

Current themes in understanding children's emotion regulation as developing from within the parent–child relationship

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A large existing literature has established that children's emotion regulation (ER) behaviors and capacities emerge from within the parent–child relationship. This review identified very recently published studies that exemplify contemporary themes in this area of research. Specifically, new research suggests that the influence of fathers, above and beyond that of mothers, becomes more pronounced across development. Further, culture influences how parents socialize emotion and how specific parenting behaviors relate to children's developing ER. Lastly, studies find child-elicited effects, such that children's ER predicts parents' emotion socialization and other relevant behaviors. We suggest several future directions, including understanding the nature of situations that elicit ER patterns, as well as both expanding upon and integrating the areas highlighted in the review.

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It is well-established that emotion regulation (ER) behaviors and capacities emerge from experiences within the early parent–child relationship, with previous theory and empirical research supporting the attachment relationship (typically with the mother) and specific parenting behaviors as foundations of ER development from infancy onwards [1,2]. While acknowledging that ER development in the parent–child relationship is a nuanced literature that cannot be exhaustively encompassed here, this review covers two themes emerging from very recent research in this area (Figure 1). First is the increased acknowledgment of contextual factors, like parent–partner (mother versus father) and culture, in the development of ER within the parent–child relationship. Second, parents do not unidirectionally influence children's ER. We review new studies examining how children's ER influences parenting behavior. Within both of these

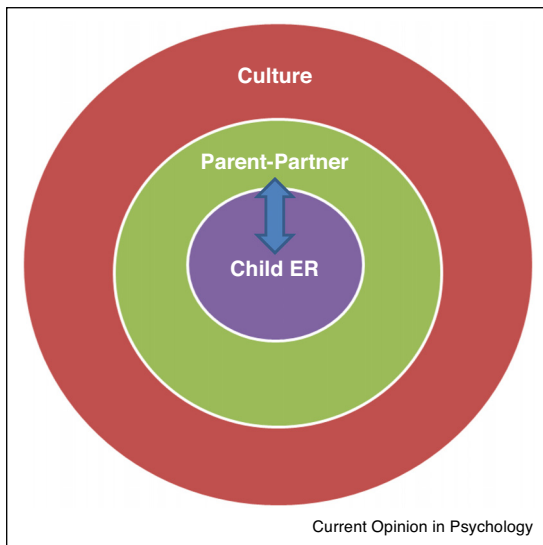
themes, recent research focuses on emotion socialization (see Box 1) as the parenting construct of relevance to children's ER. We conclude with suggestions for future research that will continue to refine our understanding of ER development.

Parent–partner as a context of ER development

Unequivocally, parents play a role in the development of ER. Recent studies have focused on how mothers and fathers independently and conjointly influence ER. These suggest that both parents make unique contributions to children's ER development and these distinctions become more apparent as children age.

Few differences exist between how fathers and mothers impact ER in infancy. Infants often rely on their caregivers for assistance in regulating their affective experience [1,3]. When the caregiver is uncharacteristically unresponsive, the infant must attempt to self-regulate. When either mothers or fathers were instructed to be unresponsive, 3-month to 7-month-olds employed similar strategies to regulate their emotions (e.g. looking to the parent, distraction, self-soothing), and these strategies proved equally effective for reducing negative affect over a three second period with each parent [4•]. However, when comparing infants' displays of negative affect to parental unresponsiveness across the 3, 5, and 7-month assessments, reductions in negative affect across that time period were only found for paternal unresponsiveness. Regardless of age, 3-month to 7-month old infants found maternal unresponsiveness consistently distressing. A previous study by the same research group investigated the regulatory strategies used by 20-month-olds when their parents were instructed to remain unresponsive for 90 s when the toddler was introduced to a frustrating toy [5]. Consistent with the younger sample, the regulation strategy used was similar when with mothers and fathers. Further, when toddlers used a parent-centered approach to regulate their frustration, negative affect displays lasted longer with mothers than with fathers. Taken together, these studies suggest that while similar regulatory strategies are used when in the presence of an unresponsive mother and father, maternal unresponsiveness is slightly more distressing. Particularly in early infancy, caregivers are crucial in helping infants to regulate distress [3]. Infants spend more time with their mothers in their first year [6], and it is during this time that infants develop the ability to discriminate between

