

ABSTRACT

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An Analysis of the Effects of Parent-Child Quality of Relationship and Parental Emotion Socialization Practices on Youth Psychosocial Functioning
(Under the Direction of CYNTHIA SUVEG)

Understanding influences on children's emotional development has been given much attention by researchers due to the connection between emotional competence and youth's broader psychosocial adjustment. The current study aims to further explore relations between parent emotion socialization practices, parent-child relationship quality, and youth psychosocial functioning with a sample of 42 families including 7-12 year old children. These relations were analyzed based on both surveys as well as behavioral observations. Results indicated that paternal punitive emotion socialization practices were associated with lower psychosocial functioning and lower quality of parent-child-relationship.

INDEX WORDS: Parent Emotional Encouragement, Parent-Child Relationship, Child Social Problems, Child Emotion Regulation

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF PARENT-CHILD QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP
AND PARENTAL EMOTION SOCIALIZATION PRACTICES ON YOUTH
PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONING

by

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DEDICATION

To Wei for supporting me during the research process through the long days and late nights. This whole experience would not have been the same had you not been going through it with me. And, to my family for continually pushing me to be the best that I can be in all of my endeavors in academics and life in general.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Understanding the processes behind emotional management in children has been given much attention by researchers due to the connection being established between emotional competence and social functioning (Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Losoya, 1997; Hubbard & Coie, 1994; Saarni, 1999). In particular, an important factor in understanding children's emotional regulation abilities is the role that parents play in the socialization of emotion. Research has shown that parental influence is a strong environmental influence that brings about the socialization of emotional expression skills (Eisenberg et al., 1997; Suveg, Zeman, Flannery-Schroeder, & Cassano, 2005; Suveg, Sood, Barmish, Tiwari, & Kendall, 2008). Further understanding of the relations between the parent-child relationship and children's ability to adaptively regulate emotion would provide great benefits to families by allowing for the increase in children's social functioning skills.

Social and Emotional Competence

Social competence is a very important developmental aspect for children. Social competence includes social skills, peer status, and relationship success (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Emotional competence refers to the ability to act efficaciously in emotionally arousing situations, and is often considered a primary skill involved in children's adaptive social functioning and psychological adjustment (Suveg & Zeman, 2004). A plethora of research links social and emotional functioning (e.g., Hubbard & Coie, 1994). As one study notes, because emotion regulation can be viewed as a social process rather than an intraindividual process, it is not surprising that emotion regulation is a large part of high-quality social functioning (Eisenberg,

Fabes, Guthrie, and Reiser, 2000). A lack of adaptive emotion regulation has been indicated in various forms of psychopathology (e.g., anxiety, depression), which indicates the impact of emotion expression and regulation on people's capability for social interaction (Eisenberg et al., 2000).

Research has also looked at emotion regulation in children across specific emotions; in regards to anxiety, one study has shown that inappropriate management of worry can bring about an unfocused attention style, sensitivity to emotional information, and self absorption (Tallis & Eysenck, 1994). Furthermore, adaptively relying on regulated coping strategies has been shown to lower child anxiety (Gustafson, 2007). The current study will examine emotion regulation in children across four specific emotions: anxious, sad, happy, and angry.

Parental Roles

Because adaptive social functioning is considered a primary component of children's overall adjustment, research has examined variables that facilitate and/or impede social development. One line of research has examined parent-child factors given that an individual's early experiences with caregivers contribute to the formation of schemas about social relationships that have potential implications for later social functioning (Bowlby, 1980). Research examining the development of both social and emotional competence suggests that parents play a key role in facilitating these skills. Among the ways that emotion socialization can occur are through direct instruction, modeling, family emotional climate, and imitation (Suveg et al., 2005).

One of the factors thought to be involved in the emotion socialization process is parents' specific attitudes towards their children's expression of emotion. One type of response that has been studied is parents' punitive reactions, which is when parents use verbal or physical

punishment in response to children's negative emotion expression. Several studies' findings support the link between parents' reactions towards children's negative expression of emotion and children's socioemotional functioning (Jones, Eisenberg, Fabes, & MacKinnon, 2002; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996).

