

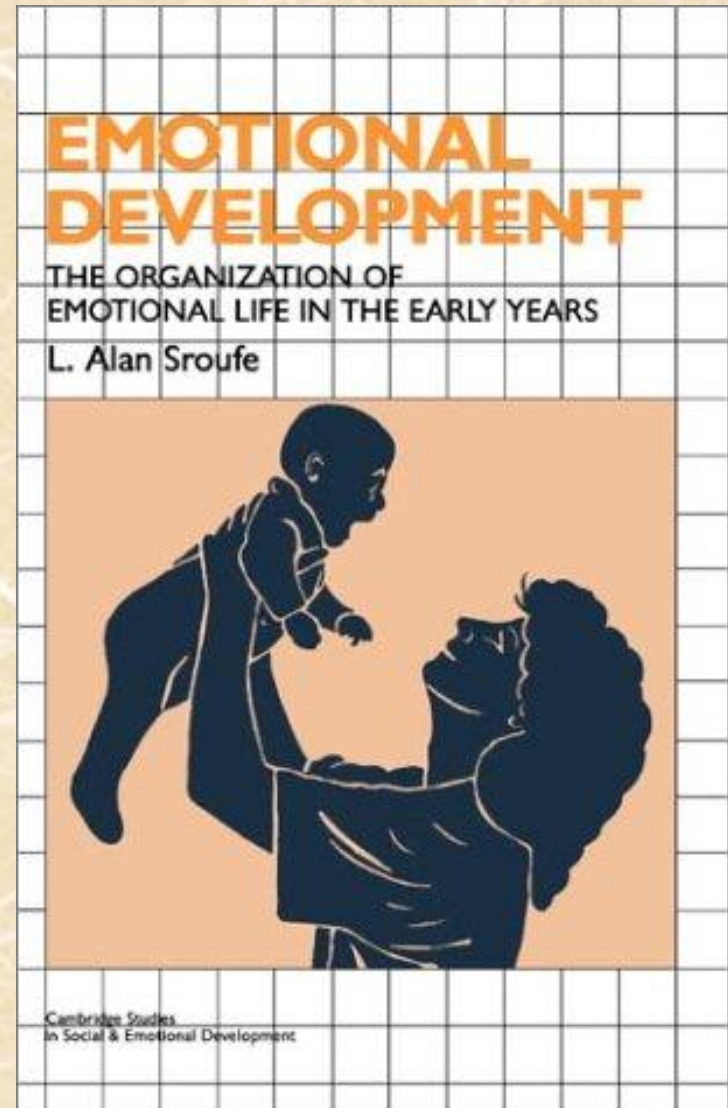
Relationships, Emotion, and the Organization of Socially Constructive Behavior

Ross A. Thompson

University of California, Davis
(rathompson@ucdavis.edu)



- emotions are central to the organization of behavior and personality
- close relationships organize emotional life, are emotionally regulatory, and are forums for the growth of emotional understanding
- relational experience is internalized in
 - self-understanding
 - expectations for how to relate to others
 - emotion schemas



