



# Maternal Perceptions of Children's Emotions: Individual Differences and their Correlates

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## Abstract

To facilitate effective emotion regulation in their children, mothers must assess their children's emotional experiences accurately. The current study employed a novel task to evaluate mothers' ability to identify the emotions their children experienced during a frustration task and examined maternal correlates of differences in this ability. Only 40% of mothers identified the same emotion the child endorsed, while 54% of naïve observers did. Logistic regression analyses revealed that mothers who believed in the importance of attending to emotion and those who had a more secure attachment with their child were more likely to accurately perceive their children's emotion.

## Introduction

- Young children's emotion regulation develops through parents' encouragement of self-regulatory strategies both explicitly during the challenging moment and when reminiscing about the event in later conversations with the child.
- Implicit in these parental interventions is the assumption that parents accurately identify their child's emotional experience in order to foster the most appropriate responses, but little research has examined this assumption.
- An investigation of mother-child conversations about past emotional events found the degree to which dyads agreed on the child's felt emotion varied by emotion. The lowest rates of concordance were found for fear and anger, where less than 50% of dyads were concordant.
- Research indicates that mothers' own emotional states, or beliefs about them, can influence perceptions of their children's emotions and a secure attachment is marked by the mother's sensitivity to the child's feelings.
- The current study examines mothers' ability to accurately perceive their children's emotions and maternal characteristics that may facilitate or impede this ability.

## Hypotheses

- Some mother-child dyads will be discordant regarding the emotion the child experienced, particularly with regards to negative emotions
- Mothers who value attending to and comprehending emotions in their own lives will more likely be concordant
- Mothers with a secure attachment with their child will more likely be concordant
- Mothers with elevated depressive symptomatology will less likely be concordant

## Methods

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

*Procedure.* Mother-child dyads visited the lab for 2 1-2 hour sessions. During the first visit, dyads participated in several emotion socialization tasks and mothers completed the AQS. During the second visit, dyads participated in the denied request task and task interviews. Mothers completed questionnaires.

*Measures.* In the denied request task, children were given a candy and allowed to eat it with their mothers' permission. Mothers had been instructed to deny their children the candy. The dyads' interactions were observed for 2 minutes, then mothers were encouraged to allow their children to eat the candy.

During independent task interviews, videotape of the denied request task was played and stopped at the moment of children's peak negative affect. Mothers and children were asked how the child felt at that moment. Children indicated their responses by picturecards of mad, sad, or happy faces, while mothers' responses were open-ended.

The moment of children's peak negative affect was also coded by naïve observers according to behavioral markers of emotions. Security of attachment was measured by the Attachment Q-Sort. Maternal depressive symptomatology was measured by the Center for Epidemiological Study of Depression inventory. Maternal emotion representations were measured by the Trait Meta-Mood Scale's subscales of attention and clarity.

## Results

- For children's reports of their own emotions, 25% were mad, 39% sad, and 36% happy
- Forty percent of mothers matched their child's endorsed emotion (Goodman-Kruskal  $\lambda = .30, p < .05$ )
- Fifty-four percent of observers identified the child's endorsed emotion (Goodman-Kruskal  $\lambda = .36, p < .01$ )
- Emotion specific comparison of concordance is shown in Figure 1
- Results of logistic regression analysis revealed that attachment security and attention were significant predictors (Table 1)
- Mothers who valued attending to their own emotions and those who were in a secure attachment relationship with their child were more likely to accurately identify the emotion the child endorsed

