents a significant challenge for psychological discipline. This research sought to examine whether interpersonal trust fosters positive emotions and social skills during middle childhood. In this study participated 952 Argentine children (52.2% girls; M age = 10.98 and SD = 1.21) who completed psychometric scales. The sample was selected by availability, according to the possibility of access to school institutions to carry out the survey. Two factorial MANOVAS were performed to study the influence of interpersonal trust and distrust on five positive emotions and four aspects of social interaction, respectively. The results indicated that trust promotes joy, sympathy, gratitude, serenity, and personal satisfaction, and distrust inhibits joy but increases sympathy. Also, it was found that trust positively influences appropriate social behaviors and reduces aggressiveness, while distrust facilitates aggressiveness, arrogance, and social anxiety. In conclusion, interpersonal trust provides benefits during middle childhood, as it promotes positive emotional experience and social interaction skills; on the contrary, distrust could be considered a risk factor for children's well-being.

Keywords

One of the greatest challenges to psychological discipline is the identification of the personal and contextual factors that can protect and optimize mental health, contributing to a healthy development during the first years of life. These protective factors are com-

plex and diverse, and those of a social and affective nature stand out during childhood. Among the affective resources, the positive emotional experience has been receiving great scientific interest, due to its role in promoting healthy behavior and its preventive role in physical and mental illness.

Positive emotions (e.g. joy, serenity, gratitude, satisfaction) have the potential to broaden the range of thoughts and actions, to stimulate associative memory, the flexibility and effectiveness of reasoning, to favor perceived social support, the interpersonal connection, the cooperative, compassionate, and tolerant attitudes, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, resilience, and physical health at different stages of life (Cohen et al., 2003; Fredrickson, 2013; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018; Froh et al., 2009; Kok et al., 2013; Madan et al., 2019; Puente-Díaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2019; Rand et al., 2015).

During childhood, emotionally positive children are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors, use effective coping strategies, experience greater psychological well-being, develop better friendship bonds, and show greater social competence (Abraham & Kerns, 2013; Cuello, 2015; Fernández Santa Cruz, 2016; Oros & Fontana Nalesso, 2015; Richaud & Mesurado, 2016; Yanzón, 2015). They also have a lower chance of managing stress unproductively and being involved in criminal and aggressive actions. (Fernández Santa Cruz, 2016; Kim et al., 2007; Richaud & Mesurado, 2016).

Positive emotional experience can be nurtured, or weakened, by the beliefs that people develop about themselves, others, and the environment, and by the relationships they establish from all these. In this way, it is possible to promote and enhance positive emotions from childhood, through direct intervention strategies (acting on positive emotions themselves) or indirect intervention (acting on the factors that facilitate or hinder their flourishing) (Oros & Richaud, 2023).

Another important psychological resource associated with socio-emotional development are social skills. Social skill has been defined as the ability to execute those learned behaviors that cover our needs for interpersonal communication and/or respond to the requirements and demands of social situations effectively (León Rubio & Medina Anzano, 1998). The social skills theory states that aggressive behavior is a consequence of having inadequate social skills. In this way, the most aggressive children would have the tendency to wrongly decode the social cues of other people (Contini, 2015).

Social behaviors, positive and negative, are learned through the socialization process initiated by significant adults (Vargas Rubilar & Richaud, 2018). Thus, both appropriate social behavior and aggressive attitudes and reactions towards peers and/or adults depend on the quality of children's primary bonds (Lacunza & Contini de González, 2011).

Human beings spend most of our time bonding with others or in social interaction, and positive social relationships are one of the greatest sources of psychological well-being and personal satisfaction (Contini de González, 2009). Various studies have identified a relationship between the development of social skills in childhood and better psychoso-

cial adjustment in adulthood (see Caballo, 2007). In addition, an adequate development of social skills has been associated with better physical and mental health (Sancassiani et al., 2015; Segrin, 2019). Conversely, low social competence has been related to low self-esteem (Caballo et al., 2018), aggressive behavior (Del Prette et al., 2014), stress and loneliness (Segrin, 2019) and with social anxiety (Caballo et al., 2018).

