



Full length article

## Associations among mothers' representations of their relationship with their toddlers, maternal parenting stress, and toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors

Efrat Sher-Censor<sup>a,\*</sup>, Cory Shulman<sup>b</sup>, Esther Cohen<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel<sup>b</sup> Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel<sup>c</sup> Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel

## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**

Five minute speech sample  
 Representations  
 Expressed emotion  
 Coherence  
 Toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors  
 Parenting stress

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the array of associations among the emotional valence and the coherence of mothers' representations of their relationship with their toddlers, mothers' reported parenting stress, and toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors. To evaluate maternal representations, 55 mothers were interviewed using the Five Minute Speech Sample procedure (FMSS; Magaña et al., 1986), which was coded for criticism and positive comments (Magaña-Amato, 1993), as well as coherence (Sher-Censor & Yates, 2015). Mothers also completed the Parenting Stress Index – Short Form (PSI; Abidin, 1997) to evaluate their parenting stress and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/1.5–5; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) to assess their toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Results indicated that parenting stress was associated with maternal criticism and fewer positive comments in the FMSS, but not with the coherence of mothers' FMSS. Parenting stress, criticism, and lower coherence in the FMSS were associated with maternal reports of externalizing behaviors. Only parenting stress and lower coherence in the FMSS were related to mothers' reports of internalizing behaviors of the child. Thus, the emotional valence and the coherence of mothers' representations of their relationship with their child and parenting stress may each constitute a distinct aspect of parenting and contribute to the understanding of individual differences in toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Implications for research and practice with families of toddlers are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

This study examined the interplay between the emotional valence and the coherence of mothers' representations of their relationship with their toddlers, their parenting stress, and their toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors to address two existing gaps in current research in the field of parenting and children's behavioral adaptation. First, several studies indicate that representations (i.e., perceptions, attributions, and emotions) which parents construct regarding their child and their relationship guide parents' behavior toward the child and thus contribute to children's internalizing behaviors (namely difficulties with mood, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints) and externalizing behaviors (i.e., aggression and attention problems; e.g., Waller, Gardner, Dishion, Shaw, & Wilson, 2012). Yet, there is no consensus as to the distinct roles of the emotional valence versus the organization or coherence of parents' representations (Sher-Censor & Yates, 2015). Secondly, parenting stress (i.e., psychological

\* Corresponding author at: The Center for the Study of Child Development, University of Haifa, 6035 Rabin Building, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel.  
 E-mail address: [esh@psy.haifa.ac.il](mailto:esh@psy.haifa.ac.il) (E. Sher-Censor).

distress that arises from the demands of parenting and parents' personal factors; Abidin, 1997) may color parents' representations and, as research suggests, may contribute to child behavior problems (Deater-Deckard, 1998). Yet, evidence regarding the unique associations of parental representations and parenting stress with children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors is limited and inconsistent.

The Expressed Emotion model (Daley, Sonuga-Barke, & Thompson, 2003; Magaña et al., 1986; Wamboldt, O'Connor, Wamboldt, Gavin, & Klinnert, 2000) and Relational Frame theory (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) suggest that parents' representations regarding the child and their relationship underlie their interpretation of the child's behavior, and shape parents' emotional and behavioral responses to the child. According to this view, parents' positive representations facilitate undistorted interpretations of their child's behavior, promote parents' warmth and empathy and thus support child adaptation (Bullock & Dishion, 2007; Daley et al., 2003). However, negative parental representations may lead parents to interpret their child's behavior as negative and respond to the child in a hostile or harsh way, putting the child at risk for increased behavior problems (Bullock & Dishion, 2007).

Attachment theory suggests that alongside the emotional valence of the representations described above, the organization or coherence of parents' representations may be of particular importance (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton, Biringen, Ridgeway, Maslin, & Sherman, 1989; George & Solomon, 1996). Coherent representations of parents include both positive and challenging attributions regarding the child, which are readily accessible to the parents, facilitate flexible interpretation of the child's signals and appropriate responsiveness to the child's needs, and thus promote child adaptation (George & Solomon, 1996; Slade, Belsky, Aber, & Phelps, 1999). Incoherent representations can be expressed as negative, all positive (i.e., idealizing), emotionally disengaged, overwhelmed with concern, or inconsistent. Such incoherent representations may hinder accurate interpretations of the child's signals and impede attuned parental responsiveness, and thus may contribute to increased behavior problems of the child (Bretherton, 1990; George & Solomon, 1996; Oppenheim, 2006).

