Choosing the One Who Sees You: Emotional Responsiveness as a Cue in Children's Help-Seeking

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has explored children's help-seeking tendencies in relation to the characteristics of help providers with a primary focus on the helper's competencies. In the current study, we propose that acknowledging a child's emotions without judgment, referred to as emotional validation, is another cue that guides children's help-seeking behavior. In Study 1, we surveyed mothers of children aged 3–6 years ($N = 200$) and found that their tendency to validate their children's emotions was positively associated with the children's help-seeking behavior, particularly among older children (5–6 years). In Study 2, a randomized experiment with children aged 3–6 years ($N = 68$) tested the causal effect of emotional validation on help-seeking behaviors. When presented with a challenging task, older children (5–6 years) were more likely to seek help from an emotion-validating adult than an emotion-invalidating adult. This pattern was not observed in younger children (3–4 years). These findings underscore the fact that by around the age of 5, children begin to integrate emotional validation into their social evaluations, using it as a critical cue in deciding whom to approach for help. This developmental shift highlights the role of emotional validation in fostering supportive relationships and promoting adaptive help-seeking behaviors.

1 | Introduction

Imagine a preschooler struggling with a challenging puzzle. Nearby, two adults observe: one acknowledges the child's frustration with understanding ("Ugh, that piece just won't fit, huh? I get frustrated with puzzles too when they don't go the way I want"), while the other dismisses the emotional experience as unhelpful ("If you want to solve the puzzle, then stop getting so upset. Crying isn't going to fix the puzzle, is it?"). At this vulnerable moment, who would the child approach to help with the puzzle?

As children grow up, they do not just learn to seek help. They learn to make important social judgments about potential helpers. Help-seeking is one of the earliest ways in which children navigate their social world, reflecting how they learn whom they trust (Karabenick and Dembo 2011; Nelson-Le Gall 1981). This

developmental shift enables children to recognize when an adult is aware of their needs and determine whether they should ask for help in emotionally charged situations. Adults typically rely on two main qualities when deciding whom to ask for support: a person's knowledge or skill and their emotional warmth or responsiveness (Mayer et al. 1995; McAllister 1995). While most developmental research has focused almost exclusively on the first quality, examining how children assess others' competence, accuracy, and reliability (Koenig and Harris 2005; Kushnir et al. 2013; Mills 2013), little is known about whether and how children consider an adult's emotional responsiveness when deciding whom to approach for support.

Children's social evaluations when choosing helpers align with the research on selective social learning, which examines how children weigh social cues when deciding whom to trust. This

Summary

- Preschoolers are selective when choosing whom to seek help from.

- Children prefer to seek help from an emotionally validating responder.

- This preference was particularly evident among older preschoolers (ages 5–6), but not among younger ones (ages 3–4).

work shows that children consider informant accuracy, certainty, niceness, and benevolence to make broader judgments about reliability and prosocial orientation (Bergstra et al. 2018; Brosseau-Liard and Birch 2010). Our study extends this framework by focusing on emotional validation in help-seeking contexts. Help-seeking during emotional distress differs from informational learning because it requires vulnerability and interpersonal trust. In these emotionally charged moments, children must evaluate not only a helper's competence but also their emotional responsiveness. We propose that children use how others respond to emotional distress as a key emotional cue when deciding whom to approach for support. Thus, emotional cues from others could significantly shape children's help-seeking behavior, suggesting that children are attentive not only to others' competence, but also to how individuals respond to their emotions.

1.1 | Help-Seeking

Help-seeking in young children is a complex psychological process in which they actively pursue assistance to address difficulties and resolve problems (Nelson-Le Gall 1981). Although help-seeking has been broadly defined in the literature, this study focuses on adaptive and instrumental help-seeking, which refers to children's active attempts to obtain help for overcoming difficulties or acquiring information (Gall 1985). Initially, children rely on help-seeking primarily to acquire information, such as asking caregivers questions like, "What is that animal called?" or "How do I build this puzzle?" As they mature, this behavior becomes integrated with the development of linguistic, emotional, and social competencies (Gall 1985; Nelson-Le Gall 1981; Newman 2000). Help-seeking behaviors facilitate language development by enabling children to formulate effective questions to solve problems and obtain the necessary information (Mills et al. 2010, 2011). Additionally, help-seeking promotes problem-solving abilities, supports cognitive development, and contributes to enhancing self-regulation (Marulis and Nelson 2021; Selmeczy et al. 2024; Thompson et al. 2012; Was and Warneken 2017). Furthermore, asking for and receiving help contribute to emotional development by giving children opportunities to manage frustration and navigate social dynamics more effectively (Karabenick and Dembo 2011). For example, preschoolers who participate in mutual help during tasks develop clearer ways to express their needs and improve their ability to empathize with their peers, thereby reinforcing emotional and social learning (Hosokawa et al. 2024; Perlmutter et al. 1989).