Another factor thought to impact the social functioning of children is the parent-child quality of relationship. Research suggests that there is a "strong link between the quality of parent-child attachment and outcomes such as aggression, social skills and self-esteem" (Ooi, Ang, & Fung, 2006, p. 553). Ooi reported that children with high security of relationships with their parents had less hostility and emotional distress, whereas those with insecure relationships had more aggressive behaviors and were less socially competent with lower self-esteem. The parent-child relationship does not only affect the development of social behavior, but also the development of emotional functioning. The quality of the relationship between the parent and child could implicate the availability of these emotion socializing opportunities, thus affecting the development of emotional competency.

Based on empirical foundations, the current study aims to further explore relations between parent emotion socialization practices, parent-child relationship quality, and youth psychosocial functioning. These relations will be analyzed based on both surveys as well as behavioral observations. It is expected that: 1) parental discouraging emotion socialization practices and quality of parent-child relationship will be negatively and positively related to adaptive child psychosocial functioning, respectively and 2) parental discouraging emotion socialization practices will be negatively related to quality of parent-child relationship.

CHAPTER 2 METHOD

Participants

This study included 42 families consisting of children (50% female) and their parents (42 mothers, 41 fathers). The sample was recruited from local community school systems in northeast Georgia, flyers that were posted throughout the community, and family physician's offices. The children in the study were ages 7 to 12 years old ($M = 9.11 \pm 1.68$), and came from Caucasian (76.2%), African American (9.5%), Asian (4.8%), Hispanic (4.8%), and "other" (2.4%) backgrounds. Mothers (M age = 39.4 ± 5.9 years) and fathers (M age = 41.6 ± 7.2) that had not lived with the child for at least the past two years were excluded from the current study. The socioeconomic breakdown of the study was such that 23.8% of the sample earned between \$20,000 and \$39,999, 33.3% between \$40,000 and \$59,999, 11.9% between \$60,000 and \$79,999, and 31% of the sample earned over \$80,000.

Procedure

Once potential participants called the lab, they were screened over the phone to determine whether or not they would be appropriate for the study. Participants were excluded from the current study if the child had an IQ under 80 to ensure the child could complete the questionnaires, if the child had not been living with the caregivers for at least the past two years, and if the child had any psychotic symptoms, suicidal ideation, or any other variables that would hinder participation. Once participants were deemed eligible for the study, they were scheduled to come into the laboratory for an assessment. At the beginning of the assessment, parents provided informed consent and children gave verbal assent for participation. The parents and

children were given a series of surveys including a demographics measure. Research assistants assisted the children and parents with the questionnaires as needed. After completion of the questionnaires, the parents and children completed an emotion discussion task. In this task, the families were told to speak for five minutes about an emotion provoking situation of their choosing. The families discussed situations in which the children felt anxious, sad, happy, and angry for a total of twenty minutes. The emotion discussion task was videotaped to allow for future coding of parent-child interactions. Before the children left, they were allowed to take a small token of appreciation, such as an inexpensive toy or a folder, with them and the parents were reimbursed for their time. All procedures followed were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). This questionnaire is a 118-item parent-report of children's psychosocial functioning over the past 6 months. Items are rated on a 3-point Likert scale, consisting of "not true," "sometimes true," and "very true or often true." The CBCL consists of eight subscales and three composite scales. The social problems subscale was used for this study and consists of 11 items relating to children's feelings of rejection by peers, feelings of social isolation and inferiority, and age-appropriateness of their social behaviors.

Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997). This questionnaire is a 24-item parent report of children's emotion regulatory abilities. The Regulation subscale was used in this study. The Regulation subscale assesses the ability to manage emotions flexibly across environmental demands (e.g., "Responds positively to neutral or friendly overtures by peers" and "displays appropriate negative emotion (for example, anger, fear, frustration, distress)

in response to hostile, aggressive, or intrusive acts by peers”). This scale has solid internal consistency and validity (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997).

Coping with Children’s Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES; Fabes, Eisenberg, & Bernzweig, 1990). This questionnaire asks parents to report on the ways in which they respond to their children’s expressions of negative emotions. It is composed of 12 items that ask parents about potential distressful situations in which their child is expressing negative emotions (e.g., “If my child loses some prized possession and reacts with tears, I would...”). After each situation is presented, parents use a 7-point Likert scale to rate how likely they are to respond in 6 theoretically unique ways. In this study, we used one of the six subscales (i.e., punitive reactions). Punitive reactions would be expressed by parents’ use of verbal or physical punishment in response to children’s negative emotion expression. This scale has good internal reliability (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994).

