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Longitudinal associations between physically abusive parents' emotional expressiveness and children's self-regulation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The present study took a developmental psychopathology approach to examine the longitudinal association between parents' emotional expressiveness and children's self-regulation. Data collection spanned from 2004 to 2008. Ninety-two physically abusive parents completed yearly assessments of their emotional expressiveness, as well as their children's self-regulation abilities. Observational and behavioral measures were also obtained yearly to capture both parents' emotional expressiveness and children's self-regulation. Specifically, parents participated in a parent-child interaction task, which provided insight into their levels of flat affect. A puzzle box task was completed by each child to assess self-regulation. Results indicated, first, that greater parental expression of negative emotions predicted poorer self-regulation in children, both concurrently and across time. Second, parental expressions of positive emotions and parents' flat affect were unrelated to children's self-regulation. Findings inform our understanding of parental socialization of self-regulation and provide insight into the roles of distinct components of emotional expressiveness. Moreover, findings have crucial implications for understanding emotional expressiveness in high-risk samples and increase our understanding of within-group functioning among maltreating families that may serve as a means to direct intervention efforts.

1. Introduction

Self-regulation, or the ability to modulate emotional arousal and reactivity to events, is essential to success in virtually every life outcome including mental and physical health, educational attainment, work achievement, and marital satisfaction, among others (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Burns, Fischer, Jackson, & Harding, 2012; Eisenberg, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2005; Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000). Ample evidence indicates that parenting plays a critical role in the development of these skills, with children observing their parents' emotional displays and parents teaching their children about how and when to regulate emotions (Bariola, Gullone, & Hughes, 2011; Morris et al., 2011). What is less well understood is how specific facets of parenting, such as parents' expressions of emotions, relate to children's self-regulation over time. We are particularly interested in the role of parents' emotional expressiveness across the transition into formal schooling, a developmental transition that provides an opportunity for important changes in functioning and resilience (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Such was the purpose of the present

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study. We took a developmental psychopathology approach by examining these processes in a sample of physically abusive parents and their children. Child maltreatment, as an extreme form of harsh and unresponsive parenting, represents a serious disturbance of the parent-child relationship. As such, child maltreatment has been said to offer an “experiment of nature” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) by which to articulate socialization theories of development (Cicchetti, 1998).

1.1. Parental emotional expressiveness

Emotional expressiveness is often described as a consistent pattern or style of expression, with previous studies finding that expressiveness remains relatively stable across time (Castro, Halberstadt, Lozada, & Craig, 2015; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Halberstadt & Eaton, 2002; Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995). Moreover, emotional expressiveness is often separated into two distinct forms: positive emotional expressiveness and negative emotional expressiveness (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995). Importantly, differences in levels of the expression of positive and negative emotions consistently emerge, suggesting that, one, the expression of positive emotions is considerably more common than the expression of negative emotions and, two, that positive emotional expressiveness is more consistent over time than negative emotional expressiveness, which is more context-dependent (Halberstadt, Fox, & Jones, 1993). Moreover, the impact of parents’ emotional expressiveness seems to differ by valence, such that the expression of positive emotions tends to be more consistently linked to children’s self-regulation and functioning more broadly relative to the expression of negative emotions (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999).

How parents express both positive and negative emotions has important implications for their children’s self-regulation, behavioral functioning, and mental health (Bariola et al., 2011; Chen, Zhou, Main, & Lee, 2015; Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997; Eisenberg et al., 1998, Eisenberg et al., 2001). For example, in a sample of middle class families, parents’ expression of both positive and negative emotions uniquely predicted their young children’s self-regulation, such that children whose parents were more affectively positive and less negative tended to display greater regulation (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Moreover, children’s self-regulation mediated the association between parents’ emotional expressiveness and children’s behavioral functioning and social competence. Of note, the influence of parents’ emotional expression may be tied to both genetic and environmental factors, such that self-regulation abilities have been linked to certain genes and are as heritable as many other personality traits (Goldsmith, Buss, & Lemery, 1997; Kim et al., 2011; Vernon, Petrides, Bratko, & Schermer, 2008). Parents also socialize their children’s self-regulation abilities through modeling, coaching, and reinforcement (Spinrad, Stifter, Donelan-McCall, & Turner, 2004; Thompson & Meyer, 2007).

In spite of extensive examinations of parents’ emotional expressiveness and its link to child outcomes (Denham et al., 1997, Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010; Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007), few studies have taken a longitudinal approach to understand whether and how parental emotional expressiveness relates to children’s self-regulation over time. The transition to formal schooling provides a critical moment for investigating these longitudinal associations as children are exposed to greater environmental variation, such as through the introduction of new teachers, peers, and more complex learning contexts beyond their families and households (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). To date, research involving high-risk samples of parents is particularly limited. Importantly, understanding how and when parents’ emotional expressiveness influences children’s self-regulation could provide insight into potential avenues for interventions aimed at minimizing the impact of atypical emotional environments on children’s development.

1.2. Socialization of self-regulation

Parental socialization of self-regulation occurs through a variety of mechanisms (Fox & Calkins, 2003). For one, children constantly observe their parents’ emotional displays and how they express and manage their emotions (Brophy-Herb, Stansbury, Bocknek, & Horodyski, 2012). Children of parents who display wide ranges of emotional expressions are more likely to learn about a variety of emotional responses and the appropriateness of specific emotions across multiple contexts (Denham et al., 1997). Conversely, when parents display few emotional expressions (such as when parents are high in flat affect) children may have fewer opportunities to learn about emotional expression and how to regulate one’s emotions. Parents also actively teach their children about emotions and how to regulate feelings and behaviors (Morris et al., 2011). For example, warm, supportive parents help their children verbally label emotions, empathize with or validate their children’s emotions, and actively help their children problem-solve when dealing with negative emotions (Nelson et al., 2012). In contrast, punitive parental reactions include yelling, name calling, overt expressions of anger, and physical threats and aggression (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003). Finally, the emotional climate of families may impact self-regulation in children. Climate includes such factors as parenting styles (i.e., responsive and warm versus harsh and dismissing), family expressiveness, particularly in the case of high levels of negativity, and the emotional quality of the marital relationship (Maughan, Cicchetti, Toth, & Rogosch, 2007). Climates that are unpredictable and negative are linked to children displaying high levels of emotional reactivity to challenges and poor regulation across a range of situations (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Haskett, Stelter, Proffitt, & Nice, 2012). Of note, most of the research on socialization has been done with community samples – not samples at high risk for disturbed parent-child relationships and poor regulation. Studies of these clinical samples are needed to articulate socialization processes in these families.

1.3. Physical abuse, parenting, and self-regulation

Physical abuse has the potential to be tremendously disruptive to the parent-child relationship. As a result, abusive parents’

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