Considering the significant impact of help-seeking on children's development, it is essential to further investigate the factors influ-

encing children's choices regarding whom they seek help from. Children consider the characteristics of help providers when asking for help. When children decide whom to seek help from, they take the helper's competence into account (Cluver et al. 2013; Rowles and Mills 2018; Vredenburgh and Kushnir 2016). By the ages of 3–5, they prefer individuals with accurate and relevant expertise to those who are naive or seem to possess inaccurate knowledge (Johnston et al. 2015; Koenig and Harris 2005; Sobel and Corriveau 2010). They also use past success as a sign of competence, choosing someone who has successfully repaired several toys despite not knowing the tool names, over someone who knows the names but has failed to fix the toy (Kushnir et al. 2013). Recent findings show that children aged 3–8 are able to comprehend a helper's problem-solving approach, favoring those who independently explore and solve problems or who have prior knowledge of effective solutions (Bridgers et al. 2023).

Although prior research has shown that children consider a helper's competence and expertise when deciding from whom to seek help, little is known about the role of emotional responsiveness in this process. Indeed, the ability to recognize, label, and interpret emotions in oneself and others is a major developmental milestone in early childhood (Ruba and Pollak 2020; Walle et al. 2020) and an important component of existing models of emotion regulation (Coan and Sbarra 2015; Gross 2015; Thompson 2019). As children develop a better understanding of others' thoughts and feelings (Weimer et al. 2012), they begin to recognize that adults are not only knowledgeable but also emotionally supportive. This growing awareness may influence how people judge whether an adult is a safe and trustworthy person to approach. Building on this logic, we suggest that the way a helper responds to a child's emotions, particularly whether they validate those emotions, can shape children's decisions about seeking support.

1.2 | Emotional Validation

Emotions can feel intense and overwhelming for children, especially when they face situations that they cannot manage on their own (Reitsema et al. 2022). Such emotionally laden situations, marked by frustration, anxiety, or distress, create the conditions most likely to elicit help-seeking behavior (Jia et al. 2024a, 2024b; Newman 2000). However, rather than receiving support, children often encounter adults who dismiss their emotions as inappropriate or exaggerated (Hong et al. 2021; Lambie and Lindberg 2016; Zhao et al. 2023). For instance, Lambie and Lindberg (2016) observed parent–child interactions during a competitive board game (Snakes and Ladders) designed to elicit mild frustration and emotional reactions. Children frequently displayed signs of distress (i.e., frustration or sadness) when losing turns in gameplay, and parents' responses were coded as either validating or invalidating. They found that parents engaged in behaviors that dismissed their children's emotional responses in approximately 74% of emotionally charged moments. These frequently invalidating responses may send the message that children's emotions are unworthy of acknowledgment, potentially undermining their willingness to seek support for future interactions.

Emotional validation involves recognizing a child's feelings as real and understandable without dismissing or correcting them (Jeon and Park 2024; Lambie et al. 2020). Emotional validation

operates within a broad family of constructs related to caregiver's sensitivity and emotional responsiveness during early development. Sensitivity refers to the accurate perception and appropriate response to a child's signals (Ainsworth et al. 1978), and emotional responsiveness emphasizes the timeliness and appropriateness of reactions to emotional cues. Emotional validation captures a more specific dimension: the explicit acknowledgment that an emotional experience is legitimate and understandable (Linehan 1997; Shenk and Fruzzetti 2011). In other words, validation focuses on communicating that the emotion itself is valid and worthy of respect. This distinction is important because a caregiver may respond sensitively to a child's distress by attempting to solve the problem, while simultaneously invalidating the emotion by suggesting that it is inappropriate or excessive.

Emotional invalidation, by comparison, represents the dismissal of one's feelings (Shenk and Fruzzetti 2011). Conceptually, it overlaps with the broader literature on parental criticism and its effects on children's development (Dweck and Leggett 1988). Although both involve negative interpersonal feedback, criticism typically communicates that a child's actions or attributes are inadequate, whereas emotional validation communicates that a child's feelings are illegitimate or unacceptable (Linehan 1997; Shenk and Fruzzetti 2011). For instance, imagine a child who feels hurt after being left out of a game by friends. If a parent responds by saying, "Oh, you're not really that upset. You'll get over it," the comment is not a criticism of the child's behavior, but still minimizes or dismisses the child's emotional experience. This distinction is meaningful because invalidation directly undermines children's internal emotional reality, making them more likely to experience disruptions in emotion recognition, expression, and regulation (Lambie and Lindberg 2016).

1.3 | Emotional Validation and Help-Seeking

When adults validate their children's emotions, they demonstrate that the emotions are legitimate and deserve attention. These interactions help children feel emotionally seen and may shape their view of the adult as a supportive and emotionally available figure. Emotional validation also creates a space for children to explore and regulate their feelings without fear of judgment (Shenk and Fruzzetti 2014; Sorin 2003). In such environments, children develop greater emotional awareness and learn to manage their distress constructively (Lambie and Lindberg 2016). Feeling supported in this way is a critical foundation for help-seeking behaviors, as children are most likely to reach out when they perceive the emotional climate as safe and acceptable (Moran 2007; Nelson-Le Gall 1981; Sorin 2003).