Based on these concepts, it is confirmed that positive emotions and social skills are important protective resources for mental health, so it is of interest to detect the factors that can promote their early development and expression. A variable that could be involved in the manifestation of these resources is interpersonal trust. Trusting means holding a set of expectations about others; specifically, expectations that others will keep their word, keep their promises, have benevolent intentions, and safeguard the personal information shared with them, without doing any emotional harm (Rotenberg, 2019). In this sense, interpersonal trust implies that the trustee assumes a certain vulnerability, since he expects the cooperation and benevolence of his counterpart (Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002; Rousseau et al., 1998); it also implies predictability because it allows predicting the behavior of others (Sacchi, 2004). Distrust, on the other hand, involves the expectation of a broken or unfulfilled commitment (Hawley, 2014) and arises when a person cannot trust the behavior or words of another (Schul et al., 2008).

A review of the scientific literature highlights the lack of consensus among researchers on the relationship between trust and distrust, as at least two divergent positions can be identified. The first one suggests that both constructs are opposite poles of a continuum, where high trust equals low distrust and, vice versa, high distrust equals low trust (e.g. Gurtman, 1992); on the other hand, the second perspective proposes that both constructs are independent and can coexist simultaneously, being promoted by different factors and consequently giving rise to different correlates or consequences (Lewicki et al., 1998; Ou & Sia, 2009).

This issue has been addressed by different disciplines and theoretical approaches. For example, Niedlich et al. (2021) propose a model to be applied to the educational system that includes four interrelated aspects (i.e., generalized trust, educational governance, educational environment, and educational attainment). Some recent studies, such as Legood et al. (2023) and Tomlinson et al. (2020), have highlighted the importance of analyzing both cognitive and affective aspects of interpersonal trust. For their part, Bormann et al. (2021) have analyzed notions of interpersonal trust in educational settings.

In particular, with regard to the study of interpersonal trust in childhood, Rotenberg has proposed a model for assessing interpersonal trust that takes into account three fundamental bases: Reliability, Emotional Trust, and Honesty, related to four significant figures (i.e. father, mother, teachers and peers) (Rotenberg, 2019; Rotenberg, Fox, et al., 2005). This approach is one of the most widely used and studied in different cultures. In Argentina, Sacchi (2004) proposed a model to assess children's trust/distrust of parents, teachers and peers. This scale has been revised and abbreviated by Oros et al. (2020) and

has shown adequate psychometric properties in Argentine children. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only scale in Spanish that allows the assessment of distrust in important people during childhood.

Interpersonal trust has been pointed out as a keystone for societies (Rotenberg, Fox, et al., 2005) and at the individual level, it can be considered an important indicator of positive development in children; in this sense, it has been proven that interpersonal trust promotes school adjustment (Betts et al., 2013; Rotenberg et al., 2010), children's relationships with their teachers (Dong et al., 2021), and prosocial behaviors (Malti et al., 2016); there is even evidence that children who can trust others have greater abilities to delay gratification (Ma et al., 2018). On the other hand, distrust in others can lead children to experience loneliness, depressive symptoms and health problems (Qualter et al., 2013).

Previous studies have confirmed the presence of a link between trust and emotions. Many of these studies have positioned emotions as important antecedents of interpersonal trust (e.g. Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). From this perspective, it is argued that one's own mood and the emotions evoked by the other would determine the greater or lesser willingness to trust him or her (Legood et al., 2023). This is because emotions influence people's attitudes, beliefs, judgments, and decisions (Glore & Gasper, 2000; Frijda et al., 2000). However, it is reasonable to assume that, like the dynamics of many other psychological constructs, the relationship between trust and emotions could be reciprocal. For example, it would be reasonable to assume that the ability to trust others would promote certain emotional experiences. Indeed, Burns et al. (2008) provide empirical evidence that interpersonal trust increases positive affect in a kind of upward spiral, where trust and emotions feedback on each other. On the other hand, a tendency to distrust others can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression (Qualter et al., 2013; Rotenberg et al., 2004). This study will examine whether trust plays a significant role in the experience of five discrete positive valence emotions. Such an approach will shed light on a question that has received little research attention.

