



## Parent socialization of coping in emerging adulthood: Moderation by respiratory sinus arrhythmia



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### ABSTRACT

This research examined respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity (RSAR) as a moderator of the association between parent coping suggestions, or socialization of coping, and youths' responses to stress in emerging adulthood. Emerging adults ( $N = 156$ ) reported their parents' coping suggestions and their own responses to interpersonal stress; RSAR was monitored as participants completed two laboratory challenges. Results revealed that emerging adults' sensitivity to parental encouragement to engage versus disengage from stress varied as a function of RSAR. Importantly, the RSAR profile (withdrawal vs. augmentation) associated with heightened sensitivity to coping suggestions varied as a function of the nature (interpersonal vs. noninterpersonal) of the laboratory challenge. In some cases, coping suggestions also predicted responses to stress independently of RSAR. This study extends previous work with children and adolescents and provides novel evidence that parasympathetic stress reactivity moderates the effects of parenting in emerging adulthood.

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The emerging adulthood perspective proposes that the period between ages 18 and 25 represents a distinct phase of development in which youth transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Youth in this age group focus on exploring their identity, planning for their future, and developing heightened independence; in addition, emerging adults often experience unstable conditions in their work, finances, residence, and relationships (Arnett, 2000). Perhaps because of these characteristics, emerging adults are exposed to a variety of novel stressors (Connor-Smith & Compas, 2002; Towbes & Cohen, 1996) and are at heightened risk for developing mental disorders (Eberhart & Hammen, 2010; Kessler et al., 2005). As a result, emerging adults may have a particular need for resources that support healthy responses to stress.

Growing evidence indicates that parents continue to serve as a primary source of support during emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2007; Pettit, Roberts, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Yaroslavsky, 2011). A specific form of parental support is socialization of coping, in which parents make explicit suggestions to their children about how to respond to stress. Cross-sectional (Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996; Kliewer et al., 2006) and longitudinal research (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Miller, Kliewer, Hepworth, & Sandler, 1994) with school-aged children and adolescents has revealed that parent coping suggestions contribute to responses to stress and symptoms of

psychopathology. Despite a potentially heightened need for coping support in emerging adulthood, the impact of socialization of coping beyond adolescence is unknown. Furthermore, coping represents one component of a larger stress response system that includes physiological as well as cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to stress (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2009), but the impact of physiological factors on the correlates of socialization of coping has yet to be examined. Thus, the goal of this study is to extend previous work on socialization of coping and examine parasympathetic stress reactivity, indexed by respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity (RSAR), as a moderator of the association between parent coping suggestions and responses to interpersonal stress in a sample of emerging adults.

### *Socialization of coping and youth responses to stress*

When youth have a problem or feel upset, parents may make specific suggestions about how their child should respond. Based on a framework developed by Compas and colleagues (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000), we conceptualized responses to stress along two orthogonal dimensions: *Coping* vs. *involuntary responses* and *engagement* vs. *disengagement*. Coping is voluntary and purposeful, whereas involuntary responses are automatic and dysregulated; engagement responses orient resources toward stress-related stimuli and emotions, whereas disengagement responses orient resources away from stress and emotions. Engagement coping includes efforts to address the stressor or negative emotions (e.g., problem solving, purposeful emotion expression, emotion regulation) as well as

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efforts to adapt the self to stressful conditions (e.g., cognitive restructuring, positive thinking). Disengagement coping includes efforts to avoid or deny stress or negative emotions. Involuntary engagement includes excessive, uncontrolled involvement in stressors and related emotions (e.g., rumination, intrusive thoughts), whereas involuntary disengagement includes uncontrolled avoidance of stress or negative emotions (e.g., emotional numbing, involuntary escape). Distinctions among these types of responses to stress have been supported by factor analyses in multiple samples of children, adolescents, and emerging adults (e.g., Connor-Smith & Compas, 2002; Connor-Smith et al., 2000; Wadsworth, Raviv, Compas, & Connor-Smith, 2005). In research with children and adolescents, engagement coping with interpersonal stress is associated with more positive outcomes, such as fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Flynn & Rudolph, 2007; Griffith, Dubow, & Ippolito, 2000; Jaser et al., 2007, 2008, 2005; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2009), whereas disengagement coping and involuntary responses to interpersonal stress are associated with heightened adjustment difficulties (Flynn & Rudolph, 2007; Griffith et al., 2000; Jaser et al., 2005; Valiente et al., 2009; Wadsworth et al., 2005). Thus, researchers typically conceptualize engagement coping as adaptive and disengagement coping and involuntary responses as maladaptive.

This study focused on the context of interpersonal stress, or problems in relationships with others. Interpersonal stress is highly relevant in emerging adulthood, when many youth are exposed to new forms of relationship stress (e.g., conflicts with roommates or coworkers, navigating committed, long-term romantic relationships). We specifically examined emerging adults' responses to stress and parent socialization of coping in the context of relationships with peers (including romantic partners). Parent coping suggestions are limited to effortful coping in that parents cannot recommend involuntary responses; however, previous research suggests that parent coping suggestions prospectively contribute to both coping and involuntary responses to stress among adolescents (Abaied & Rudolph, 2011). Thus, we examined both coping and involuntary responses to stress as correlates of parent socialization of coping.