Although few studies have directly examined emotional validation as a social cue in children's help-seeking behaviors, research points to its broad importance in emotional development. Emotionally validating feedback among young adults helps buffer emotional downturns during stressful tasks (Benitez et al. 2022; Kim and Kim 2013; Kuo et al. 2022; Shenk and Fruzzetti 2011). In children, validation has been linked to increased emotional awareness and improved emotion regulation (Warren and Stifter 2008). For example, maternal emotional validation has been shown to predict children's emotional awareness more strongly than age, sex, and verbal intelligence quotient, whereas maternal

invalidation negatively affects emotional understanding (Lambie and Lindberg 2016). Similarly, while emotionally validating language from teachers helps children manage emotions and approach challenging situations with greater ease, emotionally minimizing responses inhibit their emotional expression, thereby limiting their emotional understanding and social-emotional competence (King and La Paro 2018; King 2021; Pankey and King 2024).

1.4 | The Present Study

Building on this line of work, we examined whether emotional validation influences children's social decisions regarding whom to approach for help. Study 1 investigated whether mothers' tendencies to validate their children's emotions during everyday interactions predicted their children's willingness to seek help. Study 2 employed an experimental design to directly test children's choice of helper by observing two adults interacting with a puppet struggling with a challenging task: one adult validated the puppet's emotions, whereas the other invalidated them. After observing these interactions, the children were asked to choose the adult they would like to approach for help in a similar, challenging situation.

Additionally, we examined the age interaction in this decision-making process. Given prior evidence that children's understanding of emotional situations and their ability to infer emotional intentions improve significantly between ages 3 and 6 (Hughes et al. 1981; Riddell et al. 2024), and that by age 5, children begin to appreciate emotions as meaningful shared experiences (Bensalah et al. 2016), we hypothesized a developmental shift. Specifically, we expected older preschoolers (5–6 years) to use emotional validation as an affective trust cue in their social decisions more consistently than younger preschoolers (3–4 years).

2 | Study 1

2.1 | Method

In Study 1, we examined whether emotional validation is associated with preschoolers' help-seeking behaviors. We hypothesized that higher parental emotional validation would be positively related to preschoolers' help-seeking tendencies.

2.2 | Participants

To determine the sample size required for sufficient power, we conducted a statistical power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al. 2007, 2009). A priori power analysis indicated a minimum sample size of 84 to detect a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$) with a power of 0.80 for bivariate correlation analysis. To ensure sufficient power and enable age-group comparisons, we recruited 200 mothers through an online panel (Macromill Embrain), with 100 mothers of younger preschoolers and 100 mothers of older preschoolers, all currently raising a child aged 3–6 years. The mean ages of mothers and children were 37.18 years ($SD = 3.55$) and 4.5 years ($SD = 1.12$), respectively. The children's sex was equally distributed (girls: $n = 100$, 50%).

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics and correlation among variables (Study 1).

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Children's age (years)	4.50 (1.12)	—					
2. Children's sex (male = 1)	0.50 (0.50)	0.00	—				
3. Mother's age (years)	37.19 (3.55)	0.26***	−0.02	—			
4. SES	0.00 (0.82)	−0.12	−0.01	0.08	—		
5. Mother's emotional validation	3.81 (0.47)	−0.20**	0.03	−0.06	−0.04	—	
6. Children's help-seeking	3.99 (0.52)	−0.06	0.03	−0.05	−0.01	0.29***	—

Note: $N = 200$.

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

2.3 | Materials

2.3.1 | Emotional Validation

Following Jeon and Park (2024), we used the Korean-translated version of the Emotion Validation Experiences Questionnaire (EVEQ; Dinis and Gouveia 2011) to measure mothers' tendencies to validate their children's emotions. The original scale was designed to assess adolescents' perceptions of their parents; therefore, the wording was revised to enable parents to evaluate emotional validation tendency of their child (i.e., "I accepted and normalized my child's emotions," "I encouraged my child to talk about their emotions, making them feel that they would still be accepted and respected if they did so"). The questionnaire comprised 10 items (six validation items and four invalidation items) rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*). The invalidation items were reverse-coded so that high scores indicated a greater tendency to validate a child's emotions. The internal reliability of the 10-item scale was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.77$).