Regarding the link between trust and social adjustment, it was found, for example, that trusting children can establish more friendship relationships than their distrustful peers (Betts & Rotenberg, 2008); likewise, trust is related to greater acceptance and less exclusion from peers (Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005). However, scientific evidence is scarce regarding the relationship between trust and social skills; and they are even scarcer in regard to middle childhood.

In response to these gaps found in the scientific literature, this study aimed at analyzing whether interpersonal trust acts as a facilitator of positive emotions and social skills during middle childhood. Due to the wide range of positive emotions, a limited selection was chosen to study in this research, including those commonly experienced in daily life such as joy, serenity, gratitude, personal satisfaction/pride, and sympathy (Fredrickson, 2013). On the other hand, with regard to social skills, it was decided to

follow the suggestion of Matson et al. (1983), who propose to assess the strengths and deficits of social competences. These authors' model includes, on the one hand, an assessment of the ability to interact socially in an appropriate way. This dimension is referred to by the authors as assertiveness, although it is not limited to assertiveness alone; other appropriate behaviors, such as looking at people when talking, sharing, etc., are also taken into account. In addition, the model includes the exploration of certain social interaction deficits, such as aggressiveness, arrogance and social anxiety. As a result, the following hypotheses have been formulated.

> **(H1):** Interpersonal trust facilitates the experience of positive emotions (joy, serenity, gratitude, personal satisfaction and sympathy) while distrust tends to weaken them.

> **(H2):** Interpersonal trust promotes the expression of appropriate social skills (assertiveness) and inhibits aggressiveness, arrogance, and social anxiety. On the other hand, distrust limits the expression of appropriate social skills and increases aggressiveness, arrogance and social anxiety.

Method

Type of Study

For this paper, we conducted an empirical, quantitative, descriptive, ex post facto, and cross-sectional study. The research was of a descriptive, ex post facto nature, as it compared dependent variables among categorized groups of an assigned independent variable (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Furthermore, it was cross-sectional since the study data were collected at a single point in time (Cvetkovic-Vega et al., 2021).

Participants

952 Argentine boys and girls participated (52.2% girls), with an average age of 10.98 years (SD = 1.21), who were in 4th grade (n = 181), 5th grade (n = 188), 6th grade (n = 299) and 7th grade (n = 284) of primary education in the provinces of Misiones (n = 419), Mendoza (n = 476), and Chaco (n = 57). A non-probabilistic availability sampling method (Otzen & Manterola, 2017) was used in this study. Inclusion criteria comprised schoolchildren aged 9 to 12 years, without neurological, developmental, or psychiatric disorders.

Instruments

To assess positive emotions, the Children's Questionnaire of Positive Emotions (CIEP in Spanish) was used (Oros, 2014; Oros et al., 2022). This instrument provides information about five affective experiences: joy (e.g. *I am almost always happy*), serenity (e.g. *I am*

quite calm), sympathy (e.g. *when someone is lonely and bored I want to approach and play with him*), gratitude (e.g. *I appreciate when others help me*), and personal satisfaction (e.g. *I feel that I am very valuable*). The questionnaire consists of 23 items rated on a three-point scale (*Yes, More or less, and No*). The internal consistency calculated in this sample was acceptable for each of the dimensions: joy (α = .71), serenity (α = .67), sympathy (α = .60), gratitude (α = .60) and personal satisfaction (α = .80).

