

IMPACT OF PARENTAL DISCIPLINE METHODS ON THE CHILD'S INTERNALIZATION OF VALUES

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ABSTRACT

The goals of the present study were: 1) to describe and provide initial support for the validity of the Future Scenarios Questionnaire (FSQ), a new self-report questionnaire designed to measure parental responding to anticipated children's negative emotions; and 2) to examine how maternal responses on the FSQ related to young children's aggressive, asocial, and prosocial behaviours with peers. Further, this study examined whether the temperamental trait of negative affect moderated the relation between maternal responses on the FSQ and children's social adjustment outcomes. In particular, encouraging emotion expression significantly predicted more asocial behavior and less prosocial behavior (approached significance), but only for children rated high in negative affect. Similarly, discouraging emotion expression significantly predicted less aggressive behavior only for high negative affect children. None of these relations was significant for children rated low in negative affect. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed in terms of the importance of considering child temperament in emotion socialization processes.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important and challenging socialization tasks is the socialization of emotion. How a child comes to understand his or her own emotional life as well as that of others, in addition to how he or she expresses and regulates emotions, has significant implications for both personality organization and patterns of interrelating (Hubbard & Coie, 1994; Kopp, 1989; Saarni, 1990a).

Emotion socialization involves the processes by which parents (or other socialization agents) impart to children socially and culturally acceptable ways of expressing emotion, as well as effective ways of responding in situations when they, or others, are emotionally aroused. For a child to respond optimally to emotionally-charged events, he or she requires an understanding of emotion as well as an ability to regulate and cope with his or her own heightened affect. It is widely accepted that parents play a primary role in emotion socialization (Chaplin, Cole, & Zahn-Waxler, 2005; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). So while acknowledging the impact of siblings, peers, and teachers among others, it is the parental socialization of emotion that is the focus of this research. And although it is recognized that both mothers and fathers are important socializers in related and distinct ways, I focused on maternal socialization of emotion. As with other socialization outcomes, there are often pronounced individual differences in what mothers deem desirable or appropriate with respect to children's emotional displays and responses. That is, mothers have different ideas and feelings, both explicit and implicit, about children's emotional lives, likely resulting from their own socialization experiences and attachment histories. Not all of these ideas translate into socialization strategies that are adaptive with respect to children's social and emotional outcomes. Further, children themselves influence their own socialization in various ways. A significant and ongoing challenge for developmental researchers is to identify those socialization variables, be they from the mother, the child, or their interaction, that help produce emotionally and socially competent children. The current study was designed to contribute to this research objective. In particular, I examined one empirically neglected emotion socialization mechanism, that is, the ways in which mothers anticipate and verbally address future-oriented emotional events with their children, and how these ways might be related to children's social adjustment. I focused on emotion socialization in the preschool years because this is a time when emotionally-laden events are quite frequent, and because, during this time, parents are usually the foremost socializers of their children's emotional lives (Denham, 1998).

Further, the emergent representational capacities of children during this developmental stage permit greater opportunities for socialization of emotion via language and dialogue (Oppenheim & Waters, 1995; Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003). First, I will provide a brief overview of parental socialization of emotion and its links with children's social competence. The role of child temperament will also be discussed. Then I will describe the development and the preliminary validation of a new measure of emotion socialization, the Future Scenarios Questionnaire (FSQ). Finally, I will make predictions as to how the FSQ might relate to measures of young children's social adjustment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concerning talking with children about emotions, emotion coaches will help a children label their emotions, will educate children about the nature of emotion, and will teach children strategies for dealing with intense emotions. Dismissing parents, in contrast, will not be inclined to talk to children about emotions and if they do, it will not likely be in a supportive way. For example parents who perceive children's negative emotions as aversive or harmful tend to punish children or trivialize the negative emotion in order to quickly halt its expression (Gottman et al., 1997). Extrapolating from and expanding on some of these suggestions, I speculated that there are several different approaches parents might take when discussing imminent emotional events with their children. The FSQ attempts to capture these different approaches in a self-report format, which theoretically under two broad categories: strategies that encourage children's expressions of emotion, and strategies that inhibit or restrict children's expressions of emotion.

