



“Good enough” parental responsiveness to Children's sadness: Links to psychosocial functioning



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ABSTRACT

This study used parent–child sadness discussions to understand individual and interactive influences of maternal and paternal emotion socialization strategies on children's psychosocial functioning. Participants included 82 two-parent families (56.2% boys; M age = 9.62 years; 80.5% Caucasian). Analyses examined the interactive influence of mothers' and fathers' positive and negative emotional responsiveness. Results indicated that the individual effect of one positively responsive parent was associated with better psychosocial functioning for girls, with no significant interactive parental effects. Parents' interactive socialization efforts were associated with boys' psychosocial functioning, but these effects were not simply additive (i.e., more support = better outcomes). That is, boys with one highly responsive parent and one parent low in responsiveness (disengaged) had higher social competency. Instead of receiving uniformly positive responses, findings support a “divergence model” whereby the most optimal outcomes for boys are fostered by a mixture of parental responsiveness. Future directions and implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

An important developmental task for children involves learning how and when to modulate emotional arousal, especially with regard to negative emotions such as sadness. Socialization influences appear to be one of the primary mechanisms through which children learn how to regulate their emotions (for a review, see Zeman, Cassano, & Adrian, 2013). In infancy, caregivers help children regulate their emotional arousal. As children age, however, they become progressively more reliant on individually-driven strategies to manage their emotions, which are learned through the parent–child relationship (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Although most research has focused on early childhood, an emerging body of evidence suggests that parental emotion socialization influences continue through middle childhood, with parents helping to refine children's emotion regulation skills in response to increasingly complex social-contextual demands (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007). Furthermore, this developmental time period is commonly associated with the onset of a multitude of emotion-related disorders and other problems; indeed, approximately 13–20% of school-age children meet criteria for a diagnosable mental disorder within

the previous year (Perou et al., 2013). Finally, in middle childhood, children must master a number of socially-oriented developmental tasks, including knowledge of social standards of behavior (e.g., display rules), social problem-solving, and the recognition and understanding of emotions, all of which are influenced via the parent–child socialization relationship (Saarni, 1999; Zeman et al., 2013).

An important gap in the literature concerns how each parent in a two-parent family may influence their child's emotional development *interactively*, given that each parent has been found to contribute uniquely to this process (e.g., Cassano, Zeman, & Sanders, 2014; Zeman, Perry-Parrish, & Cassano, 2010). Examining how mothers and fathers jointly respond to their children's sadness expressions is important because it is unclear whether there is an optimal level of parental support needed to facilitate the development of children's adaptive emotion regulation skills. For example, is it necessary that both parents provide highly supportive responses to their children's sadness for optimal psychological well-being? The current study examined the individual and interactive effects of mothers' and fathers' sadness socialization responses in relation to indices of children's psychological and social adjustment (Denham et al., 2000; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003; Zeman, Shipman, & Penza-Clyve, 2001; Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002).

Parental emotion socialization is posited to occur via direct and indirect methods (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, & Robinson, 2007). Parents' beliefs

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about emotion and their acceptability are likely to be communicated in the form of socialization behaviors during conversations about emotions with their child (Morris et al., 2007). These discussions serve as important opportunities for parents to support their children's socioemotional development. Consequently, the frequency and content of parental discussion of emotion have been linked to children's emotion regulation skills (Denham et al., 2000; Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006), and influence children's emotional development in both positive (e.g., Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007) and negative (e.g., Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997) ways.

Parental emotion socialization responses have generally been categorized as either belonging to a supportive or unsupportive category (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Lunkenheimer et al., 2007; Sanders, Zeman, Poon, & Miller, 2015). Gottman et al. (1996) proposed that parents develop "an organized set of feelings and thoughts about one's own emotions and one's children's emotions" (p. 1). These meta-emotion philosophies are categorized into two groups. Parents who adopt a positive, supportive (i.e., emotion coaching) philosophy are more aware of and validate their children's emotions and help them verbally label their feelings. They perceive their children's experience of negative affect as a healthy learning opportunity, and problem-solve to find constructive ways to help their children manage emotional situations. Supportive emotion socialization responses have been associated with an array of positive outcomes, including adaptive emotion regulation, fewer psychological symptoms, and higher levels of academic achievement and social competence (Dunsmore, Booker, & Ollendick, 2013; Gottman et al., 1996, 1997; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002).

