

Like Parent, Like Child: Parent and Child Emotion Dysregulation

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Purpose: This study examined the association between children's emotion regulatory processes and parents' emotional problems.

Design: A 5-year longitudinal study of families from Northwestern United States with data collected over 3 time points. Families were recruited in an effort to oversample for multiracial and African American families because these families have historically not been well represented in research studies.

Method: Parental hostility characteristics and subclinical levels of depression were assessed in combination with teachers' reports of children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Ninety-one families with married parents and an elementary school-aged child participated in the study.

Findings: There was a significant main effect for the association between fathers' self-reports of hostility and teacher reports of children's externalizing behaviors. Neither parental hostility nor depressive symptoms were significantly associated with the children's internalizing behaviors.

Conclusion: The results suggest that children's externalizing behaviors are associated with their fathers' dysregulated expression of hostility.

Clinical Relevance: Parent-child interactions are a key component of children's emotion regulation development. Our findings may guide health care professionals in identifying and intervening in parental behaviors, particularly fathers' behaviors, that may adversely affect the healthy emotional development of their children.

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PARENTS PLAY A vital part in helping their children develop healthy emotion regulation skills (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Hooven, Gottman, & Katz, 1995). They socialize their children about emotion, including modeling appropriate emotional responses in stressful and conflicting situations, coaching their children about the meaning of emotions and how to manage emotions successfully, and teaching children about the social rules of emotional expression (Carson & Parke, 1996; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). In contrast, emotionally dysregulated children have difficulties behaviorally and physiologically self-soothing themselves under emotionally stressful situations (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Gottman et al., 1997). The goal of this study was to determine if emotion dysregulation in parents was linked to children's emotionally dysregulated behaviors.

What happens to children's development of effective emotion regulatory processes when their parents have difficulty regulating their own emotions? There is research indicating that marital conflict and hostile family interactions are predictive of children's externalizing and internalizing

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behaviors (e.g., Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Davies & Cummings 1994, 1998; Hetherington, 1999). However, less is known about how parental emotion dysregulation is associated with children's emotion regulation abilities.

There is reason to believe adult self-reports of hostile behaviors and subclinical levels of depressive symptoms are indicators of dysregulated emotions in adults. An emerging body of research suggests adults who have difficulty managing emotions often experience this dysregulation in more than one emotional domain. For example, anger and hostility behavior patterns in adults have been associated with depressive symptoms in a number of studies (e.g., Bromberger & Matthews, 1996; Carrère, Mittmann, Woodin, Tabares, & Yoshimoto, 2005). Subclinical levels of depressive symptoms can be characterized as a form of emotion dysregulation because individuals experiencing depressive symptoms are experiencing difficulty emotionally self-soothing and modulating their emotions. Relative to more normative populations, individuals with subclinical levels of depressive symptoms have difficulty with the frequency and intensity of emotion (Beck, 1978).

A hostile behavioral pattern is associated with a propensity to be easily goaded to hostile behaviors under social situations and more readily assess a situation as anger provoking (for a review, see Miller, Smith, Turner, Guijarro, & Hallet, 1996). This behavioral pattern may be because these hostile individuals are emotionally dysregulated and have difficulty soothing themselves emotionally, physiologically, and behaviorally under stressful situations (Brosschot & Thayer, 1998; Carrère et al., 2005; Sloan et al., 2001). For example, Carrère et al. established a link between self-reports of anger dysregulation and a significantly higher level of observer-coded angry behavior by wives in a problem-solving discussion with their husbands. Sloan et al. demonstrated that the ability to calm oneself physiologically is adversely affected when hostility is present. Taken together, these findings suggest that hostile behavioral patterns and subclinical levels of depressive symptoms represent forms of emotion dysregulation in adults. In turn, parental depression coupled with hostile behaviors may contribute to externalizing and internalizing behaviors in the child. Reeb, Conger, and Wu (2010) found that daughters were more likely to exhibit depressive

symptoms and hostile behaviors in response to their fathers' depression overlaid with hostility. Thus, a child raised in a family where the parents are experiencing emotion dysregulation may experience emotional problems.

PARENTAL EMOTION DYSREGULATION AND CHILD OUTCOMES

There is some evidence suggesting that parental emotional dysregulation is associated with internalizing and externalizing problems for children. Studies from the 1980s and the 1990s evaluated the relationship between Type A behavior pattern (TABP) in parents and their children. TABP includes a constellation of behaviors such as hostility, time urgency, and competitiveness and was a theoretical forerunner to the hostility behavior pattern paradigm. These studies found that TABP in the parents was also replicated in their children (Forgays & Forgays, 1991; Raikkonen, 1993; Weidner et al., 1988). Sweda, Sines, Lauer, and Clarke (1986) found the TABP exhibited by mothers was correlated with their children's higher levels of impatience-aggression on the Matthews Youth Test for Health.

Mutual emotion regulation, where children respond to the emotional cues of their parents, has been documented by Cole, Teti, and Zahn-Waxler (2003), who found that mothers' positive responses were frequently reciprocated by their preschoolers. Similarly, the researchers found that the maternal expression of negative emotions, such as anger, was also reciprocated by children and was found to be a significant variable in the trajectory of children's conduct problems.

There is a fairly well-substantiated link between depression and depressive symptoms in parents and emotion dysregulation in children. In a meta-analysis of depression in fathers and child maladaptive outcomes, Kane and Garber (2004) found that paternal depression was significantly associated with children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. West and Newman (2003) reported that mild depression and parental anxiety symptoms were significantly linked with children's internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Work by Beardslee and others (Beardslee, Keller, and Klerman 1985; Billings & Moos, 1983; Feng et al., 2009) has demonstrated a link between depression in parents and emotional and behavioral problems in their children.

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