Early Social Understanding Study -- Toddlers

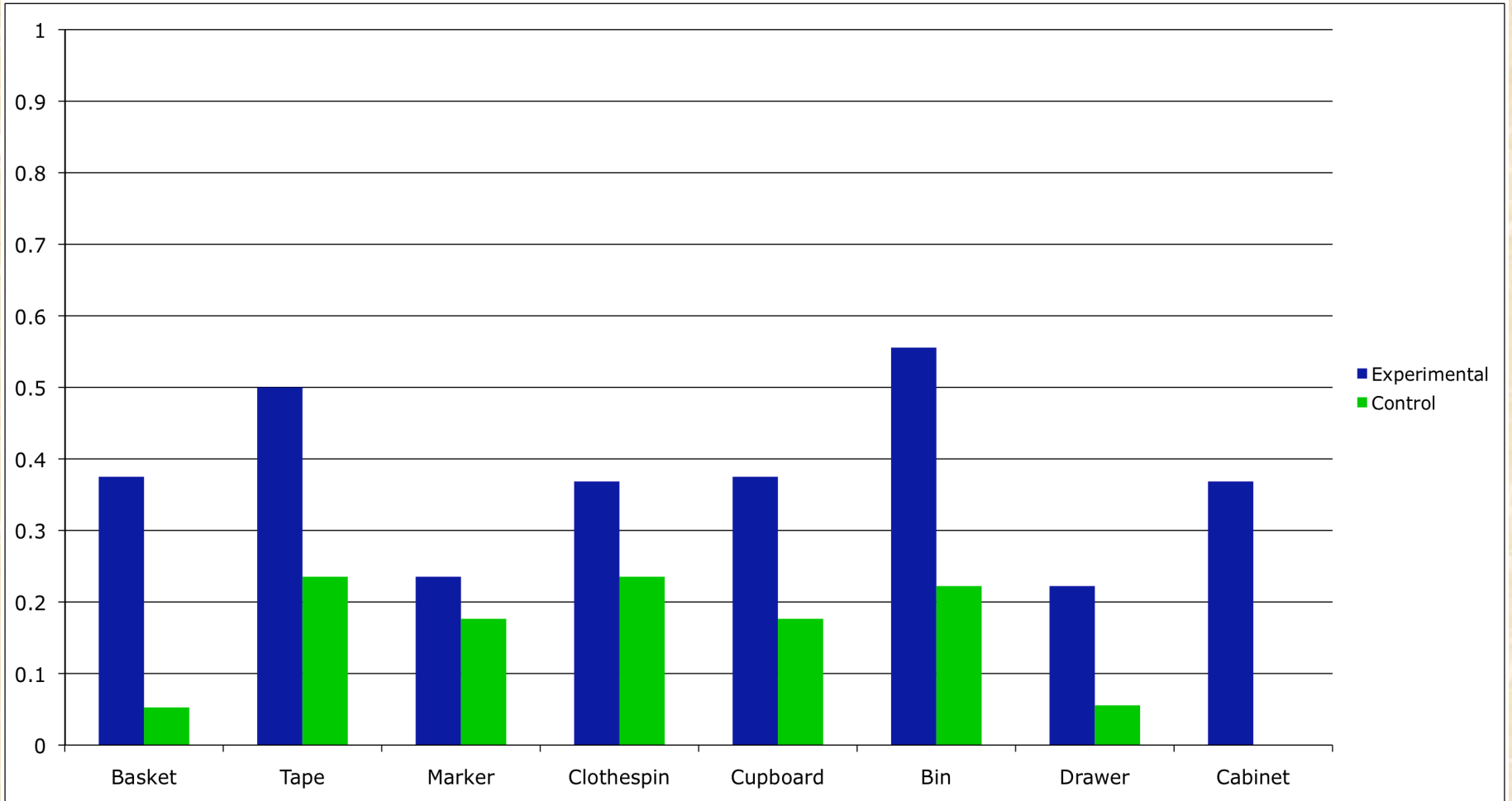
36 18-month-olds participated in a series of 8 helping tasks that varied systematically by the experimenter's indication of need and the experimenter's facial expression of emotion in a 2x2 design, with two tasks per condition

Mothers were present but occupied throughout. No thanks or other rewards were offered by the experimenter for the toddler's help.

Example: The experimenter tries to put her book into a basket. She knocks it to the floor and reaches for it (experimental condition) or places the basket on the floor without reaching (control condition). In each condition, she either looks sad or neutral.



Toddler Helping in Experimental and Control Conditions



Predictors of toddler's prosocial behavior . . .

- **Toddler emotion language:** the Internal State Language Questionnaire (modified from Bretherton & Beeghly, 1982) assesses toddlers' use of words associated with emotion via parental report.
- **Maternal positive regard:** coded from the maternal mind-mindedness interview (Meins et al., 2003), in which the mother responds to the question, "Can you describe [child's name] to me?". Number of positive emotional terms used to describe the child (e.g., "She's such a happy child.") (after Demers et al., 2010).

Predicting toddler helping behavior in sad and neutral conditions

Variable	Sad			Neutral		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Toddler emotion language	.23	.12	.33*	-.07	.13	-.09
Maternal positive regard	1.89	.82	.37*	.11	.93	.02
<i>R</i> ²		.22			.01	
<i>F for change in R</i> ²		4.28*			.15	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

2 ½ years: Mother-child conversation elements during conflict episodes in the lab

Talking about rules

Talking about the consequences of actions

Talking about people's emotions

Moral evaluative statements ("good girl!")