2.3.2 | Child Help-Seeking Behavior

We used the autonomy subscale of the Trait Help-Seeking Scale (Komissarouk et al. 2017) to measure children's help-seeking tendencies toward caregivers. As the original scale was designed to assess adults' perceptions of their own help-seeking styles, we modified the wording to allow mothers to rate their children's help-seeking tendencies. Moreover, we excluded items that assessed behaviors not applicable to young children (e.g., "I tend to look for the kind of help that would allow me to deal with a problem better on my own," "I believe that the best way to deal with problems is to obtain guidance that will eventually help me arrive at solutions on my own."). As a result, two items remained (i.e., "When my child encounters a problem, s/he talks to me to improve their ability to cope with it," "When my child encounters a problem, s/he tends to ask for my opinions to gain a new perspective, and then they face the problem again on their own"). The questionnaire was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*), and high scores indicate greater tendencies for seeking help from their mothers. The correlation between the two items was significant ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$).

2.3.3 | Demographic Information

Data were collected from a socioeconomically diverse sample in South Korea. Most data were collected from Seoul, Gyeonggi, and Incheon (109 of 200, 55%), which are considered metropolitan areas in South Korea. To assess families' socioeconomic status (SES), we measured caregivers' education levels and annual family income. Mothers' education levels were recorded as total years of education, ranging from 12 years ("Graduated high school") to 18 years ("Master's degree or higher"). Family income was categorized into six ranges (1 = *less than KRW 10 million*; 2 = *more than KRW 10 million to less than KRW 30 million*; 3 = *more than KRW 30 million to less than KRW 50 million*; 4 = *more than KRW 50 million to less than KRW 70 million*; 5 = *more than KRW 70 million to less than KRW 100 million*; and 6 = *more than KRW 100 million*).[1]

We computed standardized scores (*z*-scores) for both family income and maternal education, and averaged them to create a composite SES index.

3 | Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the primary variables. Mothers' tendencies to validate their children's emotions were not associated with most demographic variables, including child sex, mother's age, and SES; $p\text{s} > 0.05$, although there was a small negative correlation with child age ($r = -0.20$, $p = 0.005$). Similarly, children's help-seeking tendencies were not related to any demographic variables ($p\text{s} > 0.05$).

Consistent with our hypothesis, maternal emotional validation significantly predicted the help-seeking tendencies of children ($b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.17, 0.47], $p < 0.001$). The association remained significant after controlling for all demographic variables ($b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.47], $p < 0.001$; Table 2). These findings suggest that children are more likely to seek support from caregivers who acknowledge and accept their emotions regularly. In emotionally challenging situations, children may view validation as a sign that adults are emotionally available and safe to approach for support.

We also tested whether children's age moderated the relationship between mothers' tendencies to validate their children's emotions

TABLE 2 | Regression models (Study 1).

Model	Variables	b	SE	95% CI	R^2
1	(Constant)	2.78	0.29	[2.21, 3.34]	0.08
	Emotional validation	0.32***	0.07	[0.17, 0.47]	
2	(Constant)	2.97	0.50	[1.99, 3.96]	0.09
	Children's age (years)	0.00	0.03	[−0.06, 0.07]	
	Children's sex (male = 1)	0.02	0.07	[−0.12, 0.16]	
	Mother's age (years)	−0.01	0.01	[−0.03, 0.01]	
	SES	0.00	0.04	[−0.08, 0.09]	
	Emotional validation	0.32***	0.08	[0.16, 0.47]	
3	(Constant)	3.69	0.60	[2.51, 4.87]	0.11
	Children's sex (male = 1)	0.02	0.07	[−0.12, 0.16]	
	Mother's age (years)	−0.01	0.01	[−0.03, 0.01]	
	SES	0.00	0.04	[−0.08, 0.09]	
	Emotional validation	0.14	0.12	[−0.09, 0.37]	
	Children's age (older children = 1)	−1.16	0.59	[−2.32, 0.01]	
	Emotional validation × Children's age	0.31*	0.15	[0.01, 0.61]	

Note: N = 200.

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.
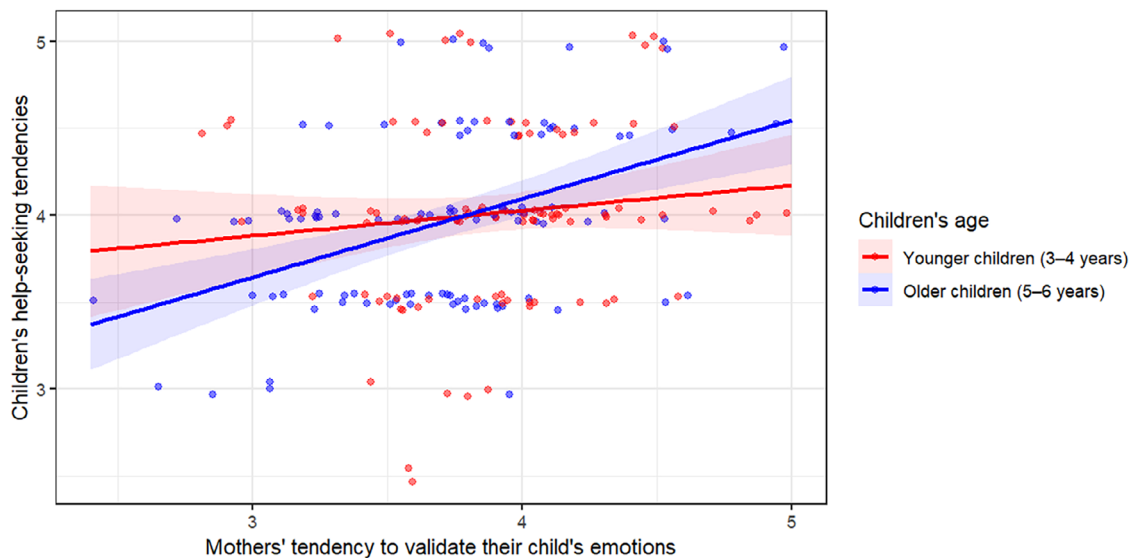
FIGURE 1 | Moderating effect of age group between mothers' tendency to validate their children and child's help-seeking behavior (Study 1).

