Socialization of Young Children's Emotion Regulation Strategies:

Parental Emotion Representations and Behaviors

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Abstract

Interactions with caregivers provide rich social contexts for children to learn about managing negative emotions. This study examined how parental socialization processes during emotional interactions relate to young children's emotion-related regulation strategies, and what specific parental emotion representations may underlie these processes. Findings illuminate the key dimensions of parents' emotion representations that may be most important for children's emotion regulation development, and what values and beliefs around emotion emotionally unsupportive parents lack. These data also lend support to the hypothesis that socialization behaviors mediate the relation between parental emotion representations and children's emotion regulation strategies. Overall, results highlight the co-construction of regulatory development, and the need to understand how parental beliefs about emotion influence their behavior during parent-child emotional exchanges.

Introduction

- Emotion regulation is a core component of adaptive social functioning throughout development. How and when we regulate our emotions leads to important social consequences early in life.

- A developmental approach to emotion regulatory development emphasizes the co-construction of emotion regulation; beginning from birth and continuing throughout life, our emotions are soothed and enhanced by our social partners (Thompson, 1994).

- However, little research has examined how caregivers' own emotional lives influences the co-construction of their child's regulatory development.

- The degree to which a parent accepts and values emotions constructs an environment that may facilitate open discussion and exploration of negative emotions. It is also logical that parents' emotion regulation style may serve as a model of regulatory functioning, and extend to provide evaluative feedback to children about their own regulation approaches.

- This study examines how caregivers' acceptance and value of emotions in their lives and approach to regulating and alleviating negative affect may influence children's regulatory development.

- Specifically, we explore how emotion representations underlie parental reactions to children's negative emotions and emotional expressivity, as well as how these representations relate to children's emotion regulation strategies.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What specific dimensions of parental emotion representations underlie parents' behavior during emotional exchanges with their children, and are these dimensions related to children's emotion regulation strategies?

Research Question 2: Are the links between parental emotion representations and children's regulation strategies mediated by the qualities and characteristics of parents' behaviors during emotional exchanges with their children?

Conceptual Model
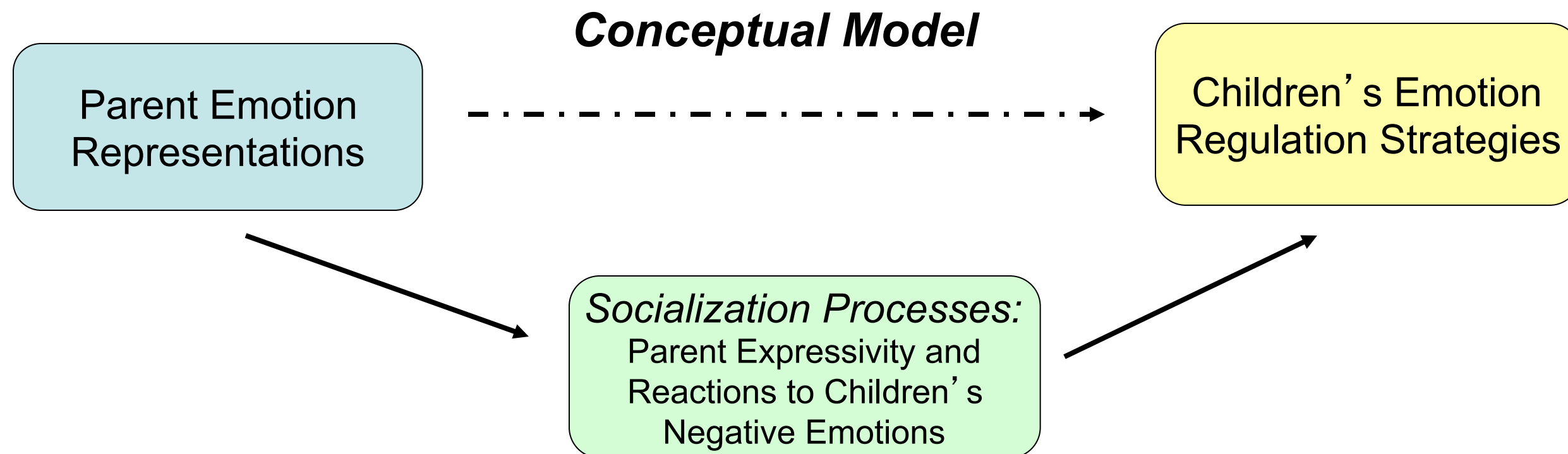
Method

Participants. Seventy-three children (*M* age = 4.52 yrs, SD = .35; 45% female) and their mothers were recruited from community child care centers and preschools.