Social skills were assessed with Matson et al. (1983) Social Skills Scale translated into Spanish by Trianes et al. (2002) and validated for Argentina by Schulz Begle (2012). This scale comprises 55 items ranked from *Never* to *Always,* using a four-point Likert format, and they evaluate the following dimensions: (a) appropriate social behaviors or assertiveness (e.g. *I look at people when they are talking, I share what I have with others, I praise or compliment people I like*), (b) aggressiveness or antisocial behavior (e.g. *I threaten people or act like a fighter, I hit when I am very angry*), (c) arrogance (e.g. *I act like I'm better than everyone else, I always want to be first*), and (d) social anxiety or lonely behaviors (e.g. *I'm afraid to talk to people, I play alone*). The internal consistency values in this sample were adequate: appropriate social behaviors (α = .86), aggressiveness (α = .84), arrogance (α = .72) and social anxiety (α = .60).

To assess interpersonal trust, the Sacchi (2004) Interpersonal Trust Scale was used, in its version revised by Oros et al. (2020). This instrument operationalizes two differentiated unidimensional subscales, trust and distrust, based on 16 sentences where the respondents must express their agreement about the fulfillment of the word, promises and honesty of significant people in the social world of children (parents, teachers and peers). Each factor comprises eight items (e.g. Trust = *Most children keep what they promise*; Distrust = *I have to be careful that my classmates don't take my personal items*). It has five response options (from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*). Each subscale is evaluated individually, and a complete score for the instrument cannot be obtained. Therefore, it is not accurate to assume that higher levels of distrust correspond to lower levels of trust and vice versa. In this sample, the internal consistency was acceptable for Trust (α = .64) and Distrust (α = .62).

Procedures for Data Collection

The sample was selected by availability, according to the possibility of access to school institutions to carry out the survey. We worked with 10 urban schools in the provinces of Mendoza, Misiones, and Chaco. Prior to the application of the instruments, the researchers explained to the directors of each school the purpose and characteristics of the research. After obtaining institutional approval, we proceeded to request, through informed consent, the authorization of parents or guardians for the participation of children. The consent made explicit the objectives and ethical criteria of the study (the participation was voluntary, free, confidential and without risks or loss of benefits for

those involved). Finally, the tests were administered collectively, in the classroom, during the usual class period.

Analysis

The sample base was free of missing data and extreme cases, both at the univariate ($z > 3.29$) and multivariate (p Mahalanobis < .001) levels. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each variable analyzed and univariate normality was tested using the asymmetry and kurtosis indicators. Subsequently, two factorial MANOVAS were performed to study the influence of interpersonal trust and distrust on the five positive emotions and on the four aspects of social interaction, respectively. To carry out this analysis, the independent variables were sorted into three levels using the punctuation obtained by the participants: low values (≤ Perc. 25), moderate (> Perc. 25 and < Perc. 75) and high (≥ Perc. 75). The effect size was estimated with the partial eta-squared statistic (η_p^2), assuming the following cut-off points for its interpretation: 0.01 (small), 0.06 (moderate) and 0.14 (large) (Ellis, 2010). Post hoc contrasts were performed using the Scheffé method.

Results

The asymmetry and kurtosis values were between excellent and adequate for all the variables, showing distributions that are close to normal (*As* y *Cu* < +/-2) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Information About the Variables Included in the Study

Variable	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*	Asymmetry	Kurtosis
Positive Emotions						
Joy	6	15	13.39	1.80	-1.16	0.88
Serenity	6	18	13.09	2.46	-0.25	-0.21
Sympathy	4	12	9.29	1.87	-0.53	-0.24
Gratitude	8	15	13.92	1.40	-1.49	1.98
Satisfaction	3	9	7.40	1.65	-0.82	-0.19
Social Skills						
Appropriate behaviours	33	88	69.30	10.13	-0.67	0.19
Aggressiveness	19	65	29.39	7.29	1.21	1.70
Arrogance	7	28	12.42	3.86	1.07	1.28
Social anxiety	7	25	12.26	3.48	0.80	0.48
Interpersonal Trust						
Trust	12	40	27.95	4.90	-0.14	-0.16
Distrust	8	40	23.10	5.48	0.18	0.00