and help-seeking behaviors. Children's ages were dichotomized into two groups: younger children (0 = *3–4 years old*) and older children (1 = *5–6 years old*). The results revealed a significant moderating effect of the age groups ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.61], $\eta^2 = 0.02$, $p = 0.045$; Figure 1). For older children, the more parents reported having validated their children's emotions, the more likely the children were to seek help ($b = 0.45$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.65], $p < 0.001$). However, for younger children, the level of parental emotional validation did not predict children's help-seeking tendencies ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [−0.09, 0.37], $p = 0.225$).

Study 1 indicated that mothers who validated their children's emotions more frequently tended to have children with higher help-seeking tendencies; this effect was mainly driven by older children. Although the data are correlational and therefore cannot establish causality, the pattern points to a potentially important developmental mechanism: children may learn to identify supportive adults based on how their emotions are received. To test this more directly, Study 2 used an experimental design to examine whether the observed validation influenced children's help-seeking choices.
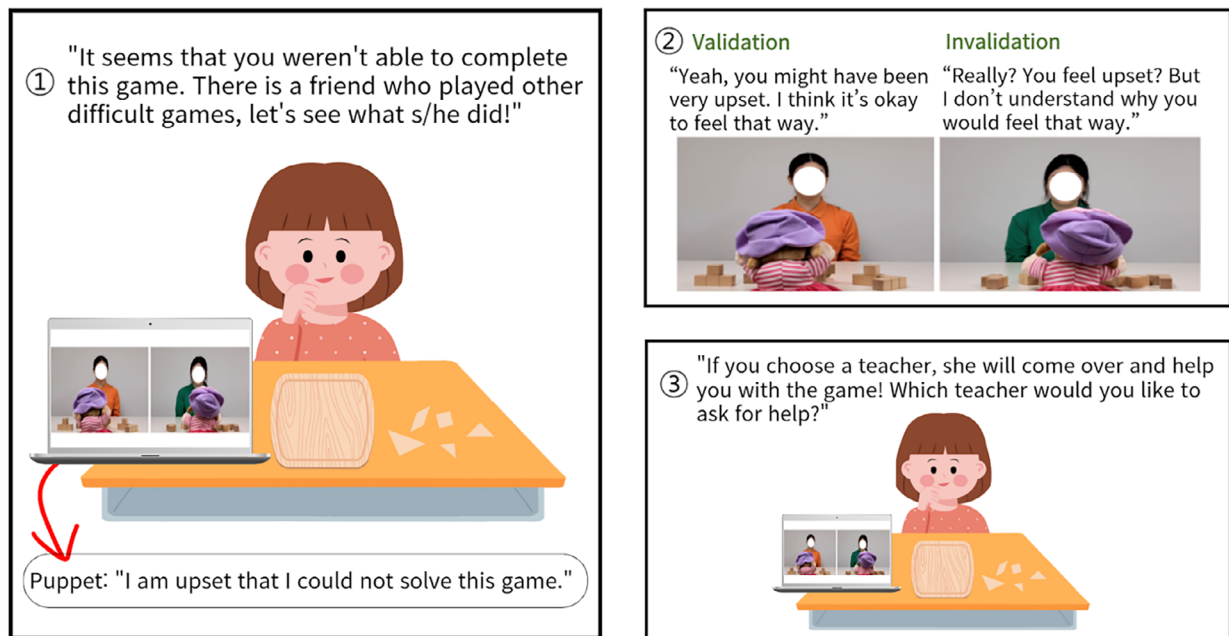
FIGURE 2 | Schematic of the experimental procedure for Study 2.

