Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: To understand the human experience, one of the most important things is for children to learn to identify emotions, what they feel, why they feel that way, and how to validate and regulate emotions in themselves. It's a big job. And every person a child comes into contact with plays a role. I'm Nicki Donnelson. Today on the Missouri State Journal, I'm talking to Dr. Elizabeth King. She teaches in the College of Education at Missouri State University and researches the language preschool teachers use that either validate or dismiss emotions. She starts by explaining gendered language.

Dr. Elizabeth K...: When we're thinking about gendered language, I always think that it's tied to a variety of narratives that we've heard a lot of. So when we're thinking about how we talk about emotions, for example, with girls and with boys, especially with the young ones, I always tie it to what we think we know and what we expect and what we want to socialize in girls and boys. And so it's tied to all of these broader narratives that we've heard, things like, well, boys will be boys, or big boys don't cry. Things that are ingrained into our media and into the ways that we talk about things. And those things actually have implications for how we talk to young children.

Nicki Donnelson: This emotional competency starts early. So much of her research has been with toddlers on the range of one to three years old.

Dr. Elizabeth K...: So my most recent work has focused on what's called teacher's minimizing emotion language, which is essentially language that distances the teacher from the feeling of the child. So the most common example of emotion minimizing language is, you're fine, you're okay, stop crying, there's no need to cry. So I look to see how this type of language relates to toddlers' social and emotional competence. And that's just an umbrella term for one's ability to understand one's own emotions, other people's emotions, and the ability to use emotions in social situations to achieve social goals.

The more teachers use this emotion minimizing language, the more they say, "You're okay, you're fine," the less social emotional competence children exhibit in those classrooms. And even when I've looked further, this relationship was stronger for boys than for girls. So in this case, if teachers are telling a boy when he's feeling sad kind of just stop expressing that emotion, you're fine. It's fine. You don't feel sad. They actually get worse at dealing with that emotion because they have less practice.

Nicki Donnelson: King points out that not learning to properly express emotions or worse yet, having those emotions dismissed has ramifications for relationships throughout the life cycle.

Dr. Elizabeth K...: When I think about how little boys hear that message, that I'm fine. I don't need to express this emotion. I don't need to deal with this feeling. What do they do? They might act out or they might internalize it. And so think about even what we do as adults. Let's say the end of a long day of work, you come home and you're talking to your partner and you're going through the trials and tribulations of your day. And your partner says, "Let's chill out." What do you do as an adult? Either you might explode or you might internalize that feeling and think to yourself, "Okay, yeah, he doesn't want to hear this. I'm going to stop expressing this." And so for little boys, if we're teaching them to stop expressing their feelings, they stop practicing how to appropriately express their feelings, they might get worse at that.

Nicki Donnelson: The study revealed that in addition to the dismissiveness of emotions in boys, teachers also were more responsive to the positivity in young girls. Teachers also talk to girls more frequently about emotions. King, as a teacher of future teachers is working to change this. She asks her students to reflect on why a child's emotions may make them feel or react a specific way. She also works with them to learn to validate all emotions a student presents. Now she's expanding the study to incorporate another layer, race.

Dr. Elizabeth K...: I'm preparing to collect data on this same thing, teachers emotion language, and I'm adding a racial identity component because research has found that adults more often incorrectly rates black children's emotions as anger, even when they're not angry, which has implications for how adults respond to those emotions. So how punitive they are in their emotion language, which then even has implications for heightened disciplinary action for black children.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Elizabeth King. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.