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Mothers' negative emotional expression and preschoolers' negative emotional regulation strategies in Beijing, China: The moderating effect of maternal educational attainment



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ABSTRACT

The relationship between mothers' negative emotional expression and preschoolers' negative emotional regulation has been a topic of debate. Studies have confirmed the unique effect of maternal education on children's emotional regulation. Further understanding of the role of maternal educational attainment in the relationship between mothers' emotional expression and children's emotional regulation strategies will help us better explain the possible reasons for the differences in children's emotional regulation abilities. In this study, 503 Chinese mother-child dyads were recruited. The Chinese version of the Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ) was used to measure the mothers' negative emotional expression, and the Emotional Regulatory Strategy Questionnaire (ERQ) was used to measure the children's negative emotional regulation strategies. The results indicated that mothers' negative emotional expression was positively related to children's negative emotional regulation strategies. Moreover, maternal educational attainment moderated this relationship. The findings of the current study demonstrate the importance of mothers' educational background, providing an important supplement to and extension of previous research on family emotions.

1. Introduction

Emotional regulation is defined as the internal and external processes that are responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional reactions and through which individuals govern their emotions in relation to goal accomplishment (Thompson, 1994). Regardless of its definition, emotional regulation is considered a core component in developing cognitive abilities and social-emotional skills (Ambrose, 2013; Garner & Waajid, 2012), which are especially important for maintaining interpersonal relationships (Hu, Wang, & Liu, 2017; Lindblom et al., 2016). Individuals may use different strategies to regulate their emotions (Gross, 1998; Sala, Pons, & Molina, 2014). Developmental research on this area has focused on early childhood and has found that children aged 3–5 years have an explicit awareness of emotional regulation strategies (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000).

With age, children develop more cognitively complex and inner-focused emotional regulation strategies. Effective strategies for coping with negative emotions include cognitive reconstruction, problem solving and alternative activities (Aldao, 2013; Martini & Busseri, 2010). However, children who are unable to cope effectively with negative emotions may be at risk of later problems with psycho-social adjustment (Fan, 2011). Examples of maladaptive strategies include passive coping, venting and self-comforting; these strategies are also called negative emotional regulation strategies (NERSs; Aldao, Jazaieri, Goldin, & Gross, 2014; Hu et al., 2017).

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According to Lu and Chen (2007), passive coping means a child “does nothing” when faced with a problem and that he or she tends to leave the negative situation. Venting is an extreme emotional regulation strategy through which children use destructive or damaging behavior to express and vent their negative emotions rather than adopting an appropriate solution to the problem. Self-comforting is when children use self-directed comfort through language and behavior, such as simple words or meaningless body movements, to comfort themselves.

Children's emotional development, such as the development of the social-emotional skills of preschoolers, predict their overall emotional competence, later school performance and even social adjustment (Garrett-Peters, Castro, & Halberstadt, 2017; Ruberry, Klein, Kiff, Thompson, & Lengua, 2017). Over the past few decades, researchers have related children's lack of adaptive emotional regulation strategies to later internalized and externalized behavioral problems (Raver, Roy, Pressler, Ursache, & McCoy, 2017; Sheppes, Suri, & Gross, 2015), substance-related disorders and related mental disorders (Woodward, Lu, Morris, & Healey, 2017), generalized anxiety disorders (Hurrell, Hudson, & Schniering, 2015) and eating disorders (Harrist, Hubbs-Tait, Topham, Shriver, & Page, 2013; Wollenberg, Shriver, & Gates, 2015). Therefore, it is critically important to understand the factors that contribute to early emotional regulation strategies.