4 | Study 2

4.1 | Method

In Study 2, we examined whether emotional validation influenced preschoolers' help-seeking behaviors using a within-subjects design. To assess children's help-seeking behavior, we presented them with a challenging puzzle game (the tangram puzzle) that they were unable to complete independently. Subsequently, the children were shown two video clips depicting a puppet struggling with a similar puzzle game (the soma cube puzzle). In one clip, the instructor validated the puppet's feelings of frustration, whereas in the other clip, the instructor invalidated them. After viewing both scenarios, children were asked to choose the instructor they would ask for help with the puzzle they had failed before. We hypothesized that preschoolers would be more likely to seek help from the instructor who had previously validated the puppet's emotion.

4.2 | Participants

To determine the sample size required for sufficient power, we conducted a statistical power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al. 2007, 2009). An a priori analysis based on effect sizes from previous research with similar designs (Zhao et al. 2021), indicated that at least 34 children per group were required to achieve a power of 0.80. In our experimental design, children were asked to choose an instructor based on two responses (emotional validation or emotional invalidation). The final sample consisted of 34 children aged 3–4 years ($M = 3.85$ years, $SD = 0.36$; girls: $n = 16$) and 34 children aged 5–6 years ($M = 5.50$ years, $SD = 0.51$; girls: $n = 16$) from seven kindergartens in Seoul, South Korea. For recruitment, kindergartens were randomly contacted to request permission from their principals. Upon receiving approval, we distributed a link to an online consent form to the parents. We

initially tested 75 children, but seven were excluded from the analysis: six due to inattentiveness to the video clips and one due to distraction by the teacher during the experiment.

4.3 | Materials

The children viewed two video clips on laptops with screens at least 13 in wide. Both clips portrayed the same scenario in which a puppet (measuring 40 cm in height) engaged in challenging puzzles and eventually failed, while a female instructor observed the puppet's struggle (Figure 2). The only difference between the clips was the instructors' responses to the struggling puppet. In the validation clip, one instructor validated the puppet's feelings. In the invalidation clip, a different instructor invalidated the puppet's feelings. The order of the instructors' responses was randomized, and no ordering effect was found ($p = 0.229$). The children were then asked who they wanted help from. A score of 1 was assigned if the children chose the instructor with an emotionally validating response and a score of 0 if the children chose the instructor with emotionally invalidating responses. The puppet's sex matched that of the participant.

4.4 | Procedure

The experiment was conducted individually in a separate classroom at the participating kindergarten. A tangram puzzle was provided to the children before measuring their help-seeking behavior. This served two purposes: to draw the children's interest and familiarize them with the experimental environment by providing a similar game that would be presented later in the study. The tangram puzzle was intentionally calibrated to be sufficiently challenging to ensure that the children could not complete it independently. A total of 3 min was allocated for the task. The experimenter remained seated on the table without interacting or

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making eye contact with the child. Based on a prior observational studies of children's behavior (Jeon and Park 2024; Leonard et al. 2020), if a child asked for help, the experimenter consistently responded in a manner that emphasized the children's independent task engagement (e.g., "This toy is for you, so I cannot help with it,") and then returned to filling out paperwork. When the time was up, the experimenter took the puzzle and said, "It seems that you weren't able to complete this game. There is a friend who played other difficult games, let's see what s/he did!" Children were shown two video clips depicting a puppet struggling to complete a soma cube puzzle. In both clips, a female instructor and a puppet were introduced as a teacher and friend, respectively, to facilitate the children's understanding of the scenario. Each instructor wore either an orange or green t-shirt while observing the puppet struggling. After 10 s, the puppet expressed frustration by saying, "I am upset that I could not solve this game." Subsequent responses from the instructors differed across the conditions. In the validation clip, one instructor responded with, "Yeah, you might have been very upset. I think it's okay to feel that way." In the invalidation clip, the other instructor responded with, "Really? You feel upset? But I don't understand why you would feel that way." Both validated and invalidated responses were delivered in a neutral tone of voice with no valence facial expressions. The order of the feedback was counterbalanced such that some children watched the validation clip first, followed by the invalidation clip, and vice versa. Following the viewing of both clips, children were presented with a manipulation-check question, "What did the teacher in green/orange say to the friend who said they were upset?" If the child provided an incorrect response or indicated that they could not remember the response, the video was played once again. The experimenter then proceeded to the next step without asking the manipulation check questions. The experimenter then asked the child, "I am going to ask you a question. I would like you to point to the answer with your fingers." Children were asked to choose which instructor from the videos they preferred to ask for help with the tangram puzzle game they had failed to complete (i.e., "If you choose a teacher, she will come over and help you with the game! Which teacher would you like to ask for help?", see the Supporting Information for the English and Korean versions of the study script).

5 | Results and Discussion

We conducted a binomial test to examine which adult the child preferred to seek help from. Across the full sample, the number of children who preferred the emotion-validating instructor did not significantly differ from that of children who chose the emotion-invalidating instructor ($p = 0.114$). To explore whether children's preferences for emotional validation changed with age, we conducted a binary logistic regression using age (in years) as the predictor and choice of an emotionally validating adult as the outcome. The regression model was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 11.44$, $p = 0.001$, −2Log likelihood = 79.93, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.21$. The effect of age in years was significant ($b = 1.00$, $SE = 0.33$, 95% CI [1.43, 5.19], $p = 0.002$), indicating that older children were more likely to choose the emotionally validating adult as their preferred helper.