Procedures. During two visits to a university laboratory, parents completed questionnaires about their own emotions (*Berkeley Emotion Regulation Questionnaire*; *Trait Meta-Mood Scale*), their own behavior during emotional exchanges (*Self-expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire*; *Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale*), and preschoolers' emotion regulation strategy use (adapted *Children's Emotion Regulation Processes Survey*). See Table 1.

Table 1. Measures

Variable	Measure
Parental Emotion Representations	*From the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995) & Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003)*
Acceptance	"Feelings give direction to life."
Clarity	"I am rarely confused about how I'm feeling."
Regulation	"I try to think good thoughts no matter how badly I feel." "When I want to feel more positive emotions, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation."
Suppression	"When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them."
Parental Behaviors	
Reaction to Child's Negative Emotions	*From the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (Fabes et al., 1990)*
Problem-Emotion focused	Helps the child solve the problem that caused the distress and focus on emotional comfort (e.g., help my child think of ways s/he can deal with the problem; soothe my child)
Emotion Encourage	Gives encouragement to express negative affect or validates child's negative emotions (e.g., encourage my child to express his/her feelings of frustration)
Minimizing/Punitive	Minimizes the seriousness of the event, the children's reaction, or expresses punitive reaction that reduce the children's exposure to the negative emotion (e.g., send my child to his/her room)
Matched Distress	Matching the distress of the child (e.g., get angry with my child)
Expressivity	*From the Self-expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ; Halberstadt et al., 1995)*
Positive Expressivity	E.g., showing praise, admiration, and gratitude
Negative Dominant	E.g., showing anger, hostility, making threats
Negative Submissive	E.g., showing sadness, crying, sulking
Children's Emotion Regulation Strategies	*From the Children's Emotion Regulation Processes Questionnaire (adapted from Eisenberg et al., 1993)*
Problem & Emotion-Focused	E.g., asks an adult for an alternative solution
Attention-focused	E.g., thinks about positive things
Dominant Venting	E.g., hit or yell to obtain his/her go a l
Submissive Venting	E.g., cry to releases feelings

Results: Research Question 1

- Parental **Attention,** was positively related to parents' problem-emotion focused and emotional encouraging reactions, parental positive expressivity, and children's problem and emotion-focused regulation strategies.

  – And negatively related to minimizing and punitive reactions.

- Parental **Clarity** was positively related to parents' emotion encouraging reactions and positive expressivity.

  – And negatively related to parental reactions that match the distress of their children.

- Parental **Regulation** was positively related to parents' problem-emotion focused and emotional encouraging reactions, parental positive expressivity, and children's attention-focused regulation strategies.

  – And negatively related to parental reactions that match the distress of their children and negative dominant expressivity.

- Parental **Suppression** was negatively related to emotion encouraging reactions and positive expressivity.

See Table 2 for bivariate correlations

Table 2. *Bivariate correlates among parental emotion representation, socialization behaviors, and children's emotion regulation strategies*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Emotion Representations (ERQ, TMMS)														
1. Attention	--													
2. Clarity	.40**	--												
3. Regulation	.22+	.50**	--											
4. Suppression	-.38**	-.32**	.04	--										
Reactions to Negative Emotions (CNNES)														
5. Problem-Emotion Focused	.26*	.16	.40**	-.17	--									
6. Emotion Encourage	.52**	.26*	.39**	-.23*	.44**	--								
7. Minimizing/Punitive	-.27*	-.15	-.08	-.01	-.09	-.37**	--							
8. Matched distress	.04	-.24*	-.36*	-.02	-.15	-.35**	.33**	--						
Expressivity (SEFQ)														
9. Positive Expressivity	.43**	.30**	.34**	-.26*	.46**	.41**	.08	-.24*	--					
10. Negative Dominant	-.01	-.21	-34*	-.01	-.06	-.07	.25*	.20	.03	--				
11. Negative Submissive	.14	-.17	-.21+	-.20	.23*	.03	.13	.22+	.31**	.56**				
Children's Emotion Regulation Processes at home (CERP)														
12. Problem & Emotion-Focused	.27*	.12	.07	-.21	.29*	.31*	.04	.13	.22	.10	.28*	--		
13. Attention-Focused	.05	.06	.26*	.10	.41*	-.06	.17	-.02	.30**	.04	.14	-.04	--	
14. Dominant Venting	.16	-.04	-.02	-.06	.07	.15	-.08	.10	-.06	.14	.09	.25*	-.18	--
15. Submissive Venting	.13	-.01	.06	-.18	.30*	.20	-.09	.09	.16	-.06	.12	.46**	-.19	.36**

+ $p < .70$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

Results: Research Question 2

A series of multiple regression analyses demonstrated the mediating influence of parental socialization behaviors on the relation between parental emotion representations and children's emotion regulation strategies in a positive context.