Conversely, parents who utilize negative, unsupportive (i.e., emotion-dismissing) responses generally lack awareness of their child's emotions, utilize an impoverished emotion vocabulary, and attempt to alter the emotion themselves rather than use the situation as an opportunity to teach skills. Negative emotions are viewed as harmful, to be eliminated as swiftly as possible (e.g., Gottman et al., 1996, 1997). Furthermore, the specific ways in which children manage their emotions may be aversive to parents, leading them to eliminate emotion-provoking stimuli, minimize the child's experience, react with personal distress, distract the child from the emotion, punish the child, or ignore the child's emotions altogether. Research indicates that parents' unsupportive responses to their children's emotionality are linked to problem behaviors and poor social functioning in middle childhood (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001), and mothers who reported employing emotionally unsupportive strategies have adolescents with more depressive symptoms (Katz & Hunter, 2007).

Notably, most studies have exclusively examined maternal responses or have combined maternal and paternal socialization practices into a global parental response. Thus, little is known about how mothers and fathers may socialize children's emotional development *interactively*. Despite fathers' unique role in children's social and emotional development, relatively few developmental studies have included fathers (Cassano, Adrian, Veits, & Zeman, 2006). Yet, research indicates that differential maternal and paternal responses to children's emotional expressions are associated with girls' internalizing and boys' externalizing symptomatology (Chaplin, Cole, & Zahn-Waxler, 2005; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). The few studies to examine parental emotion socialization differences indicate that the sex of the parent influences the socialization strategies used when discussing negative emotions with their child (Cassano & Zeman, 2010; Zeman et al., 2010). For example, mothers tend to use more emotion words and words in general during parent-child emotion discussions than fathers (Aldrich & Tenenbaum, 2006; Fivush et al., 2000). Compared to fathers, mothers reported a greater likelihood of responding to sadness with expressive encouragement, but both parents reported using expressive encouragement or problem-focused responses more with daughters than sons (Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Zeman, 2007).

Scant research has investigated the individual as well as the interactive effects of combined parental positive and negative responses to children's emotions, even though it is reasonable to expect that children's psychosocial development is influenced by both mothers' and fathers' sadness socialization practices. The present research addresses a gap in the literature through the investigation of mothers' and fathers' individual and interactive reactions to their sons' and daughters' sadness through the consideration of both positive and negative parental responses. Some researchers have proposed a "one good parent" hypothesis, suggesting that the presence of one warm, supportive parent is sufficient for adaptive child development (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999). Others, however, have argued that the most optimal psychosocial outcomes are fostered by the coordinated efforts of two "good" parents (Wagner, Cohen, & Brook, 1996). Furthermore, some research has investigated the interactive effects of supportive and unsupportive socialization strategies. For example, Lunkenheimer et al. (2007) found that parents' emotion coaching responses to children's negative emotions served as a protective factor that buffered against the detrimental effects of unsupportive responses on children's emotional and behavioral health outcomes. Thus, it is important to consider how positive and negative emotion socialization responses may operate in tandem within and between parents, and how these patterns may be associated with particular child psychosocial outcomes.

Sadness was chosen as the emotion of focus in the current study for three reasons. First, sadness is relatively understudied compared to other discrete emotions (Barr-Zisowitz, 2000). Second, although the experience of sadness is a healthy, universal, and an inevitable human occurrence, when experienced frequently and intensely, sadness has been linked to the development of psychopathology among children and adolescents (Chaplin & Cole, 2005; Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). Finally, sadness dysregulation has been consistently associated with poor social functioning outcomes in family and peer contexts (Denham et al., 2000; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003; Perry-Parrish & Zeman, 2011).

2. Current study

Using multiple methods (i.e., maternal and paternal report, observed discussion task), we sought to characterize how mothers and fathers respond to their children's discussions of past sadness-evoking events, and how their responses are related to children's outcomes (i.e., internalizing and externalizing symptoms and social functioning). Discussions were coded for the type of parental response (positive reactions, negative reactions) to their child's discussion of a sadness event. A middle childhood sample was selected because school-age children shift from an almost exclusive reliance on external sources for emotion regulation to employing more independent, varied attempts at emotional modulation (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007). However, parents in this transitional developmental period remain important agents of emotion socialization.

Based on the literature, we generated hypotheses examining the links between parental sadness socialization and children's psychosocial functioning. We expected that mothers' and fathers' individual positive emotional responsiveness would be negatively related to internalizing and externalizing symptoms and positively related to social functioning, whereas the inverse relationship was expected for negative emotional responsiveness (Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002). Regarding the interaction between maternal and paternal positive and negative responsiveness on boys' and girls' psychosocial functioning, we anticipated that positive responses by both parents would likely yield more positive psychosocial outcomes than two negative parental responses to sadness. However, it was unclear whether having one positive and one negative parental response would be equally as effective as having two positive responses, and whether the sex of the parent providing the negative response would yield differential effects for daughters versus

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