The first MANOVA indicated that both Trust, F de Hotelling(10, 1874) = 15.50; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .08$, and Distrust, F de Hotelling(10, 1874) = 3.62; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .02$, influence the general experience of positive emotions. Univariate analysis revealed that Trust significantly affects the five emotions evaluated, with effect sizes between moderate and small: joy, $F(2, 942) = 31.75$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .06$, serenity, $F(2, 942) = 35.10$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .07$, sympathy, $F(2, 942) = 22.31$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .05$, gratitude, $F(2, 942) = 29.39$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and personal satisfaction, $F(2, 942) = 19.27$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and that Distrust specifically influences joy, $F(2, 942) = 7.03$; $p < .01$; $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and sympathy, $F(2, 942) = 4.70$; $p < .01$; $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Post hoc contrasts and the observation of means indicated that children with greater interpersonal trust obtained the highest values of positive emotions. On the other hand, children with greater distrust presented lower values of joy but higher values of sympathy, although the post hoc contrasts did not reach statistical significance for this last emotion (see Table 2).

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Results of the MANOVA Between Trust-Distrust and Positive Emotions

| Positive Emotion | Trust | | | | | | Distrust | | | | | |
| | M (SD) | | | | | | M (SD) | | | | | |
	Low	Moderate	High	F	p	η_p^2	Low	Moderate	High	F	p	η_p^2
Joy	12.80 (1.99)$_a$	13.50 (1.72)$_b$	14.00 (1.36)$_b$	31.75	< .001	.06	13.79 (1.64)$_a$	13.20 (1.77)$_b$	13.09 (1.93)$_b$	7.03	.001	.02
Serenity	12.67 (2.39)$_a$	13.26 (2.45)$_b$	13.90 (2.23)$_c$	35.10	< .001	.07	13.33 (2.34)	13.15 (2.28)	12.73 (2.70)	.74	.475	.00
Sympathy	8.88 (1.94)$_a$	9.29 (1.80)$_b$	9.77 (1.74)$_c$	22.31	< .001	.05	9.17 (1.82)$_a$	9.32 (1.88)$_a$	9.40 (1.92)$_a$	4.70	.001	.01
Gratitude	13.51 (1.62)$_a$	13.96 (1.32)$_b$	14.37 (1.00)$_c$	29.39	< .001	.06	14.10 (1.31)	13.71 (1.51)	13.88 (1.38)	2.76	.064	.01
Satisfaction	6.97 (1.79)$_a$	7.51 (1.53)$_b$	7.80 (1.45)$_b$	19.27	< .001	.04	7.64 (1.52)	7.23 (1.68)	7.26 (1.73)	2.90	.056	.01

Note. The means with different subindexes differ on post hoc contrasts ($p < .05$).

The second MANOVA showed that Trust, F de Hotelling(8, 1862) = 8.15; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and Distrust, F de Hotelling(8, 1862) = 14.74; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .06$, also influence social skills. Univariate analyzes indicated that trust significantly impacts appropriate social behaviors, $F(2, 935) = 20.42$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and aggressiveness, $F(2, 935) = 11.13$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .02$, while distrust influences aggressiveness, $F(2, 935) = 30.48$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .06$, arrogance, $F(2, 935) = 26.73$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .05$, and social anxiety, $F(2, 935) = 30.87$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .06$. The *post hoc* contrasts and the observation of means indicated that a higher score in interpersonal trust corresponds to a higher score in appropriate social behaviors and lower values in aggressiveness. In addition, the greater the distrust,