- In separate analyses, both problem-emotion focused reactions (Table 3) and emotion encouraging reactions (Table 4) significantly mediated the direct path between parental attention and **children's use of eliciting emotional comfort and problem-solving to manage emotion**.

- In separate analyses, both problem-emotion focused reactions (Table 5) and positive expressivity (Table 6) significantly mediated the direct path between parental regulation and **children's use of attention-shifting strategies to manage emotion.**

Tables 3 & 4: *Summary of multiple regression analysis for predicting children's emotion and problem-focused regulation strategies*

Table 3.

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
1. Attention	13.93	5.81	.27*
Step 2			
1. Attention	10.91	5.88	.21
2. Problem – Emotion Focused Reactions	.77	.38	.23*

$R^2 = .08$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .05$ for Step 2 (ps < .05).
* $p < .05$.

Table 4

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
1. Attention	13.93	5.81	.27*
Step 2			
1. Attention	7.89	6.68	.16
2. Emotion Encourage	.47	.27	.23[+]

$R^2 = .08$ for Step 1 ($p < .05$); $\Delta R^2 = .04$[+] for Step 2 ($p = .08$).
[+] $p = .08$, * $p < .05$.

Tables 5 & 6. *Summary of multiple regression analysis for predicting* **children's attention- focused regulation strategies**

Table 5.

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
1. Regulation	11.82	5.27	.26*
Step 2			
1. Regulation	5.13	5.44	.11
2. Problem – Emotion Focused Reactions	1.30	.42	.37*

$R^2 = .07$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .11$* for Step 2 (ps < .05).
* $p < .05$.

Table 6.

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
1. Regulation	11.82	5.27	.26*
Step 2			
1. Regulation	7.99	5.48	.17
2. Positive Expressivity	6.31	3.09	.24*

$R^2 = .07$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .05$ for Step 2 (ps < .05).
* $p < .05$.

Results: Research Question 2, cont.

- There was a strong pattern of bivariate and multivariate relations among positive constructs in these data. We further aggregated the variables based on these patterns to test a more general model of constructive emotion regulation socialization.

- We found that **positive and supportive socialization behaviors** (parental positive expressivity, emotion encouraging, and problem and emotion-focused reactions) mediated the association between **parents' emotionally supportive representations** (parental attention and regulation) and **children's constructive emotion regulation strategies** (children's problem and emotion-focused and attention-focused strategies). See Tables 7 & 8.

- We conducted a path analysis to gain further insight into the size of the path coefficients. See Figure 1.

Tables 7 & 8: *Bivariate and Multivariate Analyses of Aggregate Variables*

Table 7. *Bivariate correlations among aggregate variables*

Variable	1	2
1. Parents' Emotional Supportive Representations	--	
2. Parents' Positive & Supportive Socialization Behaviors	.64**	--
3. Children's Constructive Emotion Regulation Strategies in the Home	.30*	.41*

$^+ p < .70$, $^* p < .05$, $^{**} p < .001$.

Table 8. *Summary of multiple regression analysis for predicting children's constructive regulation strategies in the home*

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
1. Emotionally supportive representations	12.65	4.82	.30*
Step 2			
1. Emotionally supportive representations	2.45	6.02	.06
2. Positive & supportive socialization behaviors	10.40	3.92	.38*

$R^2 = .09$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .08$ for Step 2 (ps $< .05$).
$^* p < .05$.

