Parents' inconsistent emotion socialization and children's socioemotional adjustment

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ABSTRACT

Parents socialize children's emotion through active, purposeful strategies and through their own expressivity; yet little research has examined whether parents are inconsistent within or between these socialization domains. The author presents a heuristic model of inconsistency in parents' emotion socialization. Parents (M age = 34.8 years, 85% mothers) of preschool-aged children (M age = 4.5 years, 53% female) reported on their responses to children's emotions, their own expressivity, child emotion regulation and expressivity, child social competence, and child internalizing and externalizing. Parents were largely consistent in their emotion socialization, with one exception being that some highly negatively expressive parents punished children's negative expressivity. This pairing of inconsistent socialization behaviors interacted to explain variance in child emotion regulation and internalizing. The author discusses the implications and limitations of the findings and directions for future research.

Parent–child relationships are the first context in which children learn about social interactions and emotions and serve as a rehearsal stage for children's developing socioemotional skills. Parents socialize children's emotional competence by labeling and defining emotions, discussing the significance of emotions and their regulation, and modeling emotion expression and emotion regulation (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Morris et al., 2002). Multiple theorists categorize these emotion socialization (ES) behaviors into two domains: 1) active, purposeful responses to and discussions of children's emotions; and 2) relatively passive, unintentional modeling of emotions and emotion-related behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007).

Parents' supportive active ES (e.g., emotion discussion) is linked to children's understanding of emotions (Denham & Auerbach, 1995; Denham, Cook, & Zoller, 1992; Dunn, 2003), positive expressivity (Denham et al., 1992), and adaptive emotion regulation (Garner, 2006). Conversely, parents' unsupportive active ES (e.g., punitive, minimizing responses) is linked to increased negative affect (Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002) and poorer emotional competence (Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997; Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994). Parents' passive ES (i.e., emotional expressivity, modeling of emotions) strongly contributes to children's socioemotional competence, as children are likely to learn about emotions by watching how parents handle their own emotions (Denham, 2007). Indeed, parents' general expressiveness, regardless

of valence, improves children's understanding of others' emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). However, this relation is likely curvilinear, with positive links between parent expressivity and child emotional competence restricted to the early childhood period (Halberstadt & Eaton, 2002). Conversely, parents' frequent, dysregualted displays of negative emotions likely undermine children's developing socioemotional skills (Denham, Renwick-DeBardi, & Hewes, 1994; Dunn & Brown, 1994; Fabes et al., 2002; Garner, 1995). Further, parents' poor emotion regulation and low levels of positive emotion are linked to children's concurrent and subsequent internalizing and externalizing problems (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Marchand & Hock, 2003).

Researchers and theorists have largely assumed that parents' ES behaviors should be consistent between socialization domains, though there is good reason to suspect the opposite. In contrast to their active ES, parents' emotional expressions "do not especially reflect [their] beliefs, values, and goals in relation to emotion" (Eisenberg et al., 1998, p. 317). Thus, it is likely that parents' passive ES will at times be inconsistent with their active ES. For example, if a parent is frustrated with a store clerk and berates the individual, the observing child may learn that yelling is an acceptable way of dealing with frustration, even if such a message is not what the parent would purposefully teach.

The limited research addressing this issue has yielded mixed results. While parents' emotional expressiveness, reactions to emotions, and emotion discussion are often correlated in expected directions (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002; Stocker, Richmond, Rhoades, & Kiang, 2007; Warren & Stifter, 2008), such relation are frequently weak and inconsistent (e.g., McDowell & Parke, 2005; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002;

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Spinrad et al., 2007). Indeed, the inconsistent coherence between domains should not be surprising, as multiple theorists have acknowledged that highly variable processes (e.g., parents' emotional competence and mental health, the emotional valence of the socializing context) likely influence parents' socialization behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Eisenberg et al. (1998) acknowledge that some socialization encounters will be inconsistent with other encounters, and Halberstadt (1998) calls for research on multiple domains of ES, explicitly noting the possibility for inconsistency between ES domains. In response to this call, the present study has two goals: first, to determine whether parents are inconsistent in their ES; and second, to describe relation between parents' inconsistent ES and children's socioemotional adjustment.

Theoretical framework

The development of a full theoretical model of inconsistency in ES should only follow from a large body of evidence demonstrating the presence and significance of such inconsistency, but a preliminary inconsistent ES framework is needed to structure initial attempts at describing inconsistent ES. Despite the strong theoretical frameworks for describing multiple domains of ES (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Morris et al., 2007), there is little theoretical or empirical work devoted to inconsistency in ES. Constructs similar to inconsistent ES (e.g., inconsistent discipline, parent differential treatment of siblings) have been investigated; however, these topics are typically explored within a general parenting framework (e.g., control/discipline and affection/warmth), thus ignoring the unique role of ES in promoting children's socioemotional competence (e.g., Garner, 2006). Although the findings of such investigations may be of limited use in understanding how inconsistent ES relates to children's socioemotional adjustment, the frameworks employed in previous research on inconsistent discipline (e.g., Bierman & Smoot, 1991; Gardner, 1989; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984) and on parent differential treatment of siblings (e.g., McGuire, Dunn, & Plomin, 1995; Stocker, 1995; Volling, 1997) do suggest multiple ways parents may be inconsistent in their ES, as described below.