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the greater the values of aggressiveness, arrogance and social anxiety. Table 3 shows the averages of each variable and the post hoc contrasts that were significant. The trust-distrust interaction had no effect on the dependent variables.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Results of the MANOVA Between Trust-Distrust and Social Skills

Social Skills	Trust						Distrust					
	M (SD)			*F*	*p*	η^2_p	*M (SD)*			*F*	*p*	η^2_p
	Low	Moderate	High				Low	Moderate	High			
Appropriate behaviors	66.97 $(10.10)_a$	68.99 $(9.92)_b$	72.34 $(9.63)_c$	20.42	< .001	.04	70.22 (10.05)	67.89 (10.59)	69.41 (9.70)	2.12	.120	.01
Aggressiveness	31.28 $(7.29)_a$	28.83 $(7.42)_b$	27.67 $(6.65)_b$	11.13	< .001	.02	27.15 $(6.45)_a$	29.42 $(6.45)_b$	32.08 $(8.03)_c$	30.48	< .001	.06
Arrogance	12.66 (4.02)	12.21 (3.69)	12.31 (3.84)	.43	.654	.00	11.42 $(3.17)_a$	12.44 $(3.77)_b$	13.61 $(4.36)_c$	26.73	< .001	.05
Social anxiety	12.80 (3.59)	12.06 (3.31)	11.80 (3.43)	2.18	.114	.01	11.14 $(2.86)_a$	12.63 $(3.50)_b$	13.29 $(3.76)_b$	30.87	< .001	.06

Note. The means with different subindexes differ on post hoc contrasts ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to analyze whether interpersonal trust acts as a facilitator of positive emotions and social skills during middle childhood. The results of the first analysis are aligned with the proposed hypothesis; indeed, trust promotes joy, serenity, sympathy, gratitude, and personal satisfaction. The role of trust in these affective experiences can be explained by the tendency shown by trusting children to consider that their environment is safe and to believe that those around them are not going to inflict intentional harm on them (Rotenberg, 2019). On this basis, it is natural that their emotional experience is impregnated with joy, since this emotion arises in scenarios that are pleasant for the individual (Lazarus, 2000). Also for this reason, it seems logical that previous studies with children and adolescents have indicated an inverse relationship between interpersonal trust and affective states that are clearly contrary to joy and happiness, as is the case of depression (Lester & Gatto, 1990; Li et al., 2019).

Likewise, it is reasonable that trusting children are likely to experience calm and serenity, since they do not have *a priori* view of the other as someone hostile or dangerous (Rotenberg, 2010). The relationship between these two variables had the largest effect size observed in this research. By definition, serenity is a positive emotion that, like joy, arises in situations perceived as pleasant, and also safe and predictable (Tong & Jia, 2017). The absence or low frequency of attitudes of vigilance, suspicion and mistrust,

would allow children to experience this affective state of low physiological activation. On the other hand, individuals with weak interpersonal trust would be expected to show a pattern of less tranquility and greater anxiety, which has been corroborated in previous studies with the adult population (Richaud de Minzi & Sacchi, 1999).

On the other hand, it is also understandable that trusting children show a greater capacity to sympathize with the pain of the other, since, in the absence of any clear evidence, they interpret that pain as genuine. As they maintain positive expectations about the intentions or behaviors of the other (Rousseau et al., 1998), they do not usually make alternative interpretations of a suspicious tone (i.e. that the suffering person is taking advantage of a disadvantaged situation to manipulate the feelings or actions of the other person). This trusting conception would not only facilitate emotional attunement with the other, but also the inclination to help and support him, two key aspects of sympathetic emotion (Eisenberg, 1991; Kienbaum et al., 2001; Lazarus, 2000).

