



Avoiding Conversations about Negative Emotions: The Role of Attachment, Parent Validation, and Child Characteristics

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Introduction

- ❖ Parent-child conversations about emotions are important catalysts to young children's developing psychological understanding.
- ❖ However, children often avoid conversing about past emotional experiences, particularly those that are distressing or upsetting. Children may change the topic, evade the mother's invitations to talk, or explicitly refuse to continue the conversation.
- ❖ Multiple factors are likely to influence children's willingness to engage in discourse with their mothers about past negative emotional experiences.
 - Attachment theory suggests that secure attachments foster open communication that enable children to discuss distressing events.
 - How mothers respond in the context of conversation, such as mother's validation of the child's responses may also influence children's willingness to converse about negative emotions.
 - Characteristics of the child – particularly the child's current emotion understanding – may also contribute to the ease of emotional discourse with the parent, particularly of negative emotions.
- ❖ Because little is known about the correlates of young children's avoidance of parent-child conversations about negative emotions this study was designed to yield further understanding.

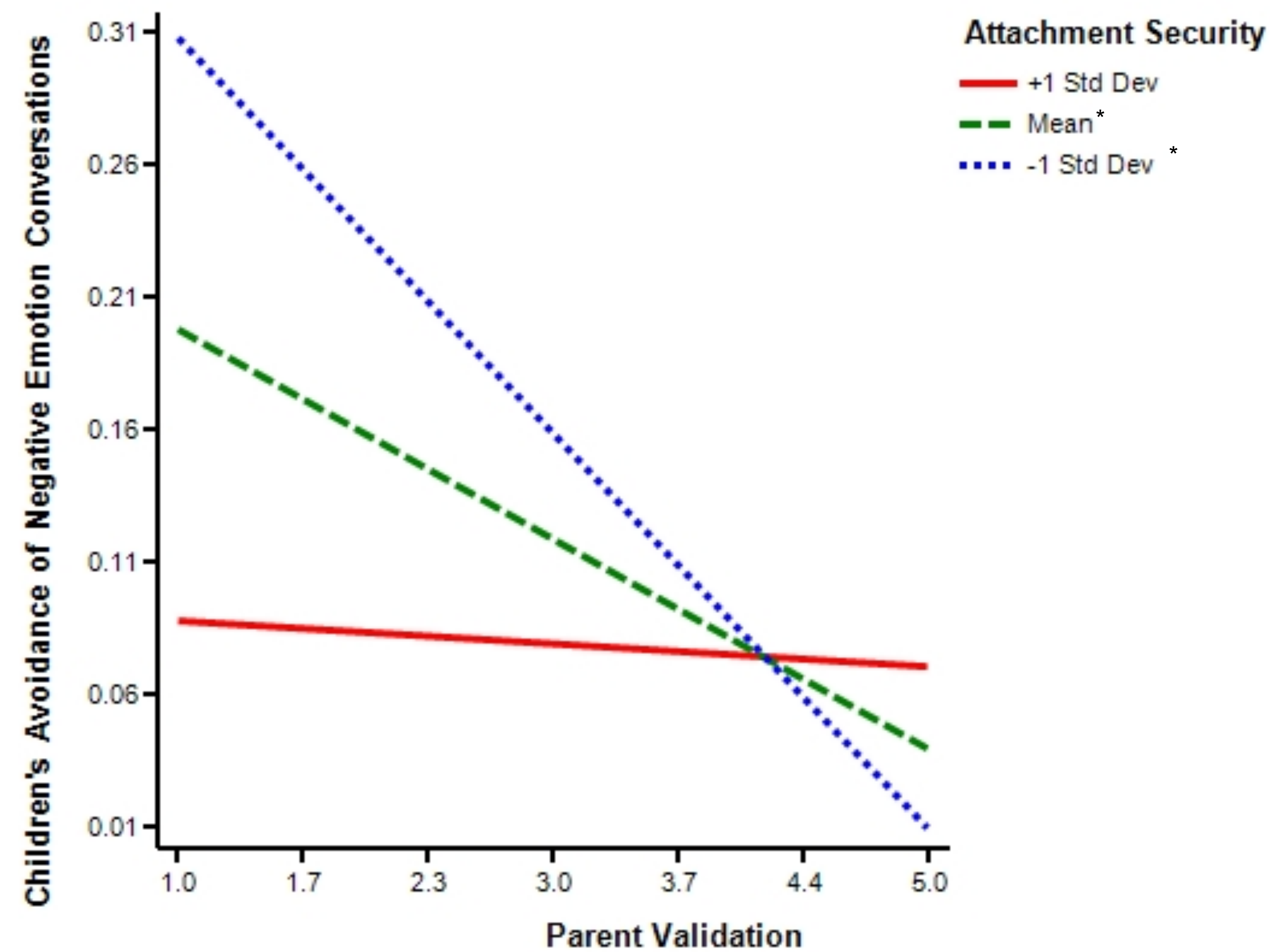
Hypotheses

- ❖ Child avoidance would be negatively associated with (a) attachment security, (b) maternal validation during the mother-child conversation and (c) independent assessments of children's understanding of negative emotions.

Methods

Participants. 73 mother-child dyads. Children's mean age was 4.52 years (45% female).

Procedure. During a single laboratory visit, mothers and children discussed together 2 recent events in which children felt sad and mad. Mothers completed the Attachment Q-Sort (Waters & Deanne, 1985). Children participated in Denham's affective perspective-taking task (Denham, 1986).



Methods (cont.)

Measures.

Child Avoidance. Conversations were transcribed and coded for verbal and behavioral indications of child avoidance of the conversational topic. Frequency of child avoidance was divided by the total number of conversational turns, yielding proportion scores.

Examples of child avoidance include:

Changing the topic : Child actively tries to shift the conversational topic or focus of shared attention to something else.

