

Parent-child relationships, conversation, and developing emotion regulation

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Young children in secure relationships are more proficient at emotion regulation

(e.g., Contreras et al., 2000; Gilliom et al., 2002; Kochanska, 2001; Nachmias et al., 1996; NICHD ECCRN, 2004)

But why . . . ?

- greater responsiveness of mothers in secure relationships as children are struggling to manage difficult feelings
- mothers in secure relationships talk with children about emotion in a more descriptively rich, elaborative manner
- securely-attached children have greater emotion understanding, especially of negative emotions that require management
- caregivers in secure relationships provide a more accepting context in which children can talk about difficult feelings

Prior research has shown . . .

- Preschoolers who are securely attached are more advanced in emotion understanding, especially of negative emotions (Laible & Thompson, 1998; Ontai & Thompson, 2002; Steele et al., 1999, 2008)
- Mothers in secure relationships are more likely to accurately perceive and interpret their children's emotions (Waters et al., SRCD 2009)
- Mothers in secure relationships talk about emotion in a descriptively richer, more elaborative manner with children (Laible, 2004; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Ontai & Thompson, 2002; see Reese, 2002)
- Mothers with secure attachment representations are more likely to talk in an elaborative manner with their children (Bost et al., 2006; Reese, 2008)
- Attachment security interacts with maternal conversational style in predicting children's emotion understanding (Laible & Thompson, 2000; Ontai & Thompson, 2000)

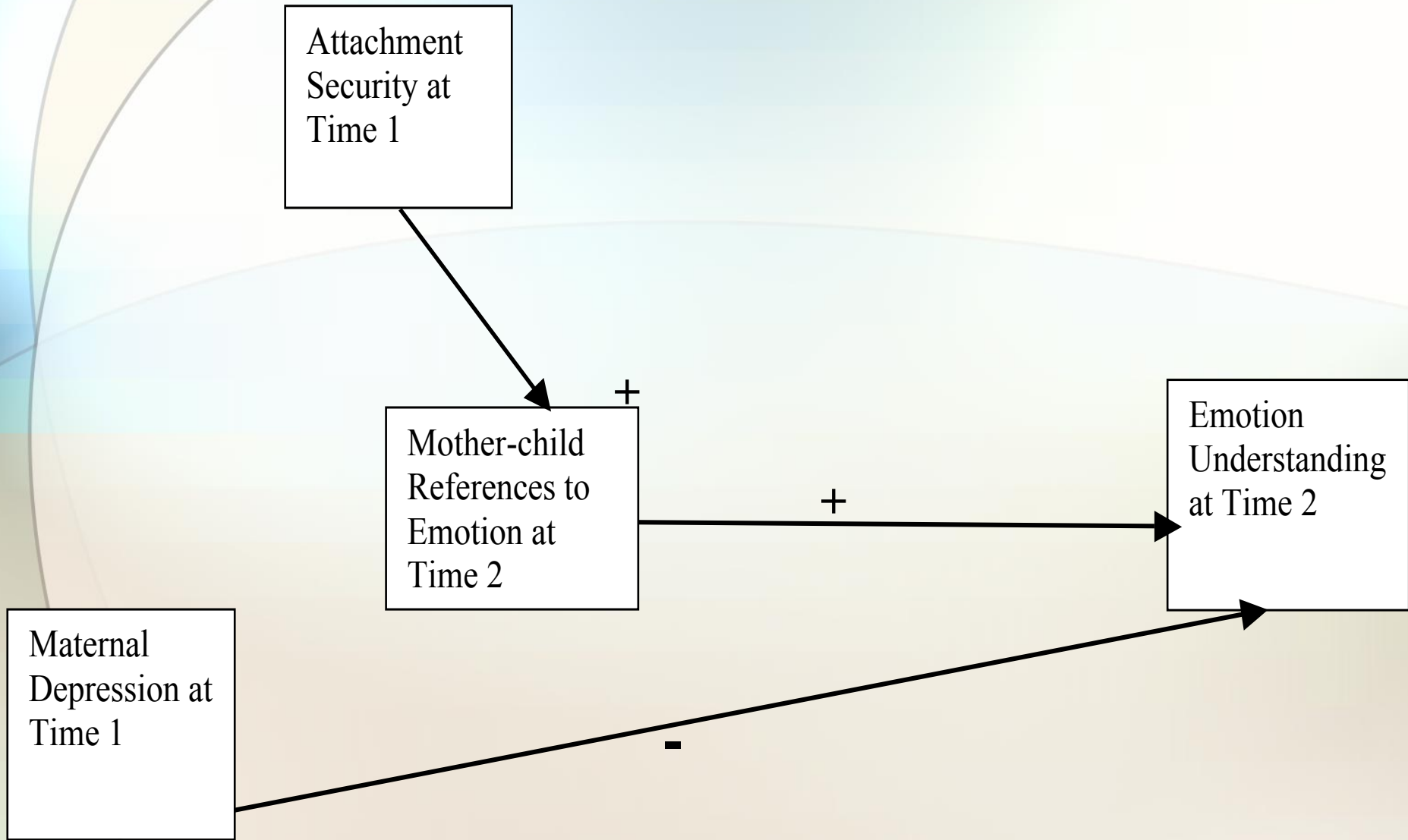
Family Emotional Climate, Attachment Security, and Young Children's Emotion Understanding