During the first year of life, parents play a vital part in helping their children develop healthy emotional regulation skills (Eisenberg et al., 2003), and children have a close relationship with their parents, especially their mothers. How mothers manage and display their emotions provides opportunities for children to imitate and learn emotional displays. Through their emotional displays, mothers convey emotional information to children and demonstrate many ways of expressing emotions (Hu et al., 2017). The parents' emotional expression means the style of expression or a persistent model that conveys verbal or nonverbal expression within the family (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995). Studies have provided evidence of a positive correlation between mothers' emotional expression and children's ways of expressing emotion (Crandall, Ghazarian, Day, & Riley, 2015), and the way that mothers express emotion has been found to be associated with children's emotional regulation abilities: higher levels of negative emotional expression (NEE) or lower levels of positive emotional expression were related to lower levels of emotional regulation ability in children (Morris et al., 2011; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002). Similarly, Sineiro and Paz Míguez (2007) found that children whose mothers reported higher levels of anxiety were more likely to express higher levels of negative emotion themselves when confronting frustrating situations. Additionally, previous studies have revealed gender differences in preschoolers' emotional regulation strategies. For example, using the self-compiled Children's Emotional Regulation Questionnaire, Lu and Chen (2007) found that boys use more NERs than girls. However, using the same questionnaire, Zhao, Zhang, and Zheng (2014) found no gender differences. No consistent conclusion has yet been established.

1.1. The moderating effect of maternal educational attainment

Maternal educational attainment (EA) has been linked significantly to increased levels of parental care that provide children with a more adaptive and nurturing child-rearing environment (Coleman & Karraker, 2000). Mothers with a higher level of education have more positive mother-child interactions, which can help secure long-lasting advantages for children, for example, by enhancing their cognitive skills, psychological capacities and socioemotional development (Augustine, 2014; Harding, 2015; Hughes & Ensor, 2009). Laosa (1980, 1981) suggested that maternal education positively influences children's emotional and social development. Parents with higher level of education provide their children with richer and more meaningful emotional conversations in a more responsive manner (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In contrast, parents with a lower level of education may not view emotional conversations as an opportunity to teach children about emotions (Miller & Sperry, 1987; Garner, Jones, Gaddy, & Rennie, 1997). In a study investigating the association between parents' education level and children's educational and future occupational success, Dubow, Boxer, and Huesmann (2009) found that highly educated parents were more likely to rear children who would achieve positive outcomes, and the links between the parents' education and the children's achievements were mediated by the parents' positive guidance of the children's emotion.

Education is often cited as a key indication of socioeconomic status (SES), which affects mothers' emotion-related parenting behavior by alleviating or exacerbating parenting stress (Chen et al., 2000), especially in China, where education is regarded as a primary path to individual achievement and economic success (Brown, 2006). Low-income parents show less concern and less positive responsiveness to their children's emotional needs and rely more on physical punishment and coercion to obtain obedience than middle-income parents (Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994). Previous studies have shown that this form of parenting behavior is related to children's lower social-emotional functioning (Creavey, Gatzke-Kopp, & Fosco, 2017; Garner & Spears, 2010). The influence of emotion-related parenting behavior on children's emotions is also reflected in parents' emotional attitudes toward their children. For instance, Garner et al. (1994) found that low-income mothers convey more hostile attitudes toward their children's negative emotions and are more likely to be deficient in understanding their children's emotions. A study by Martini, Root, and Jenkins (2010) of low- and middle-income families found that SES has a great influence on mothers' emotional regulation and attitudes toward their children's negative emotion. The results suggested that middle-SES mothers are more inclined to control negative emotions, such as anger, in response to their children's negative emotion, while low-SES mothers are more likely to express hostile emotions such as sadness and anger when faced with their children's negative emotions.

Throughout the literature, previous studies have proved the relationship between maternal emotions and children's emotions and considered gender factors in children's emotional regulation strategies. The other factors that may play an important role in the relationship between mothers' NEE and children's NERs require further understanding and discussion. Mothers' education has received considerable attention, and a large number of studies of early childhood have confirmed the importance of maternal education. We conducted research on the basis of previous studies to help achieve a better understanding of the factors that influence

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