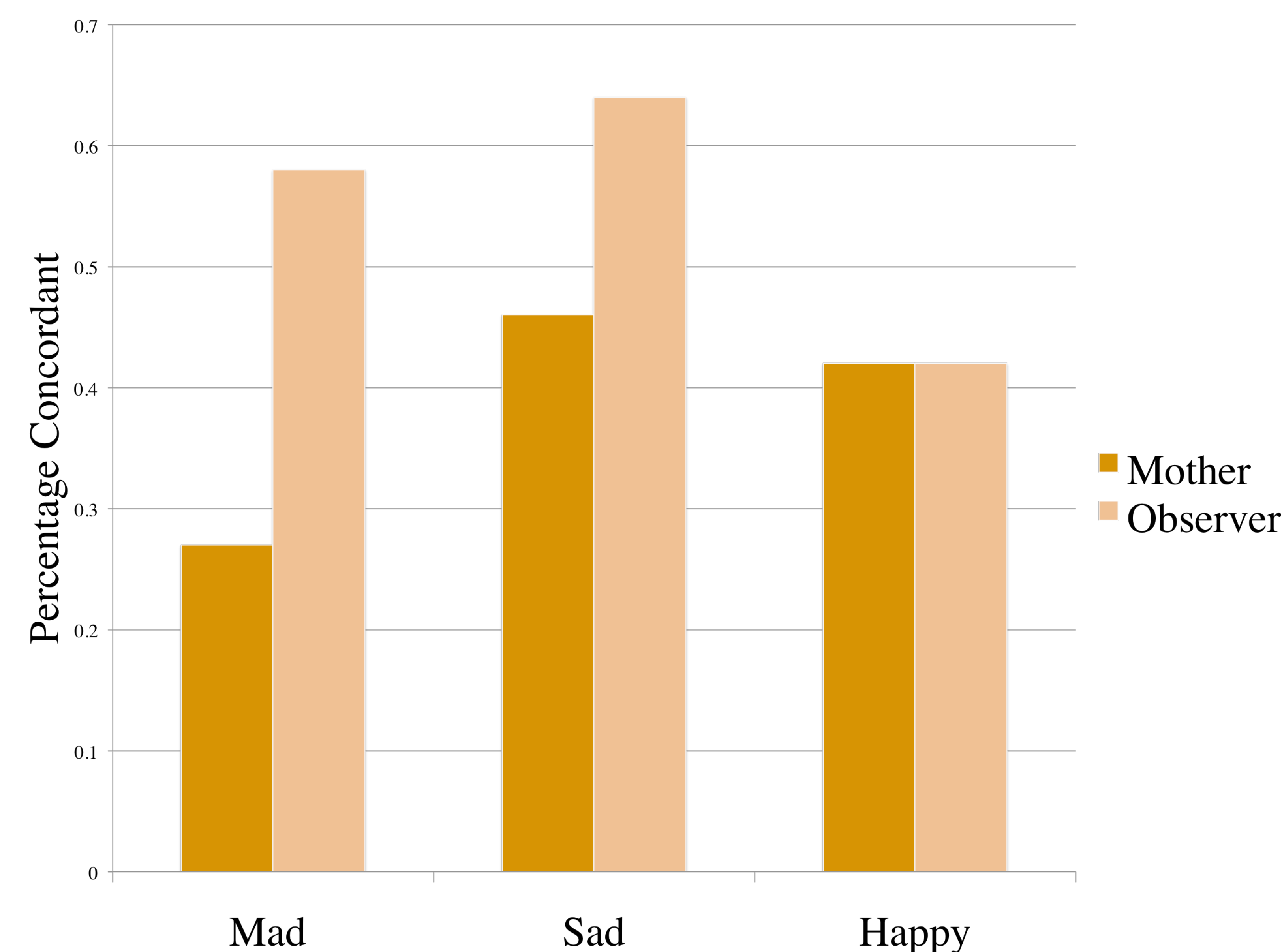
Table 1. Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Mother-Child Concordance

Variables	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Attention	3.57*	0.97 – 13.04
Clarity	1.17	0.35 – 3.88
Attachment security	87.20*	2.70 – 2817.54
Depression	1.04	0.96 – 1.14

For model,  $\chi^2(4) = 12.50^*$

\*  $p < .05$

Figure 1. Child Emotion Concordance with Mother and Observer



## Discussion

- The **novel interview method** used in this study was designed to support accurate recall of the denied request task both by timing the interview soon after the task and by watching a videotape of the task itself. Nevertheless, the rate of mother-child concordance was less than 50%.
- **Low rate of dyad concordance** aligns with findings from only other study to examine dyads in this way (Levine et al., 1999).
- Findings indicate that many mothers are challenged by an initial step in emotion regulation socialization.
- Because ER strategies are often emotion-specific, mothers' inaccurate identification of the child's emotional experience may lead to the fostering of inappropriate strategies.
- Higher concordance rates for mothers who attended to emotions in their own lives suggest **that parents' representations of emotion are significant to processes of emotion socialization.**
- **Securely attached dyads** were more likely to be concordant, which may reflect both partners' **more advanced skills in emotion communication.**