Figure 1: *Mediation path model with standardized path coefficients shown. Solid lines indicate significant paths.*

Dashed lines inidicate nonsignificant paths.
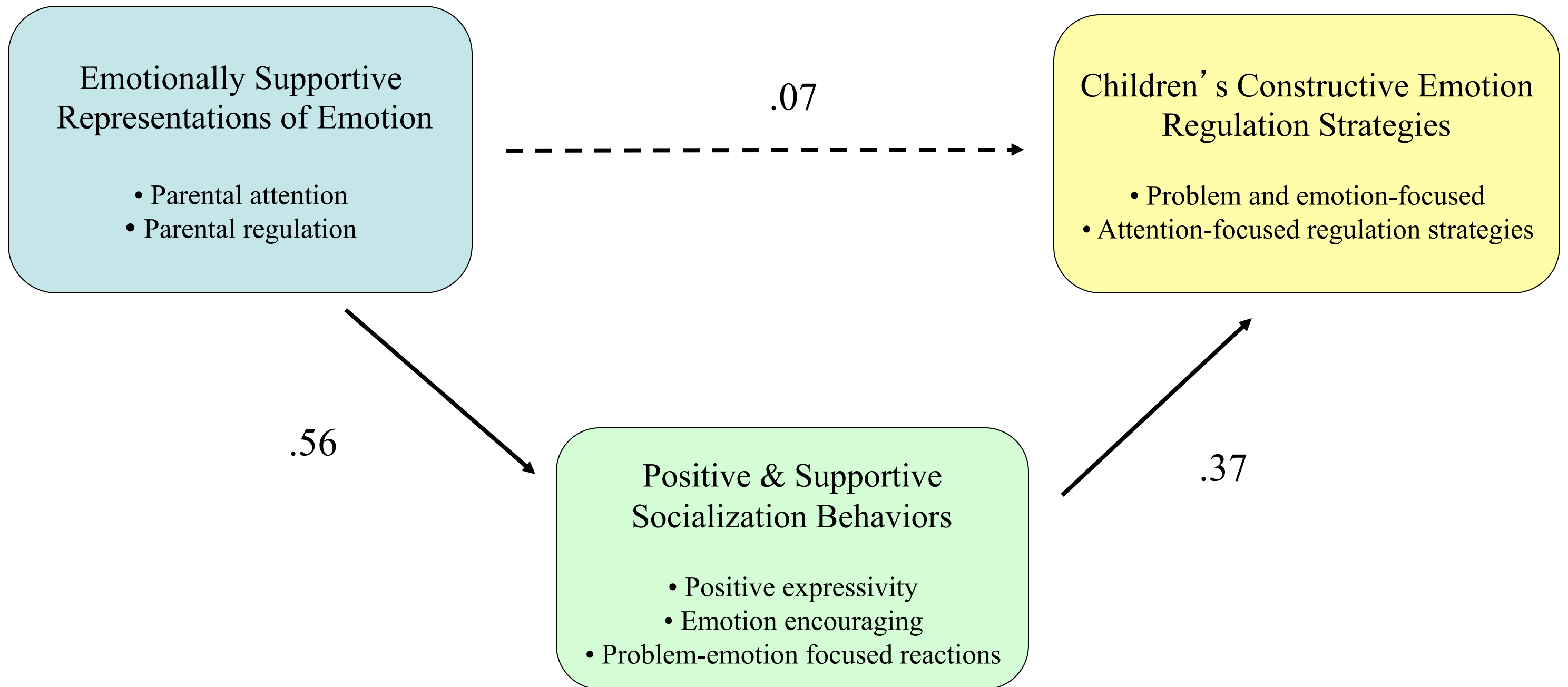
Discussion

Together, these results highlight the importance of examining parent-child emotional exchanges as forums for the co-construction of regulatory development and revealed several unique contributions to the emotion regulation literature.

First, this study extracted the specific dimensions of parental emotion representations that are important to children's emotion regulation development. Parents' beliefs about the importance of attending to, and accepting, emotion experiences (attention) and their effort and strategies to reduce negative moods (regulation) appear to be the most critical, as evidenced by their pattern of association with parents' emotional expressivity, reactions to children's negative emotions, and children's use of constructive strategies to regulate affect. (Research Question 1)

Second, this study did not find evidence for a strong pattern among emotionally unsupportive representations, hostile and negative socialization behaviors, and non-optimal approaches to managing emotions. However, data does support the conclusion that **parents with unsupportive behavior are deficient in beliefs and values about emotions that are important for encouraging those supportive socialization behaviors that benefit children's emotional development.** For example, parents who react to their children with minimizing and punitive responses were less attentive and accepting of their own emotions. (Research Question 1)

Third, these data reveal that children's ability to engage in constructive approaches to emotion regulation was shaped, in part, by parents' supportive reactions to children's negative emotions, as well as positive displays of emotions in the home. (Research Question 2) **Parents who are most likely to construct a supportive and positive emotional environment are those that are attentive to, and value, their own emotions and put forth energy to regulate them in a constructive way and maintain positive moods.**