Abstract

Children’s emotion regulation strategies are created in concert with caregivers, who teach children how to think, express, and respond to emotion. Caregivers’ representations about acceptance, expression, and regulation of emotion may guide efforts to promote different approaches to emotion regulation in their child. This study examines relations between caregivers’ representations of their own emotions, parents’ responses to emotional exchanges with their children, and children’s approaches to emotion regulation. Findings support the contribution of parental emotion representations to parents’ behavior during emotional exchanges, and lead support to the contribution of these representations and behaviors to children’s emotion regulatory development.

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 influence 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 an environment that may facilitate open discussion and exploration of emotional exchanges and children’s emotional experience.
• Specifically, we explore how emotion representations underlie parent reactions to children’s negative emotions and guide discourse style about emotions in conversations with their children, as well as how these representations relate to children’s emotion regulation strategies.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Are the specific ways in which parent emotion representations influence parents’ behaviors during emotional exchanges and children’s emotion regulation strategies?

Research Question 2: Are there direct links between parent emotion representations and children’s emotion regulation? If so, which specific ones?

Method

Participants. Forty-seven children (M age = 4.09 yrs, 40% female) and their mothers were recruited from community child care centers and preschools.

Procedures. During two laboratory visits, parents completed parent-report questionnaires measuring representations of emotions and their behavior during emotional exchanges, and engaged their children in conversations about recent emotional events. Conversational data are currently analyzed for a subset of the sample (N=17).

Table 1. Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Emotion Representations</td>
<td>Acceptance, Mood Repair, Suppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Behaviors</td>
<td>Reaction to Child’s Negative Emotions, Expressive-emotion-focused, Emotion-focused, Minimizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Discourse</td>
<td>Elaboration, Emotion Conversational Support, Validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Emotion Regulation Strategies</td>
<td>Constructive, Aggressive, Attention-deficit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis

• Positive parent-child conversations about emotional events are associated with more positive emotion regulation in children.
• There are specific patterns between parents’ representation of emotions and their behavior during emotional exchanges with their children.
• Parents who placed more importance on their own emotional experiences reacted to their children’s affective affect in supportive ways and validated their children’s emotional experience during conversations.

Discussion

There are specific patterns between parents’ representation of emotions and their behavior during emotional exchanges with their children. Parents who placed more importance on their own emotional experiences reacted to their children’s negative affect in supportive ways and validated their children’s emotional experience during conversations. Parents who put forth greater efforts to resolve their own negative moods focused on alleviating their children’s negative affect by comfort and problem-solving. In contrast, parents who believed emotions and emotional displays should be suppressed spoke to their children in ways that devolved the emotional experience and their children’s perspective. These patterns suggest that some parental emotion representations have greater significance for conversation style, while others influence parental reactions to negative emotions.

Results

Research Question 1 (Figure 2): Parents’ acceptance of their own emotions was positively related to:
• parents’ expressive encouragement of children’s negative affect, validation during emotional discourse, and children’s use of expressive aggression regulation strategies.
• Parents’ efforts to repair their negative mood was positively related to children’s use of attention shifting strategies.
• Parents’ suppression emotion regulation strategy was negatively related to autonomy supportive, elaborative, and validating discourse.

Research Question 2: Direct effects (Figure 3). Only parental acceptance predicted children’s suppression aggression when parental acceptance and expressive encouragement were included in a regression model.

Mediating effects (Figure 4).
• In separate analyses, emotion-focused reactions and problem-focused reactions remained marginally significant when included with parental mood repair to predict child attention shifting. In each case, the bivariate relationship between parental mood repair and children’s attention shifting was no longer significant.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Figure 2. Bivariate Relations between Parental Emotion Representations, Parental Behaviors, and Children’s Emotion Regulation Strategies

Figure 3. Direct Effect Model for Children’s aggression

Figure 4. Mediation Model for Children’s Attention Shifting