Emotion Discussion Task. Advanced graduate and undergraduate research assistants coded video footage of the parents’ interaction with the child during the emotion task. The code was based on parenting behavior constructs found in Ginsburg and Grover’s Coding Manual for Parent-Child Interactions (2007). *Quality of Relationship* represented the overall quality of the parents’ relationship with the children. For the Quality of Relationship rating, the overall quality of the parent-child interaction over the five minute discussion was rated on a 7-point Likert scale with higher numbers representing higher quality interactions. This relationship was observed for mother-child, father-child, and family as an entire unit.

CHAPTER 3 RESULTS

Analyses examined the Pearson correlations between two factors of parent-child interaction and psychosocial functioning. First the correlations between parent response to children's negative emotion and emotion regulation and social competence were examined. Next, the correlations between parent-child quality of relationship and emotion regulation and social competence were examined. Finally, the correlations between parent response to children's negative emotion and parent-child quality of relationship were inspected. Table 1 contains means and standard deviations for these variables.

Parent Response to Children's Negative Emotion and Socioemotional Competence

To reiterate, parent response to children's negative emotion was measured via the Punitive subscale of the CCNES. Socioemotional competence was assessed via the social problems subscale of the CBCL as well as via the Regulation subscale of the parent reported ERC. For fathers, the Punitive subscale was negatively correlated with parent-reported emotion regulation ($r = -.38, p = .014$) and positively correlated with father-reported social problems ($r = .33, p = .033$). Thus greater display of fathers' punitive reactions related to lower emotion regulation and more social problems. For mothers, the Punitive subscale was not significantly correlated to any factor in this study's measurement of socioemotional competence. See Table 2 for the correlations.

Parent-Child Relationship Quality and Socioemotional Competence

Parent-child relationship quality was measured through behavioral observation. Both the father-child and mother-child dyads as well as the family as a whole were rated on quality of

relationship. However, for all three groups, there existed no significant correlations between any of the current study's measures of socioemotional competence. Table 3 indicates the specific intercorrelation between parent-child relationship quality and socioemotional competence.

Parent Response to Children's Negative Emotion and Parent-Child Relationship Quality

For fathers, the Punitive subscale of the CCNES was negatively correlated to quality of relationship for both the father-child ($r = -.40, p = .015$) and mother-child ($r = -.48, p = .002$) dyads as well as for the overall family interaction ($r = -.46, p = .004$). Thus greater display of fathers' punitive reactions related to lower relationship quality amongst all three groups. For mothers, the Punitive subscale of the CCNES was negatively correlated to quality of relationship for the mother-child dyad ($r = -.39, p = .018$) in a similar way to the fathers. Thus increased displays of mothers' punitive reactions related to lower relationship quality between mother and child. Table 4 indicates the specific intercorrelation between parent response to children's negative emotion and parent-child relationship quality.

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to further explore the connection between the role of parent-child interactions and child psychosocial functioning. Being able to regulate emotions adaptively is a major factor in social competence in youth. And, research has also noted the importance of parents in the process of facilitating children's ability to appropriately regulate emotion (Bowlby, 1980). Due to the importance of the parent-child relationship in this emotion socialization process, this study aimed to provide support for the correlation between the specific parent qualities and socioemotional competence. Some of the hypotheses posited by this study were supported by the current findings while other aspects were not supported. Our first hypothesis that parental discouraging emotion socialization practices and quality of parent-child relationship would be negatively and positively related to adaptive child psychosocial functioning, respectively, was partially supported. For fathers, punitive reactions' correlated with both emotion regulation as well as social competence showing support for this hypothesis. However, there was a lack of support for this connection with mothers. There also was no support for the correlation between parent-child relationship quality and socioemotional competence. Our second hypothesis that parental discouraging emotion socialization practices would be negatively related to quality of parent-child relationship had mixed support. The correlation seems to exist for punitive behavior in fathers and somewhat in mothers.

The findings that father's punitive reactions to children's negative emotion correlate to lower emotion regulation and increased social problems are as expected. By chronically reacting in a negative manner through such displays as frustration and anger in response to children's

negative emotion expression, parents teach their children that the expression of these negative emotions is not acceptable. For a child to be able to adaptively regulate emotion, the ability to appropriately display negative emotions is very important. This negative feedback does not promote the socialization of these emotional processes. It was expected that for fathers and mothers punitive responses would be correlated with both emotion regulation and social competence. However, it was likely due to the small sample size of the study that these results only emerged as significant for fathers and not for mothers.