42 mothers & children (22 girls) enrolled in Early Head Start
Children were 2 1/2 at Time 1 and 3 1/2 at Time 2

Time 1: Attachment security and maternal depression

Time 2: Mother-child conversations about emotion, children's emotion understanding, maternal depression

Raikes, H. A., & Thompson, R. A. (2006). Family emotional climate, attachment security, and young children's emotion understanding in a high-risk sample. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 24(1), 89-104.



In follow-up analyses . . .

- In secure relationships, mothers' conversational style was characterized by heightened **elaboration** and **affirmation** of the child's contributions, and diminished **imposition** of the mother's viewpoint
- In secure relationships, 3 ½-year-olds were more likely to provide **labels for emotional states** in the absence of a maternal prompt
- In secure relationships, 3 ½-year-olds were marginally more likely to provide a greater number of **emotion words**
- Both maternal and child contributions to emotion understanding arise in these dyadic conversations

Preschool Emotional Development Study

What are the predictors of child evasion of conversation with the mother about difficult emotions?

More specifically, how is child evasion related to:

- maternal conversational quality – particularly maternal acceptance and validation of the child's viewpoint
- security of attachment
- child emotion understanding

Preschool Emotional Development Study

72 children (mean age 4½; 30 girls) and their mothers

During a single laboratory session, mothers and children conversed about two recent incidents in which the child had felt **mad** and **sad**. Conversations were videotaped and transcribed.

Later in the session, children participated in Denham's affective perspective-taking task. Children's responses to stories involving **negative emotional themes** were scored.

The **security of attachment** was also assessed independently via the AQS.

Digitized recordings of mother-child emotion conversations were coded for behavioral and verbal indicators of **child avoidance**, including:

- behavioral evasions
- verbally explicit evasions or refusals
- changing the topic

Transcriptions of mother-child conversations were assigned a summary score for **maternal validation** (5-point scale with 5 high), based on mother's conversational contributions indicating:

- acceptance of child's perspective (even if it contradicts mother's own view)
- expressions of empathy for child's feelings
- focus on child's (not mother's) viewpoint