Figure 1



A pictorial representation of current themes in child emotion regulation research. Children's emotion regulation development occurs within the context of the parent-child relationship, which may be influenced by both the specific parent-partner as well as the culture(s) in which the family resides. Further, children's emotion regulation also influences the parent, so this relation is best conceptualized as bidirectional.

faces and voices [3]. Perhaps distress results from infants' violated expectations of their mothers as external sources of ER, coupled with infants' evolving abilities to identify their mothers' characteristic features.

These small cross-parent differences in infancy become more pronounced by childhood. Mothers engage in more supportive emotion-coaching behaviors than fathers in reaction to their children's negative emotions during a teaching task [7]. Perhaps surprising, a recent model by Fosco and Grych [8] proposed that when considering family emotional climate and interparental conflict, only maternal supportive responses to children's emotion displays related directly to ER development. Others [9^{*}] found that positive paternal influences on children's behaviors are observed only in families where the mother-father relationship is characterized by low conflict. Together these findings suggest that paternal behaviors may be absorbed in the general family climate whereas maternal behaviors maintain unique influences for children's ER. In addition, maternal ER strategies related to their 9 to 19-year-old children's ER strategies whereas paternal strategies did not [10^{*}]. Given this recent research, it appears that mothers may influence the development of ER more than fathers in this age range. It is important to consider the intergenerational context when speculating about the mechanisms underlying these differences. Research supports the notion that parents discuss emotions more with their daughters than their sons

Box 1 Emotion socialization is the process by which parents communicate values surrounding the display and management of emotions through direct dialogue about, modeling of, and reactions to children's displays of emotions [32]. Subsequently, children learn how to regulate their emotions in line with these values. In European American samples, discussion and general familial acceptance of the expression of emotion is associated with improved emotion regulation capabilities in children [33–38]. These adaptive parental reactions to emotion are termed *supportive* and *emotion-coaching* behaviors throughout this article. Within these broader categories are *problem-solving* responses, which seek to determine a solution and provide another example of supportive emotion-coaching behaviors. *Explanation-oriented* responses are a type of supportive emotion socialization behavior found in Indian samples that aim to help the child understand the feelings and intent of others to facilitate interpersonal relationships [19^{**}]. *Nonsupportive* emotion socialization practices include minimizing, punitive, and critical reactions to children's emotion displays. Such *emotion-dismissive* parenting is associated with maladaptive ER capabilities in children and predicts poorer coping outcomes and future dysregulation [39,40].

[11]. Perhaps mothers are more comfortable discussing emotions with their own children because their parents discussed emotions more in their own childhood and so were socialized to accept emotional expression as more typical than fathers.

By middle childhood, paternal reactions to emotion displays appear influential in the development of gender-stereotypical emotions. The extant literature has demonstrated that fathers are more supportive than mothers of sadness in their daughters and anger in their sons [11,12]. A recent study extended these findings to spousal-report and found that mothers perceive fathers to be more supportive of their daughters' rather than their sons' sadness displays [13]. Given that fathers generally engage in less emotion socialization with their children than do mothers [11], it is possible that when fathers are supportive of gender-stereotypical emotions this is particularly salient to their children. This appears to be true for stereotypically male emotions as well. When fathers, but not mothers, are unsupportive of their children's anger displays, children are at an increased risk for psychopathology [14]. In addition, children of fathers who model dysregulation and hostility are more likely to demonstrate externalizing problems in a classroom environment [15]. Clearly, parent-partner has a significant impact on ER development, and as research evolves, the nuances of these parental influences should be investigated.

From the above findings, it should not be assumed that mothers are the only agents by which children develop ER. It is clear that both mothers and fathers are similarly influential in infancy and speaks to the importance of the paternal relationship for developing these foundational ER capabilities. The above review does suggest that mothers and fathers influence emotion regulation in unique domains. Particularly, paternal influences should

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