

Pathways from Maternal Depressive Symptomatology to Children's Emotional Development: The Case of Emotion Understanding and Emotion Expression



Alyssa C. Parsons, Abby C. Winer & Ross A. Thompson
Social and Emotional Development Lab, University of California, Davis

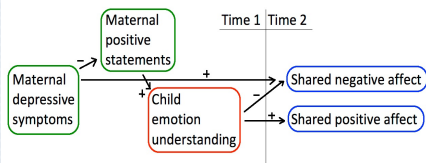
Introduction

- Past research shows that mothers' depressive symptoms can have a profound detrimental effect on the emotional development of their children (Harris, 1994).
- However, less research has investigated the mediating processes by which it may be influential on children's emotional development.

Research Objectives

- The current project examines the impact of maternal depressive symptoms upon children's emotion understanding, and subsequently, their emotion expression.
- We hypothesized a positive link between maternal depressive symptoms, children's emotion understanding, and mother-child affective interactions 18 months later.

Conceptual Model



Methods

- Short-term longitudinal study.
- 65 four-year-olds and their mothers from a diverse community sample visited our lab.
 - Time 1 (T1): children were 4.5 years old.
 - Time 2 (T2): children returned 18 months later when they were 6 years old.
- Maternal depressive symptomatology was assessed at T1 using maternal reports on the Center for Epidemiological Studies' Depression Scale (CES-D).
- Mothers' positive evaluative statements were measured at T1 in a mother-child conversation in which the mother talked about a time the child helped someone.
 - To account for the varying durations of the conversations, statements were adjusted based upon the number of conversational turns.
- Emotion understanding was assessed at T1 using a well-established, age-appropriate, puppet-based affective-perspective taking task (EU; Denham, 1986).
- Shared positive or negative affect between the mother and child was coded at T2 during two unstructured, five-minute periods of free play (following a coding procedure developed by Kochanska & Askan, 1995).

Table 1. Correlations Between Measures

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. CES-D Score	1				
2. Positive statements	-.382**	1			
3. Emotion understanding	-.158	.408**	1		
4. Shared positive affect	-0.015	.271*	-.514**	1	
5. Shared negative affect	.393**	-.294*	-.513**	-.291*	1

*p>.05, **p>.01.

Table 2. Regression Analyses Predicting Emotion Understanding at T1

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Maternal depressive symptoms	-0.058	0.13	-0.059
Maternal positive statements	1.173	0.286	.406**
R ²	0.196		
F	4.295**		

*p>.05, **p>.01

Results

- Linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the significance of each predictive model.
- The model predicting children's emotion understanding at T1 was significant (see Table 2); that is, maternal positive statements directly predicted children's emotion understanding.
- Mothers who made more positive evaluations of their child (e.g., "good girl" "nice thing to do") had children with greater knowledge about emotions and affective perspective taking abilities.
- The models predicting mother-child shared positive and negative affect were also significant.
 - The full model accounted for 27.2% of the variance in shared positive affect.
 - The full model predicting shared negative affect accounted for 26.3% of the variance among mother-child dyads.



Table 3. Regression Models Predicting Shared Positive Affect at T2

Predictor at Time 1	β	R ²	Δ R ²	Δ F
Step 1. Maternal Variables		0.007		0.151
Depressive symptoms	0.107			
Positive evaluative statements	-0.011			
Step 2. Child Variables		0.272	.265**	16.028
Emotion understanding	.517**			

*p>.01, **p>.001

Table 4. Regression Models Predicting Shared Negative Affect at T2

Predictor at Time 1	β	R ²	Δ R ²	Δ F
Step 1. Maternal Variables		0.007		0.169
Depressive symptoms	0.52			
Positive evaluative statements	0.008			
Step 2. Child Variables		0.263	.256**	15.293
Emotion understanding	-.508**			

*p>.01, **p>.001

Discussion

- While maternal depressive symptoms and maternal positive statements contributed to qualities of mother-child interactions, it was emotion understanding that provided the most robust prediction of shared affect (positive or negative) within the mother-child dyad at Time 2.
- Overall, our hypotheses were confirmed. Maternal depressive symptoms undermined mothers' positive statements in conversations with the child, which in turn undermined children's emotion understanding, which predicted shared positive affect 18 months later.
- Though maternal caregiving qualities did not directly predict the mother-child interactions 18 months later, the results suggest that they may do so indirectly through their contributions to the development of emotion understanding.
- Although 18.5% of mothers in our sample met the threshold for clinical depression, replication with a clinical group would likely bolster the strength of the relationships found.
- Based on these findings, early intervention efforts involving depressed caretakers may benefit from focusing on developing positive interactions and evaluations in addition to helping to foster emotion understanding in young children.

Acknowledgements

My most heartfelt thanks for the tremendous assistance I have received from Alberto Guzman-Alvarez, Abby Winer, and Dr. Ross Thompson. This work was supported by a grant from the Amini Foundation for the Study of Affects.

Contact: acparsons@ucdavis.edu