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Emotion regulation in parenthood



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ABSTRACT

Emotion regulation, defined as the capacity to influence one's experience and expression of emotion, is a complex skill now recognized to evolve throughout the lifetime. Here we examine the role of emotion regulation in parenthood, and propose that regulatory function during this period is distinct from the emotion regulation skills acquired and implemented during other periods of life. In this review, we consider the unique demands of caring for a child and recognize that parents have to maintain a regulated state as well as facilitate regulation in their child, especially early in development. We examine neurobiological, hormonal and behavioral shifts during the transition to parenthood that may facilitate parental regulation in response to infant cues. Furthermore, we consider how parents shape emotion regulation in their child, and the clinical implications of regulatory functioning within the parent–child relationship.

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Introduction

The purpose of this review is to examine the role of emotion regulation in parenthood. While emotion regulation has been defined in a number of ways, here we operationalize it as referring to a parent's capacity to influence the experience and expression of their emotions in caregiving contexts (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007). Furthermore, we view parental emotion regulation as having

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a functional purpose in facilitating sensitive responding and caregiving behavior – irrespective of the affective state of the child (Thompson, 1994). Emotion regulation may influence every aspect of functioning, including mental and physical health, and the relationships that are formed and maintained with others (Kooze, 2009). Difficulties with emotion regulation are thought to be central to a number of clinical disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder (Etkin, Prater, Hoef, Menon, & Schatzberg, 2010), depression (Gross & Muñoz, 1995), and substance use and abuse (Li & Sinha, 2008). Further, variation in emotion regulation strategies may serve as protective as well as risk factors for psychopathology (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). Therefore, emotion regulation is a well-studied capacity that has significant implications for healthy functioning.

An individual's capacity to regulate their emotions appears to change across the lifespan, with developmental studies of emotion regulation typically focusing on childhood (Bariola, Hughes, & Gullone, 2012). However, there are significant changes to cognitive and affective systems through adolescence into young adulthood that may influence emotion regulation (Steinberg, 2005; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Furthermore, during adulthood, there may be continued opportunity for modifications to regulatory functioning shaped by changes in the physical and social environment, as well as increased life experience (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Consistent with this notion, there is emerging evidence that emotion regulation processes continue to change and develop well into adulthood. For instance, recent interest has focused on the notion that while there are declines in sensory and cognitive domains, elderly adults seem to report higher levels of well-being than younger adults (Suri & Gross, 2012). Consistent with this, experimental tasks suggest that elderly adults experience less regret during risk-taking tasks than younger adults (Brassen, Gamer, Peters, Gluth, & Büchel, 2012). Therefore healthy aging may promote more positive emotion regulation strategies in response to non-optimal outcomes during these risk-taking paradigms (Suri & Gross, 2012). Here we focus on the notion that neurobiological and psychological changes that occur during adulthood with the onset of parenthood may also significantly impact emotion regulation.

Critically, to support the claim that parenthood modulates emotion regulation, research examining this faculty from a longitudinal perspective before and after becoming a parent would be required. Further, literature explicitly assessing emotion regulation as an organizing construct in parenthood would be valuable. However, to date there is a paucity of research and theoretical work in this regard; therefore we review the preliminary literature that is relevant to parental emotion regulation and the research studies that have adopted a more indirect approach to investigating regulatory functioning in parents. In structuring this review, we first consider why becoming a parent may necessitate specific regulatory demands, before discussing the role of parental emotion regulation in the socialization of emotion and emotion regulation in the child. Next, we examine the potential role for cognitive functions in facilitating emotion regulation in parents, building on emerging work in non-parents relating emotion regulation to executive functioning, as well as social-cognitive functions such as mentalization and mindfulness. We then consider the clinical implications of parental emotion regulation and how interventions may foster such regulation during the transition to parenthood. Finally, we suggest the next steps in empirical research in this important area of parental functioning.

Neuro-cognitive changes associated with parenthood: evidence for changes in emotion regulation

During the transition to parenthood, a number of changes occur at a neurobiological, hormonal and psychological level to facilitate successful caretaking (Feldman, 2007). For instance, both mothers and fathers report increased preoccupation in their thoughts relating to their developing child shortly before birth, which remain elevated into the postpartum period and is thought to depend on evolutionarily conserved neurohormonal patterns (see Leckman et al., 2004). Here we consider neurobiological and hormonal data relevant to parental emotion regulation based on reported differences between parents and non-parents while engaged with infant cues. These neuro-cognitive findings are informative for understanding parenting-related variability in the detection and processing of infant-relevant stimuli, which likely involves a balance of reactivity and regulation. Regulatory functioning may shape reactivity to infant cues, especially when participants are engaged with infant cues of distress. Indeed, reactivity to infant cues and regulation to those cues may be tightly coupled, with regulation

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