A narrative approach is generally used to measure parents' representations (Oppenheim, 2006; Sher-Censor, 2015). The emotional valence of parents' representations is presumably reflected in the affective content of the parental narrative regarding the child and their relationship (Daley et al., 2003), while the coherence of parents' representations is reflected in the coherence of the narrative, namely the extent to which parents portray their child and their relationship in a multifaceted, authentic, and consistent manner (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Slade et al., 1999).

The Expressed Emotion model and attachment theory developed in parallel, and thus the majority of previous research examined either the affective content or the coherence of parents' narratives. Most studies that focused on affective content assessed criticism, namely negative statements, expressions of dislike or disapproval and positive comments, namely positive descriptions, warmth and empathy (e.g., Bullock & Dishion, 2007; Wamboldt et al., 2000). Among these studies, the few that focused on toddlers indicated that parental criticism and fewer positive comments were associated with children's internalizing behaviors (Gravener et al., 2012), with children's externalizing behaviors (Gravener et al., 2012; Waller et al., 2012; Waller et al., 2015), and with a global index of total behavior problems of the child, which combines internalizing, externalizing, and other problems (e.g., sleep and eating problems; Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Toth, 2004). A previous study that focused on the coherence of the parental narrative found that preschoolers whose mothers provided a coherent narrative showed fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors compared with preschoolers whose mothers provided incoherent narrative (Oppenheim, Goldsmith, & Koren-Karie, 2004).

The integration of Expressed Emotion model and attachment theory is important in order to help researchers and practitioners to identify which aspects of the parental narrative are seminal for understanding and fostering children's behavioral adaptation. To our knowledge, however, only one study (Sher-Censor & Yates, 2015) examined both the affective content and the coherence of parents' narratives regarding the parent-child relationship. The study focused on families of preschoolers and documented that each aspect of the narrative has unique associations with child behavior problems. In particular, positive comments in mothers' narratives were associated with mothers' report of fewer total behavior problems of their preschoolers. Negative comments were associated with mothers' report of more total behavior problems, but only among White and Black mothers and not among Hispanic mothers. Finally, the coherence of the maternal narrative was associated with observers' reports of fewer total behavior problems of the preschoolers.

The current study was designed to re-evaluate the associations of both the affective content and coherence of the parental narrative with children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and extend this examination downward to toddlerhood. We focused on toddlerhood because this is a transitional period from a mutual parent-child emotional and behavioral regulation to self-regulation (Calkins & Hill, 2007). In addition, during this developmental stage, parents begin to socialize the child concerning rules of conduct (Kochanska, 1993). These two processes are considered core pathways to children's behavioral (mal)adaptation (Kochanska, 1993; Eisenberg et al., 2005). Thus, parents' representations may be closely related to internalizing and externalizing behaviors particularly during toddlerhood.

In line with prior work (e.g., Sher-Censor & Yates, 2015; Waller et al., 2012), we elicited maternal narratives using the Five Minute Speech Sample procedure (FMSS; Magaña et al., 1986). This procedure prompts parents to speak for five uninterrupted minutes about their thoughts and feelings regarding their child and their relationship. Although brief, the FMSS requires parents to narrate without the aid of prompts or responses from the interviewer, and thus presumably maximizes the projection and expression of their internal representations (Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969).

This research also examined parenting stress, as it may be associated with the emotional valence and the coherence of parents' representations, and may be related to toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors as well (Deater-Deckard, 1998). Parenting stress refers to various sources of stress that are associated with parenthood. These include child self-regulation difficulties and child unsatisfying behaviors during interactions with the parent, as well as parent maladjustment in terms of for example, depression, marital conflict, and social isolation. Parents who experience higher levels of parenting stress may construct negative representations with respect to their child and their relationship (i.e., show high levels of criticism and low levels of positive comments), portraying

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7272995>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7272995>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)