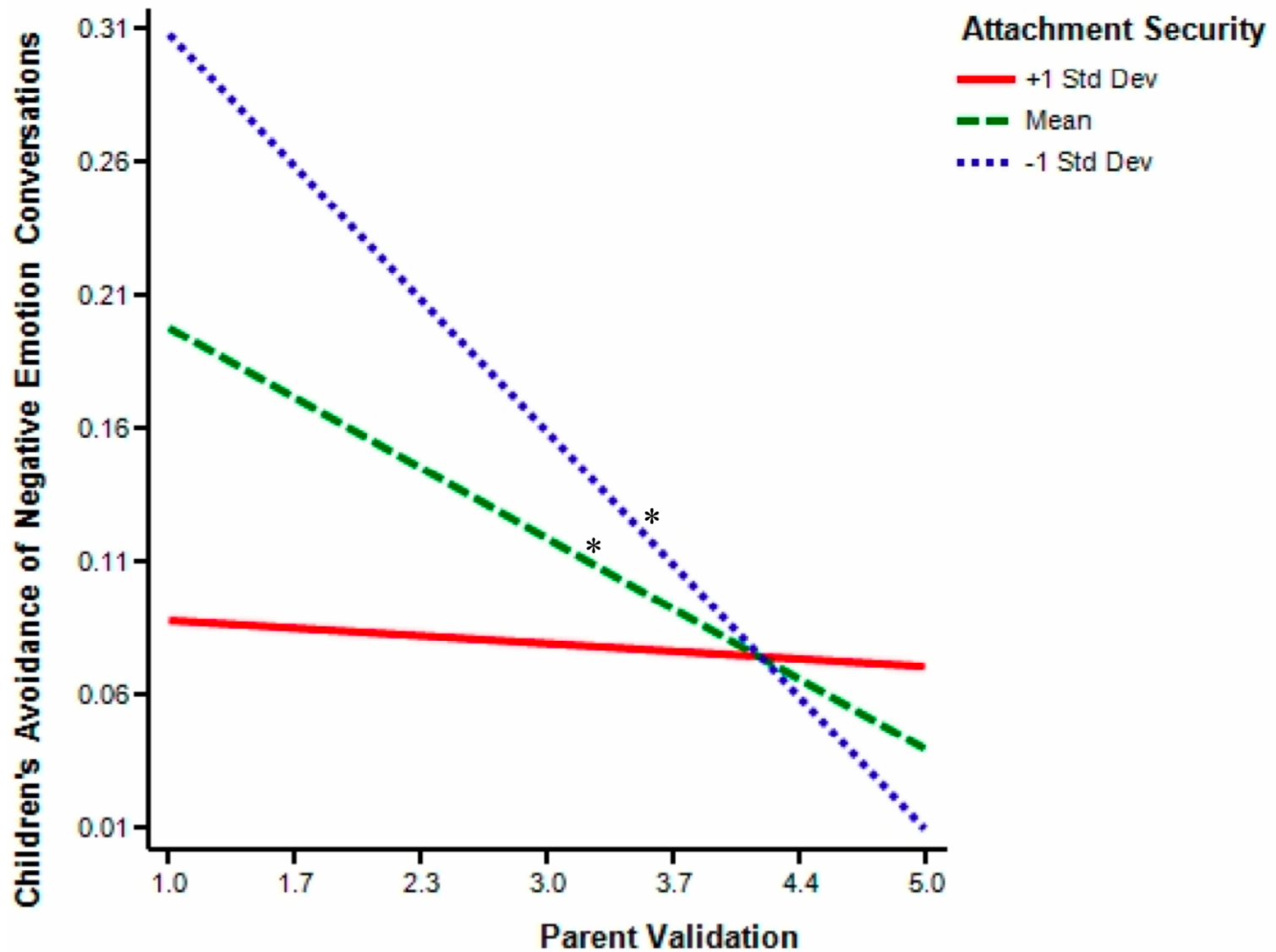
Predicting Child Avoidance in Mother-Child Conversations about Negative Emotion

| Variable | Step 1 | | | | Step 2 | | | | Step 3 | | | |
|--|----------|-------------|----------|---------|----------|-------------|----------|---------|----------|-------------|----------|---------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | <i>B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | <i>B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | <i>B</i> | β |
| Emotion understanding (negative emotions) | -.03 | .01 | -.41** | | -.03 | .01 | -.37** | | -.03 | .01 | -.37** | |
| Security of attachment | | | | | -.21 | .11 | -.21* | | -.18 | .11 | -.17 | |
| Maternal validation | | | | | -.04 | .01 | -.23* | | -.04 | .02 | -.23* | |
| Attachment x Validation | | | | | | | | | .21 | .10 | .21* | |
| R ² | .17** | | | | .29** | | | | .33** | | | |
| <i>F</i> for change in R ² | 14.57** | | | | 5.60** | | | | 4.40* | | | |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Interaction of Attachment and Maternal Validation in Predicting Child Avoidance



* Slope significant at $p < .05$

Final thoughts . . .

- There are multiple ways that secure attachment contributes to the growth of emotion regulation in children:
 - maternal sensitivity in secure relationships to children's feelings and efforts to manage challenging emotions,
 - secure children's capacities for emotion understanding, particularly of negative emotions that require regulation,
 - the conversational context of secure dyads that facilitates emotional communication and emotion understanding
- Relational contributions to the growth of emotion regulation are overlapping and sometimes compensatory
 - maternal conversational style may be especially important for children in insecure relationships