The same line of argument can be used to explain the relationship between interpersonal trust and gratitude. Gratitude is an empathic emotion that arises from obtaining a benefit evaluated as positive, which has been intentionally granted by a benefactor (Emmons et al., 2003; Lazarus, 2000). This affective experience depends on a complex pattern of attributions and social meanings that necessarily involve having confidence in the intentions of others. For example, if the recipient of the benefit perceives the donation as a non-altruistic act on the part of the giver (i.e. to obtain a benefit in return, to push the recipient into doing something, etc.), any possibility of feeling gratitude is lost, but instead, negative emotions such as anger or shame may appear (Lazarus, 2000). Therefore, it is understandable that interpersonal trust, because of the interpretive pattern it involves, is a facilitator of genuine experiences of gratitude.

Regarding personal satisfaction, the results of this study also find support in theory. This emotion is related to the acceptance of oneself and the enjoyment of one's own abilities. In this sense, this is a concept closely linked to self-esteem, while the latter involves satisfaction as an emotional component (Iannizzotto & Da Dalt, 2017). Although the relationship between interpersonal trust and self-esteem has not been extensively studied, the classic postulates of Erikson (1987) and Bowlby (1989) support the idea that children who manage to develop trust in their significant figures tend to show greater self-acceptance and a better view of themselves. Erikson, in particular, pointed to basic trust as the foundation for the development of the identity and as a critical step for the emergence of a healthy self-esteem (Bernath & Feshbach, 1995).

At another level of analysis, the results of this study indicate that children who obtain values of distrust between moderate and high see their experience of joy diminished, compared to children with low scores in this dimension. To complement the information provided before, this may be due to the fact that distrustful children build a perception of their environment and of the people who surround them, as essentially threatening or dangerous. The assumption that one should be constantly watching one's belongings

because others might take them away, that in most of the games played one is cheated, that friends will betray if they are given the chance, that parents and teachers lie and do not keep their promises, generates a psychological atmosphere that is not conducive to the development of experiences of contentment, enjoyment and happiness.

On the other hand, preliminary evidence was found to suggest that distrust tends to increase sympathy. This finding is counterintuitive and inconsistent with the initial hypothesis and with the results observed between this same emotion and the trust dimension. Given the lack of theoretical and empirical support that allows a legitimate interpretation on this subject, and because none of the post hoc contrasts were significant for this analysis, which could be indicating a false/spurious relationship between the variables, it is recommended to deepen the study in future research.

Regarding the second hypothesis of this study, the results also confirmed that trust and distrust influence social skills. In particular, it was observed that trust positively impacts appropriate social behaviors and inhibits aggressiveness. These findings are in line with recent research reports, where trust has been positively associated with healthier relationships. For example, Malti et al. (2016) found that children who were more stable in their prosocial behavior were perceived as more trustworthy by their peers and had more trust beliefs in their peers than those who were less stable in their prosociality. Also, Mortenson (2009) found that interpersonal trust was related to appropriate help-seeking and predicted the likelihood of showing emotional distress to friends. This is aligned with what other recent works have pointed out: interpersonal trust indirectly influenced social adjustment through the teacher-student relationship (Dong et al., 2021) and positively intervened in the relationship between maternal acceptance and the reduction of school stress (Wang & Fletcher, 2016).

Contrary to this, it was confirmed that distrust favors aggressiveness, arrogance and social anxiety. In this direction, Rotenberg et al. (2013) found that children (i.e., 11 and 12 years old) with excessive and very low interpersonal trust beliefs showed greater aggressiveness than those who reported a medium or more adequate range of interpersonal trust beliefs. Similarly, Malti et al. (2013) identified that low trust was associated with aggressiveness. It was also observed that distrust favors social anxiety or lonely behaviors. In this line, Qualter et al. (2013) found that low confidence beliefs were predictors of loneliness, which ratifies the role of confidence in the prevention of isolation and the feelings that this condition brings along.

