



# Emerging effortful control in infancy and toddlerhood and maternal support: A child driven or parent driven model?



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between children's temperamental characteristics of rudimentary effortful control (EC) and mothers' supportive reactions to their children's negative emotions in infancy and toddler period. One hundred and fifty eight (78 girls) Taiwanese children's EC was assessed at 12 and 24 months with mothers' report on the very short-form scales of Infant Behavior Questionnaire (IBQ) and Early Childhood Behavior Questionnaire (ECBQ) respectively. The mothers also completed questionnaires to assess their comforting behaviors at 12 months and both comforting and cognitive assistance to their children's expression of negative emotions when the child was 24 months old. A structural model was used to examine within- and across-time relations between children's EC and the maternal support. The results showed continuity of EC related temperament from infancy to toddlerhood and the 12-month rudimentary EC positively predicted mothers' comforting and cognitive assistance at 24 months, suggesting that mothers modulate their use of support in accordance with their prior knowledge of their children's regulatory capacities. The results indicated an influence of infants' temperament on adult behaviors, supporting potential evocative child effects on mothers' emotion coaching behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

The goal of this study was to examine the relations of infants' dispositional self-regulatory characteristics (i.e., rudimentary forms of effortful control) and maternal behavior in emotionally charged situations. Using a longitudinal model that allows for a test of potential causal relations (i.e., by controlling for initial levels of constructs when predicting over time), we tested the within- and across-time bidirectional relations between emerging effortful control (EC) related temperament in infancy/toddlerhood and mothers' supportive reactions to their children's anger and sadness.

Numerous studies have indicated the importance of EC for many developmental outcomes. Previous studies have linked high EC to more effective emotion regulation (e.g., Eisenberg, Hofer, & Vaughan, 2007; Rothbart & Sheese, 2007), the development of conscience (Kochanska & Knaack, 2003; Kochanska, Murray, & Coy, 1997; Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000), compliance (Spinrad et al., 2012), and social and academic competence (Blair & Razza, 2007; Eisenberg, Smith, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2004; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008) as well as low EC to difficulties with externalizing problems (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2009; Gartstein & Fagot, 2003; Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005).

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However, studies examining developmental precursors of EC are of relative scarcity. To date, very little work has tested potentially important contributors to the development of EC (see Eisenberg et al., 2010, for exception), particularly within infancy and toddlerhood. Eisenberg et al. (2010) studied children of 18, 30, and 42 months old, and found that their EC consistently predicted maternal teaching strategies across time rather than vice versa. Individual differences in children's dispositions may influence caregiving behavior at an earlier stage, thus it is important to examine the role of potential child- or parent-driven influences in the development of EC in infancy.

Prior work shows that aspects of EC related infant temperament and certain attributes of maternal support/responsiveness (e.g., sensitivity, acceptance, warmth, and cognitive assistance) may be critical for the emergence of EC in the toddlerhood and its further development (Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007; Lunkenheimer et al., 2008). However, children's characteristics may also affect the quality and nature of parenting strategies from evocative genetic perspective (Plomin, 1994) and Vygotskyian view (Eisenberg et al., 2010). There are compelling conceptual reasons to examine child driven and parental driven associations as well. The present investigation aims to add to the emerging literature examining temperamental and environmental precursors to toddler EC and explore how maternal support may be affected by the rudimentary EC related temperaments in infancy and toddlerhood.

### 1.1. Children's effortful control and socialization of emotion regulation

Effortful control (EC) is defined as a dimension of temperament related to the self-regulation of emotional reactivity and behavior, reflecting individual differences in the ability to voluntarily deploy attention (attention focusing and shifting), detect errors, and activate a subdominant response in place of a more automatic/dominant response (Rothbart & Bates, 2006; Rothbart & Derryberry, 2002). During infancy, caregivers provide much of control over children behavior and EC begins to emerge at the end of the first year of life and becomes more organized and sophisticated in the preschool years (Putnam, Spritz, & Stifter, 2002). Despite the progressive development due to maturation, EC appears to be a heritable aspect of temperament that tends to exhibit within-subject stability from infancy to childhood (Eisenberg et al., 2004; Saudino, 2005). After age 2, individual differences in EC become increasingly stable and measures of EC progressively interdepend (Kochanska et al., 2000).

EC includes the abilities to control emotions and behavior by inhibiting or activate behavior and willfully focusing or shifting the attention (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Infants show basic forms of effortful attention, such as anticipatory looking at 6- to 7-months old (Sheese, Rothbart, Posner, White, & Fraundorf, 2008), and reaching for a target when they are 12-month old, indicating the ability to control and coordinate reach and vision (Diamond, 1991). These abilities are considered to include planning, execution of intentional behavior, and resistance to more involuntary action tendencies (Diamond, 2002).

Although EC is considered dispositional (Rothbart & Bates, 2006), it also has been linked to quality of parenting. Developmental changes in EC have been theorized as being due to not only individual factors, but also socialization factors (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). The link between maternal behavior and effortful control is consistent with theoretical notions suggesting that effortful control may be amenable to socialization practices (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). The external socialization of emotion regulation by parents is considered among the most critical influences on children, especially in infancy and early childhood (Calkins & Johnson, 1998). EC has been associated with relatively high maternal responsiveness and positive guidance (e.g., praise, warmth/affection, encouragement, suggestions, and positive feedback) (Kochanska et al., 2000; Lengua et al., 2007; Lunkenheimer et al., 2008; Putnam et al., 2002), low levels of maternal restrictiveness and high levels of cognitive stimulation/verbal interaction (Olson, Bates, Sandy, & Schilling, 2002). Thus, there are some research results showing the quality of parenting is related to children's performances in self-regulation and effortful control. Nonetheless, the direction of causal effects underlying these associations is not clear.

There are also conceptual reasons to expect children's EC to affect parenting behavior. According to Eisenberg and Morris (2002) and Derryberry and Rothbart's (1997) theoretical framework, children with higher EC are able to voluntarily control their motivation, attention, and actions and thus make their parents more likely to feel efficient in assisting their children to adapt to changing circumstances in flexible and appropriate ways. Also, from a Vygotskyian perspective, various parental teaching strategies may have different effects. For example, parents who cognitively assist children to understand a challenge may help children to develop effective strategies rather than becoming frustrated and inattentive. With parental cognitive assistance (maybe a different perspective), children may interpret a situation differently and develop an effective strategy for dealing with challenges in the future. However, if a mother is aware that her child has poor inhibitory or attention control, she may be more likely to use directive commands rather than cognitive strategies.

Moreover, empirical data show that children's EC plays a role in the relations between parent-child interactions (Eisenberg et al., 2005) and consistently predicted three types of maternal teaching strategies (i.e., cognitive assistance, directive, and questioning) across time rather than vice versa (Eisenberg et al., 2010). Research indicates that children who display poor behavior and emotion regulation are likely to demonstrate hostility and lower-quality social interactions (Bridgett et al., 2009; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003; Lengua, 2006), parental monitoring (Pettit, Keiley, Laird, Bates, & Dodge, 2007), and negative parental responses (Bridgett et al., 2009). On the other hand, high levels of EC were found to be related to lower parental rejection when children were transitioning from middle childhood to adolescence (Lengua, 2006).

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