In the following preliminary theoretical framework, emotion and ES are conceptualized primarily through a functionalist perspective (e.g., Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994). Specifically, emotions are understood to serve social regulatory or disruptive functions and are understood in relation to individuals' goals. Goals notwithstanding, socializers may use emotional expressions unintentionally (e.g., dysregulated expressions of anger), thus creating the possibility for inconsistency between the messages sent by such unintentional displays (i.e., that anger expressions are acceptable) and the socializer's goals for that interaction (e.g., down-regulating the child's anger). This pairing of personal negative expressivity and dismissing or hostile responses to others' emotions may be viewed as consistent from a personality perspective; however, when viewed as socialization messages directed at a child attempting to understand the rules governing emotional expressivity, such messages are inherently contradictory. Alternately, children may view such encounters holistically, only understanding that "mom is being mean and yelling because I got angry;" though it is not clear that all unsupportive ES messages are presented with a negative emotional valence. Indeed unsupportive strategies such as ignoring, dismissing, and minimizing may be presented with neutral affect. Regardless of the affective tone of any given socialization message, parents may be affectively negative during multiple encounters, creating myriad opportunities for inconsistency.

Given the likelihood that a host of highly variable processes impact any given socialization encounter (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Morris et al., 2007), parents may be inconsistent within each domain of ES. For example, a parent may engage in emotion focused responses and minimizing responses to a child's negativity.

Building on the active vs. passive dichotomy in ES, it is possible that socializers are inconsistent between these domains. For example, a parent may freely express negative emotions and respond punitively to a child's negativity. Additionally, multiple socializers may be inconsistent with one another, both within and between socialization domains. For example, one parent may encourage expressivity while the other parent minimizes their own and the child's expressivity. Further, one or more socializers may be inconsistent in any of the above ways across multiple children. Finally, it is likely that socializers will dramatically change their ES behaviors over time in response to children's changing age and regulatory capacities (Denham, 2007; Morris et al., 2007), creating temporal inconsistency. Thus, a preliminary framework for describing inconsistent ES includes inconsistency within and between domains of socialization, within and between socializers, between children, and over time. The present study addresses only within-domain and between-domain inconsistencies.

Empirical approaches to inconsistency in emotion socialization

Limited empirical evidence suggests that parents may adopt inconsistent approaches to ES and that parent inconsistency may have consequences for children's adjustment. Unfortunately, much of the following research relies upon concurrent designs, suggesting that parents' inconsistency also may be a response to various child behaviors or characteristics. Regarding between-parent inconsistency, children exposed to low levels of support from one parent are more emotionally competent if the other parent is high in support (McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007). Surprisingly, when both parents are high in support, children are less emotionally competent (McElwain et al., 2007).

Regarding between-child inconsistency, children who receive less warmth and more negativity than their siblings have increased rates of antisocial behavior problems (Caspi et al., 2004). Likewise, between-sibling differences in mothers' discipline and affection predict children's externalizing problems (McGuire et al., 1995). Although these studies approach socialization through a broader parenting framework, the findings suggest that inconsistency in the emotional dimensions of parenting (e.g., emotional negativity, warmth/affection) may affect children's adjustment.

Concerning between-domain inconsistency, Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, and Martin (2001) found that parents' punitive and minimizing responses to children's emotions were inversely related to children's social competence; and this relation was stronger when parents were more negatively aroused during emotionally salient parent–child interactions. These findings seem to suggest that children who receive negative/unsupportive socialization in both domains fared worse than children receiving such messages in only one domain. However, simply considering parents' punitive/minimizing responses and parents' negative emotionality as different forms of unsupportive socialization ignores the inherent inconsistency between the messages these behaviors send. That is, while parents may be explicitly dismissive and punitive of children's negative emotions, they also are implicitly endorsing negative expressivity through their own emotionality.

Landry and colleagues investigated parents' temporal within-domain inconsistency in warmth and responsiveness by grouping mothers into "consistently responsive," "inconsistent," and "consistently low-responsive" clusters, finding that consistently responsive mothers had children with better-developed cognitive and social skills (Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001). Along similar lines, Curby, Brock, and Hamre (2013) analyzed the impact of inconsistency over time in teachers' emotional support with students and found that less variability (i.e., more consistency) in teachers' emotional support was associated with better social and academic outcomes for children. Further, mean levels of emotional support were not significantly related to the same outcome variables, suggesting the unique importance of temporal inconsistency in ES.