Specifically, for younger children (3–4 years), there were no significant differences in their choice between the two instructors,

and a binomial test revealed that 14 of 34 (41%) selected the emotionally validating adult ($p = 0.392$). A one-sample binomial test was conducted to determine whether children's choices differed by chance (50%) within each age group. The results confirmed that younger children did not show a preference for validating or invalidating adults ($p = 0.391$). However, older children (5–6 years) showed a clear preference; 27 of 34 children (79%) chose the emotionally validating adult ($p = 0.001$; see Figure 3). These findings suggest that, while younger preschoolers did not show a clear preference between the two adults, older preschoolers were more likely to seek help from someone who acknowledged and accepted others' emotions.

6 | General Discussion

Asking for help is a natural and essential part of learning, but doing so often carries an emotional weight. Children, like adults, must decide not only when to seek help, but also whom to approach. In these moments of vulnerability, they navigated both the practical challenges in front of them and their emotional need for support. Across the two studies, we examined whether preschoolers considered emotional validation when choosing whom to turn to for help.

Study 1 found that children whose mothers engaged in more frequent emotional validation were more likely to seek help from their mothers. Importantly, this association between emotional validation and children's help-seeking behaviors was observed regardless of demographic variables such as sex and SES. These findings suggest that emotional validation, which can be naturally embedded in everyday parent–child interactions, may be equally effective across different groups. That is, the effectiveness of maternal emotional validation serves as a cue for promoting children's help-seeking behavior across sex and SES levels, suggesting that emotional validation plays a key role in fostering supportive relationships.

Study 2 provided causal evidence that preschoolers were more likely to seek help from an adult who had previously acknowledged another person's feelings (i.e., the puppet's). Our findings indicate a meaningful developmental shift in children's evaluations of potential helpers. Although younger preschoolers did not show a definite inclination toward a certain adult (emotionally validating or invalidating), older preschoolers were much more likely to choose to receive help from adults who validated the puppet's emotions. The predicted age-related difference in sensitivity to emotional validation reflects several converging developmental processes. Research shows that younger preschoolers (3–4 years) have difficulty using emotional cues to infer others' behaviors or intentions, whereas by around the age of 5, they become more consistent in interpreting affective cues as reliable indicators of how others will act (Boseovski and Lee 2006; Richard et al. 2025). Additionally, children's understanding of emotions develops rapidly between the ages of 3 and 6, shifting from recognizing basic emotional expressions to appreciating emotions as meaningful psychological states that can reveal something about a person's character and trustworthiness (Bensalah et al. 2016; Weimer et al. 2012). This developmental trajectory reflects improved emotion recognition and an enhanced cognitive capacity to integrate emotional information with other social cues
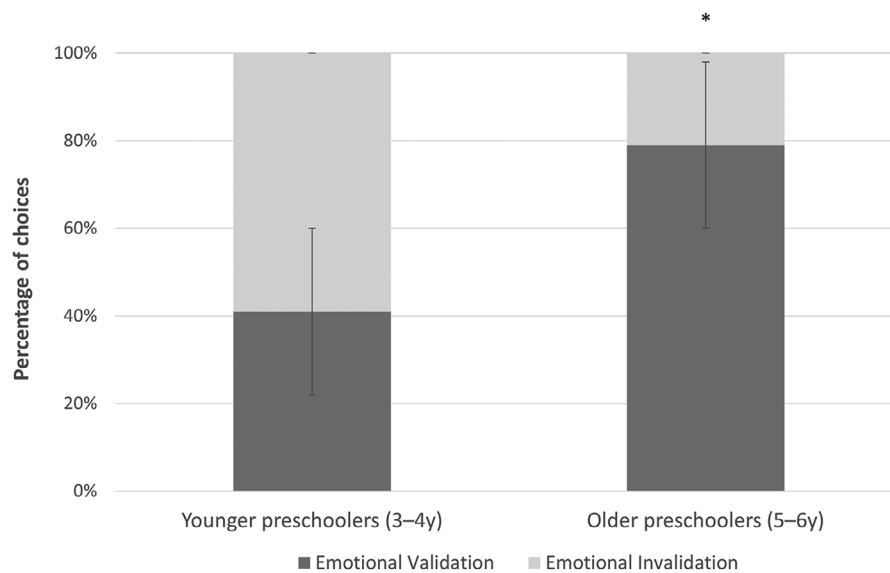
FIGURE 3 | Children's preference for seeking help (Study 2). *Note:* $N = 68$; $M_{age} = 4.68$; Data represent percentage of choices in instructors and error bars (± 1 standard error). *$p < 0.01$.

when making trust-related decisions. Thus, younger children may notice when someone is emotionally supportive but lack the cognitive flexibility to weigh this cue alongside more immediate or familiar signals when choosing a helper. However, by the age of 5, children may develop sufficient ability to treat emotional validation as a meaningful social signal and incorporate it systematically into their help-seeking decisions.