The distinction between engagement and disengagement coping suggestions is supported by factor analysis (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010b) and by differential associations with youth adjustment. Investigations of parent socialization of coping among children and adolescents indicate that engagement suggestions support adaptive patterns of responses to stress in youth, whereas disengagement suggestions are problematic, predicting less effective responses to stress. Specifically, parent engagement suggestions are associated with higher levels of children's engagement coping, and parents' disengagement suggestions are linked to lower levels of children's engagement coping (Kliewer et al., 1996, 2006; Miller et al., 1994). Furthermore, a longitudinal study of early adolescents found that in the context of heightened interpersonal stress, parent engagement coping suggestions predicted less involuntary disengagement over time and buffered youth from the adverse effects of disengagement suggestions, which predicted less engagement coping and more involuntary engagement (Abaied & Rudolph, 2011). Involuntary responses are dysregulated and may emerge when youths' coping resources are overtaxed (Compas et al., 2001). It appears that parent engagement suggestions provide youth with resources for adaptive responses to stress, such that youth who receive encouragement to use engagement strategies are less likely to exhibit involuntary responses. These findings demonstrate that parent socialization of coping has an impact on youth responses to stress, but researchers have yet to examine socialization of coping in emerging adulthood, a developmental period when parent support may be critical to youths' efforts to cope with stress.

#### *Parents in emerging adulthood*

We propose that parent socialization of coping is particularly relevant to emerging adults for two reasons. First, Arnett (2000) and others

(Nelson et al., 2007) characterize emerging adulthood as a time in which youth feel that they are no longer adolescents, but are not quite adults. Consistent with this state of being "in-between" (Arnett, 2000, p. 471), emerging adults often have increased independence and responsibility relative to adolescents, but they also report remaining at least partly dependent upon parents for money or material resources (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). In this way, despite their heightened independence, emerging adults demonstrate a willingness to rely on parents for help when they need it. We expect this continued dependence upon parents to further manifest in seeking coping support in times of stress. Second, emerging adults often live unstable lives marked by frequent transitions in living arrangements, employment, and relationships (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). Emerging adults are also exposed to heightened and novel interpersonal stressors, such as navigating new friendships, life with roommates, and developing romantic or sexual relationships (Connor-Smith & Compas, 2002; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). Thus, even well adjusted emerging adults may require additional support when coping with the stressors that arise during this transitional period.

A growing body of evidence indicates that parents play an important role in the lives of their offspring after adolescence. Many emerging adults continue to rely on their parents for emotional support (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2007; Pettit et al., 2011; Shulman, Kalnitzki, & Shanhar, 2009) and disclose intimate details of their lives with their parents (Urry, Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2011). Furthermore, emerging adults identify developing an equal relationship with parents as a criterion for reaching adulthood (Nelson & Barry, 2005), suggesting that emerging adults highly value their relationship with their parents. Indicators of a positive parent-child relationship, such as parent emotional support and secure attachment, are in turn associated with better psychological and social adjustment in emerging adulthood (Duchesne, Ratelle, Larose, & Guay, 2007; Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1994; Larose, Guay, & Boivin, 2002; Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2011; Strage & Brandt, 1999). Two studies found that parent but not peer support buffered emerging adults from developing depressive symptoms (Pettit et al., 2011; Shulman et al., 2009), suggesting that parents may remain a superlative source of support for emerging adults. Regarding emerging adults' responses to stress, one study found a positive association between emerging adults' secure attachment to parents and adaptive coping with stress (Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005), and another study found that high parent psychological control is associated with maladaptive responses to stress (Abaied & Emond, 2013).

In sum, research supports the idea that parents will continue to influence youths' coping during emerging adulthood. However, the impact of parents' explicit suggestions about how to cope with stress has not been examined among emerging adults. Thus, the first goal of this study was to examine the link between parent coping suggestions and responses to interpersonal stress during emerging adulthood. Exploring whether this aspect of parenting remains a substantial influence on emerging adults' coping development will help clarify the role parents play during this stage of life; importantly, this should inform future efforts to support adaptive coping among emerging adults. Consistent with previous research, we expected that parent engagement coping suggestions would be associated with adaptive responses to interpersonal stress (i.e., high engagement coping, low disengagement coping, and low involuntary responses) and disengagement coping suggestions would be associated with maladaptive responses (i.e., low engagement coping, high disengagement coping, and high involuntary responses). Engagement strategies such as problem solving, emotion regulation, and positive thinking are relatively more resource intensive than disengagement coping; attempting to problem solve with a peer or work through one's emotions will often seem more daunting than simply avoiding the problem. Parent suggestions about how to employ adaptive engagement coping behaviors may provide critical resources that support youths' use of these strategies, helping them rely less on

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