Compromising or bargaining

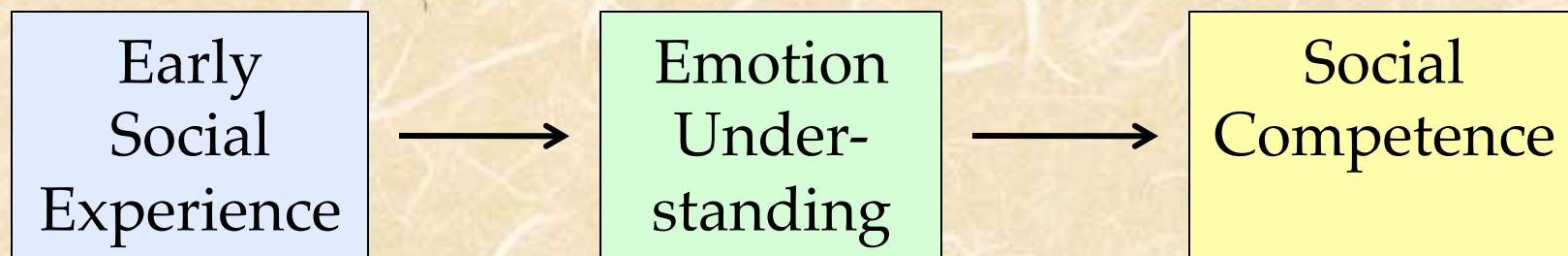
Justification and reasoning /
Low use of threats, teasing or insistence



Conscience
Development
age 3

“ . . . mental representations (are) a bridge between children’s early experiences and their later (social) expectations and behavior.”

Dweck & London, 2004



Sample drawn from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development:

1,016 children and families from 10 sites nationwide, recruited immediately after birth and followed to age 15.

Secure attachment with Mother
age 3



Negative attribution bias
Belief that others have negative intentions in uncertain situations (e.g., a block tower falls over when another child runs by)

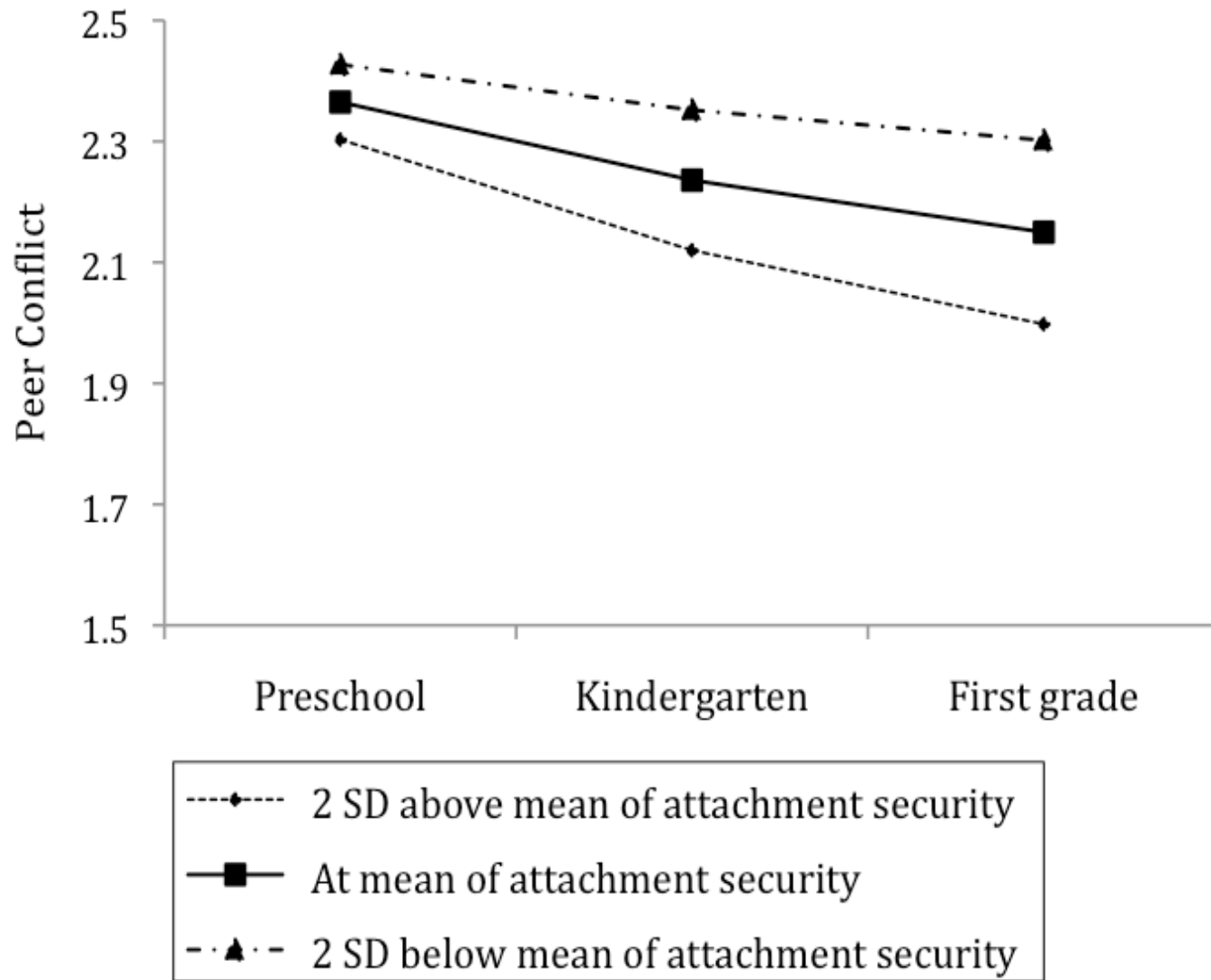
Social problem solving
Number / variety of positive solutions to social problems (e.g., how to make friends with another child)