Although Study 1 (correlational, maternal reports) and 2 (experimental, child's choice) employed different methods, they converged on the same conclusion about the role of emotional validation in children's help-seeking, thereby strengthening both external and internal validity. Study 1 captured children's everyday behaviors within established caregiver relationships, underscoring ecological validity, whereas Study 2 used experimental control with novel instructors to test causal effects. In addition, Study 1 examined mothers' general tendency to validate emotions, while Study 2 focused on an experimenter's specific act of validation. Despite these methodological differences, both studies demonstrate that emotional validation serves as a fundamental social signal, guiding children's evaluation of potential helpers.

6.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, in Study 2, children observed a puppet rather than directly experiencing their own emotions being validated or invalidated to minimize discomfort. However, we anticipate that similar—or even stronger—effects would emerge when children's own emotions are validated or invalidated. We encourage future research to examine this possibility directly. Second, emotional validation and invalidation were presented through scripted lines, which may not fully capture tone, body language, and context in real interactions. Emotional validation is often communicated through warmth, empathy, and supportive nonverbal cues while invalidation may occur through a dismissive tone, lack of eye contact, or signs of impatience (Shenk and Fruzzetti 2011, 2014). These aspects can

strongly influence how children perceive others, and whether they choose to seek support. We expect emotional validation to have an even greater effect when paired with nonverbal signals such as warm tones, expressive facial cues, and gentle gestures that convey genuine empathy. Third, we measured children's help-seeking preferences using only a forced-choice paradigm. Although forced-choice paradigm is widely used and validated in developmental research as a measure of social preferences (e.g., deMayo and Olson 2024; Kinzler and Spelke 2011; Shutts et al. 2013; Tasimi and Johnson 2019), we encourage future work to replicate our finding with behavioral measures (e.g., observing which adult children actually seek help from when one has provided validation vs. invalidation) to provide converging evidence. Finally, in Study 2, because we compared two conditions, emotional validation and invalidation, it remains unclear whether the children were drawn to the validating adult or simply avoided the invalidating adult. Although prior research suggests that the effects of validation stem from the unique benefits of validation itself (Jeon and Park 2024), future studies should examine this question more directly in the context of children's help-seeking behaviors.

Although emotional validation is often discussed in parenting literature, its developmental significance has received far less attention in empirical research. Although it is widely accepted that a "supportive environment" encourages help-seeking (Nelson-Le Gall 1981; Sorin 2003), what makes an environment feel supportive to a child remains unclear. Our study identified one powerful component: emotional validation. By age 5, children are not only capable of recognizing emotionally validating responses, but also use this information to guide meaningful social choices, such as deciding whom to approach when they need help. When adults acknowledge and accept a child's emotional world, they create a climate in which help-seeking feels safe.

Fortunately, prior research suggests that emotional validation can be taught (Shenk and Fruzzetti 2011). Parents who received brief training in emotionally validating strategies showed measurable

improvements in how they responded to their children's feelings (Lambie and Lindberg 2016; Lambie et al. 2020). In one study, parents who practiced validating responses during book reading and games saw gains in their children's emotional awareness, and the children began to extend these validation strategies to others in their lives (Lambie et al. 2020). Our results suggest that such training may strengthen children's willingness to reach out for help, particularly after emotionally charged experiences.

In conclusion, this study goes beyond examining how children choose someone to help them with tasks. It touches on how children begin to notice who understands them, who listens, and who feels approachable during moments of difficulty. Emotional validation is not a dramatic act. It is a small moment of acknowledgment. For children, that acknowledgment may make it easier for them to reach out rather than face challenges on their own.

Author Contributions

Minji Kim: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. **Jeewon Jeon**: conceptualization, investigation, writing – review and editing. **Gerardo Ramirez**: conceptualization, writing – review and editing. **Daeun Park**: conceptualization, supervision, writing – review and editing, funding acquisition.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Sungkyunkwan University (reference number: 2024-08-035 for Study 1 and 2024-03-008 for Study 2).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

We appreciate the children, parents, and teachers for the participation and support, and the contributions of the students who assisted with data collection and coding.

Endnotes

[1] According to Statistics Korea, the average household income in Seoul in 2024 is expected to be KRW 76.96 million, KRW 82.31 million in Gyeonggi province, and KRW 65.15 million in Incheon (Statistics Korea 2024). Our sample falls within the range of average household income in Seoul (KRW 78.87 million) and Incheon (KRW 65.80 million); however, it is relatively lower than the average in Gyeonggi province (KRW 72.28 million).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting File 1: desc70095-sup-0001-SuppMat.docx Supplementary materials which support the findings of these studies are openly available in the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/m8ue5.