Explicit evasions or refusals : Child verbally indicates refusal to continue conversation in response to maternal statement or question.

Behavioral Evasions: In response to a maternal statement or question, child goes to the door and tries to leave, acts aggressively toward mother, or begins yelling loudly.

Maternal validation. Transcripts of these mother-child conversations were independently coded for the mother's validation of the child's viewpoint. Validation was coded 1 to 5, with scores of 5 reflecting high validation.

Children's emotion understanding. Children's responses to the negative emotional expressions and the stories describing negative emotions were combined to create an index of negative emotion understanding.

Results

- ❖ Regression analyses revealed that children's understanding of negative emotions predicted children's avoidance of negative emotion conversations such that children with greater understanding of negative emotions were less likely to avoid discourse about negative emotional events.
- ❖ Attachment security negatively predicted children's avoidance of negative emotion conversations – with greater security predicting less avoidance.
- ❖ Parent validation negatively predicted children's avoidance of negative emotion conversations – with greater parent validation predicting less avoidance.
- ❖ The interaction of attachment and parent validation significantly predicted children's avoidance of negative emotion conversations.

Table 1. Predicting children's avoidance of parent-child conversations about negative emotions

Variable	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Emotion Understanding	-.03	.01	-.41**	-.03	.01	-.37**	-.03	.01	-.37**
Attachment Security				-.21	.11	-.21*	-.18	.11	-.17
Parent Validation				-.04	.02	-.23*	-.04	.02	-.23*
Attachment x Parent Validation							.21	.10	.21*
R ²	.17			.29			.33		
	14.57**			5.60**			4.40*		

* p≤.05, **p≤.01

Discussion

- ❖ Children are least likely to avoid negative emotion conversations when mothers validate and accept the child's view point (especially in insecure attachment relationships) and when children possess a strong understanding of negative emotions.
- ❖ Mother's who are able to take their child's perspective support children's willingness to engage in difficult conversations about their past experiences of sadness and anger.
- ❖ When young children lack the support afforded by a secure attachment relationship maternal validation may play a particularly important role.