Loneliness
Children's responses to short interview questions (e.g., "How easy is it for you to make new friends?")

Negative attribution bias

4 1/2 yrs

1st grade



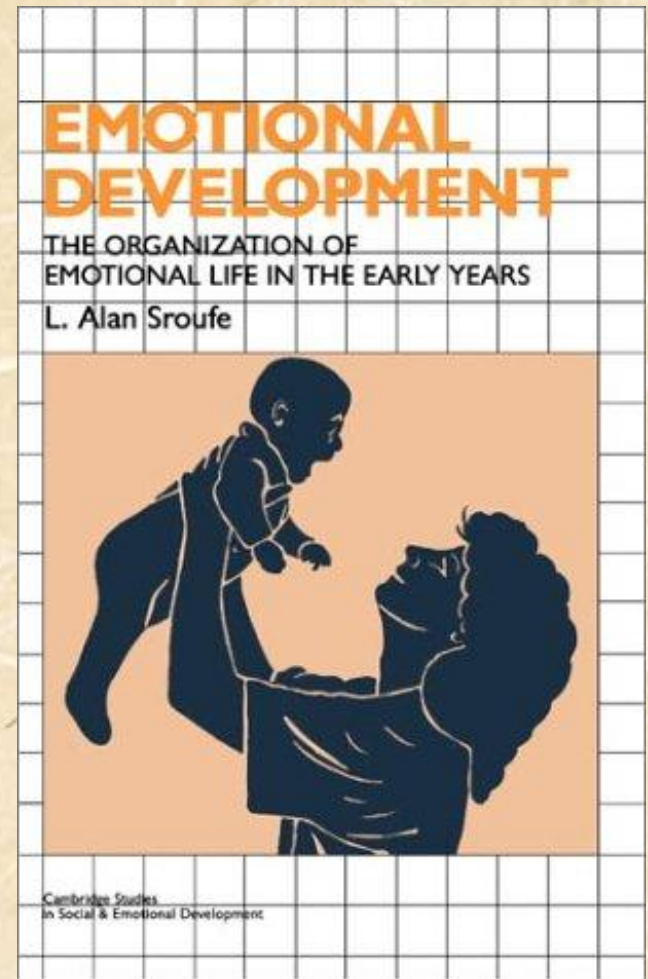
Young children in close relationships experience significant catalysts to the growth of emotion understanding

- mothers of securely-attached children are
 - more conversationally elaborative in talking about emotions
 - more often validate the child's feelings and perspective
 - more perceptive in accurately identifying the child's feelings
- children in secure relationships are
 - stronger on assessments of emotion understanding
 - endorse more constructive emotion regulation strategies

(Laible, 2004; Ontai & Thompson, 2002; Waters, Virmani, Thompson et al., 2010)

Early attachments are laboratories for emotional development, enabling children to understand emotional experience, manage their feelings, and constructively enlist emotions into positive social conduct in the context of the psychologically secure base that these relationships provide.

These early relational influences can have long-term consequences.



Thanks!

rathompson@ucdavis.edu