First, I will discuss possible approaches that fall under the category of encouraging children's emotion expression: (1) Acknowledging and labelling the anticipated emotion. In addition to teaching the child about emotions by assigning meaning, this strategy would also convey maternal acceptance and support of the emotion; (2) Helping the child feel more in control of the situation by instilling a sense of mastery or by helping him/her generate explicit strategies that might be effective in a particular situation (e.g. coaching or problem-solving); (3) Actively encourage the child to express and talk about the emotion in a direct way; and finally, (4) Using strategies that help the child mentally reframe an upcoming

stressful event. This could involve distancing from the emotional event without taking the child away from his or her feelings, for example, via storytelling, drawing pictures or some other abstract, creative strategy.

There are also several possible strategies that would likely serve to restrict or discourage a child's expression of emotion. These include: (1) Refrain from any discussion of the emotional content of the event or even the event itself, perhaps in an attempt to avoid creating feelings of anxiety or distress in a child (or the mother); (2) Discuss the event, but downplay or minimize the negative emotions that might be aroused; (3) Deceive the child about what he or she will likely feel (e.g. denial of the emotion) or distort the meaning of the emotional experience in some way (e.g. by providing inappropriate attributions about the cause of the emotion); (4) Shame or lecture a child about expressing the emotion perhaps in order to pre-empt an emotional display; (5) Use external contingencies such as threats or bribes in order to try to halt their children's expression of negative emotion. These could take the form of either material tangible contingencies (e.g. a treat) or a more "psychological" contingency, such as explicit maternal approval or disapproval; and finally, (6) Focus on the negative aspects of the situation by exaggerating or overestimating the severity, consequences, or the uncontrollability of the stressful event. This could be due to mothers becoming over-aroused themselves when faced with the thought of the child experiencing or displaying a negative emotion. Their focus on their own personal distress or discomfort would make it difficult to focus on the emotional needs of the child and support him/her through the emotional experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In mother-child conversations about the past, maternal styles of reminiscing do not appear to be situation-specific but rather, seem to reflect a consistent attribute of the mother (Reese & Fivush, 1993). Additionally, Kuersten-Hogan and McHale (2000) found a striking level of stability in mothers' use of emotion talk as children progress from the toddler years to the preschool years. In other words, mothers' tendencies to use either high or low levels of emotion talk when their children were toddlers continued as their children became preschoolers, despite significant changes in children's abilities to both verbally express emotions and understand parents' explanations of emotions.

These authors suggest that this consistency in emotion talk is due to other, enduring parental variables such as awareness of, interest in, and experience and comfort with emotional events. Consistent with these ideas, I predicted there would be other, more stable, maternal characteristics or traits that would relate in meaningful ways to mothers' response styles on the FSQ. In other words, the extent to which children's emotional expressions are encouraged or discouraged is likely to some extent indicative of more generalized maternal mindsets or internal schemas around emotions and relationships. These implicit, or to some extent unconscious, schemas would guide how mothers react and respond to their children's behaviors and emotional displays (Bugental & Happaney, 2002; Bugental, Johnston, New, & Silvester, 1998). Examples of some of these mindsets include maternal attachment representations, maternal mind-mindedness, and maternal perceptions of control in relationships. In the present study, each of these was assessed. In addition, a measure of maternal alexithymia, a personality construct, was included in order to assess mothers' potential deficits in the ability to describe, process, and regulate emotions. I will briefly discuss the rationale behind using each of the above measures to begin validation of the FSQ. The CCNES (Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale) was also included in the battery of validation measures in order to ascertain the overlap in responding between these two related emotional socialization measures.

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