The lack of support for the correlation between relationship quality and socioemotional competence was surprising but could have been due to several factors. The most glaring factor is that the sample size could have been too small to properly identify the relationship between these two variables. Another possibility is that the artificial nature of the lab setting in which the experiment took place may have caused families to behave in ways inconsistent with their normal functioning. This could have made it more difficult to properly assess the families' quality of relationship.

The study provided mixed support for the correlation between parent response to children's negative emotion and parent-child relationship quality. As expected, punitive responses from both mothers and fathers were correlated to lower relationship quality. These correlations support the notion that negative methods of teaching children emotion relate to the parent-child relationship itself. Chronic punitive and hostile responses to children's emotional displays are likely to impede youth emotion regulation and social competence as well as the quality of the parent-child relationship.

There are limitations to the current study. Primarily, the strength of the study was hindered due to a relatively small sample size. In the future a larger sample size will increase

power and the possibility to detect additional findings. Also, the artificial lab setting may have impacted the interactions between the parents and children. In the future it would be ideal to conduct the discussion task in a more comfortable setting such as the families' own homes. And finally, there are limitations to research involving the use of only correlations. Correlational analyses preclude causal statements. Further exploration of parents' roles in emotion socialization is necessary. In the future, studies should look at more aspects of the parent-child relationship that impact the process of emotion socialization.

Table 1 Descriptives

Measure	Mean	SD
1. Father Punitive Reactions ^a	2.49	.88
2. Mother Punitive Reactions ^a	2.06	.66
3. Father-reported Child Social Problems ^b	2.86	2.75
4. Mother-reported Child Social Problems ^b	3.76	3.37
5. Child Emotion Regulation ^c	48.37	6.50
6. Father-Child Relationship Quality ^d	5.89	1.34
7. Mother-Child Relationship Quality ^d	6.32	1.37
8. Family Relationship Quality ^d	6.06	1.34

Note. ^aAssessed with the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale; ^bAssessed with the Child Behavior Checklist Social Problems subscale; ^cAssessed with the parent-reported Emotion Regulation Checklist Regulation subscale; ^dAssessed with behavioral observation coding of Relationship Quality.

Table 2 Correlations between the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale, the Child Behavioral Checklist, and the Emotion Regulation Checklist

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Father Punitive Reactions ^a	-				
2. Mother Punitive Reactions ^a	.23	-			
3. Father-reported Child Social Problems ^b	.33*	.24	-		
4. Mother-reported Child Social Problems ^b	.31*	-.04	.49**	-	
5. Child Emotion Regulation ^c	-.38*	-.05	-.35*	-.45**	-

Note. ^aAssessed with the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale; ^bAssessed with the Child Behavior Checklist Social Problems subscale; ^cAssessed with the parent-reported Emotion Regulation Checklist Regulation subscale.

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

Table 3 Correlations between Relationship Quality based on behavioral observation, the Child Behavioral Checklist, and the Emotion Regulation Checklist

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Father-Child Relationship Quality ^a	-					
2. Mother-Child Relationship Quality ^a	.46**	-				
3. Family Relationship Quality ^a	.77**	.84**	-			
4. Father-reported Child Social Problems ^b	-.04	-.22	-.17	-		
5. Mother-reported Child Social Problems ^b	-.16	-.04	-.08	.49**	-	
6. Child Emotion Regulation ^c	.09	-.11	-.06	-.35*	-.45**	-

Note. ^a Assessed with behavioral observation coding of Relationship Quality; ^b Assessed with the Child Behavior Checklist Social Problems subscale; ^c Assessed with the parent-reported Emotion Regulation Checklist Regulation subscale.

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

Table 4 Correlations between the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale and Relationship Quality based on behavioral observation

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Father Punitive Reactions ^a	-				
2. Mother Punitive Reactions ^a	.23	-			
3. Father-Child Relationship Quality ^b	-.39*	-.12	-		
4. Mother-Child Relationship Quality ^b	-.48**	-.39*	.46**	-	
5. Family Relationship Quality ^b	-.46**	-.31	.77**	.84**	-

Note. ^a Assessed with the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale; ^b Assessed with behavioral observation coding of Relationship Quality.

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

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