On the other hand, little research was found to help explain the role of distrust in relation to arrogance. Now, both trust and distrust represent expectations about others, which are based on previous experiences. For example, when children need to disclose information about negative events to professionals in the school environment, they assess the trustworthiness of these interlocutors using different aspects of their own biography and their own personal contexts (Davies, 2019). In the specific case of distrust, it was found that having suffered negative events during childhood can lead to increased

levels of this attribute (Hepp et al., 2021). Following this line of argument, it is possible that the most distrustful children have had difficult experiences in their short lives, and that these have predisposed them to take a defensive attitude towards others (Leary et al., 1997), This attitude is characterized by extreme self-confidence (e.g. feeling better than others, trying to be the best, trying to be the first and/or always win). Thus, arrogance can appear as a compensatory solution for these children that would allow them to avoid the risks of displaying the necessary vulnerability to trust someone and get hurt. In summary, distrust would seem to foster psychological risk factors that weaken or harm the positive social relationships of children (i.e., social anxiety, aggressiveness and arrogance), as opposed to the proper development of social skills.

In conclusion, it is possible to claim that interpersonal trust plays a decisive role in the expression of healthy emotions and behaviors, and at the same time it reduces the probability of expressing inappropriate social behaviors during middle childhood. In any case, it is important to highlight that, although reasonably high values of trust can promote good socio-affective performance, excessively high values can produce opposite effects (Rotenberg et al., 2013). Therefore, it is a challenge for future research to determine the appropriate cut-off point that allows us to know at what values trust ceases to be healthy and becomes a dysfunctional attitude.

On the other hand, mistrust was less strongly associated with the positive emotions analyzed and more strongly associated with less effective social behavior, demonstrating the relevance of the study of mistrust for developmental psychology. New studies could take up these data to contribute to the debate on the relationship between trust and distrust introduced above.

The dynamic that occurs between the analyzed variables can be used to plan intervention strategies that include interpersonal trust, as a link to promote these and other positive aspects of socio-emotional development during middle childhood. Considering the important role of adults for the development of a trusting attitude in children, the results presented in this article are also relevant for these significant figures, adults, who can be fundamental agents of change to help children achieve positive development.

Likewise, this study presented some limitations, among them the non-probabilistic sampling method used. The strategy of intentional selection of the participants of the study may show the presence of some biases not controlled by the researchers. Although the sample size was large and there were subjects from different provinces of the country, it is suggested to avoid generalizations to very dissimilar contexts. On the other hand, the cross-sectional design of this research also implies a limitation, i.e. hypotheses and inferences about the temporal relationships between the variables cannot be established. It would be promising to conduct longitudinal studies to examine, for example, the possible catalytic effect of trust on positive emotions and its long-term effect on psychological well-being in general.

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Finally, in future studies it would be interesting to delve into the relationship between interpersonal trust and other positive emotions, which are not considered here. Although in this case the hypothesis was that interpersonal trust leads to a greater experience of positive emotions, it is also legitimate to consider the possibility that there can be a reciprocal relationship between these variables. In this regard, a study conducted with an adult population (Lee et al., 2011) showed that the positive emotions of admiration and appreciation contribute to the willingness to trust the other. Therefore, it is possible that certain positive emotions can act as precursors and others as results of the trust process. The complexity of the variables analyzed and their possible interplay deserves to be studied at different stages of the development cycle, especially during childhood, where research continues to be very scarce. New lines of research could also be interested in evaluating the various components or bases of trustworthiness and their recipients (Rotenberg, Fox, et al., 2005), with the aim of establishing the differential impact of each of them on socio-emotional development during middle childhood. The results of the present study highlight the importance of strengthening interpersonal trust to influence positive emotions and social competencies in early stages of life development. Likewise, the study and promotion of interpersonal trust is important in our context, given that Argentina has a strongly affiliative culture (Richaud et al., 2022). Argentine society has a high regard for collective values, especially those associated with family and friendship (Richaud et al., 2022). In this sense, the design of interventions to develop this psychological resource should include psychoeducational strategies adapted to the most socially relevant environments during childhood: family and school.

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