

Emotion Regulation Problem Solving in Four-year-olds

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Mother-child conversation contributes to emotion understanding in young children

- mothers who use more emotion words and who discuss emotions more frequently and with greater elaboration have children with greater emotion understanding
(Brown & Dunn, 1996; Fivush, 1993; Laible, 2004; Raikes & Thompson, 2006)
- conversations highlighting the causes of emotion are especially associated with children's emotion understanding
(Dunn et al., 1991; Dunn & Brown, 1993; Ontai & Thompson, 2002)
- in secure attachments, mothers talk about emotion in a richer, more elaborative manner – and securely-attached children are more advanced in emotion understanding
(Laible, 2004; Laible & Thompson, 1998, 2000; Ontai & Thompson, 2002)
- in these conversations, mothers also talk about emotion regulation strategies and their effectiveness

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**. Mothers were encouraged to help children remember what happened, how they felt, and how they dealt with their feelings, and to continue the conversation until they thought it had reached a natural conclusion.

Conversations were videotaped and transcribed.

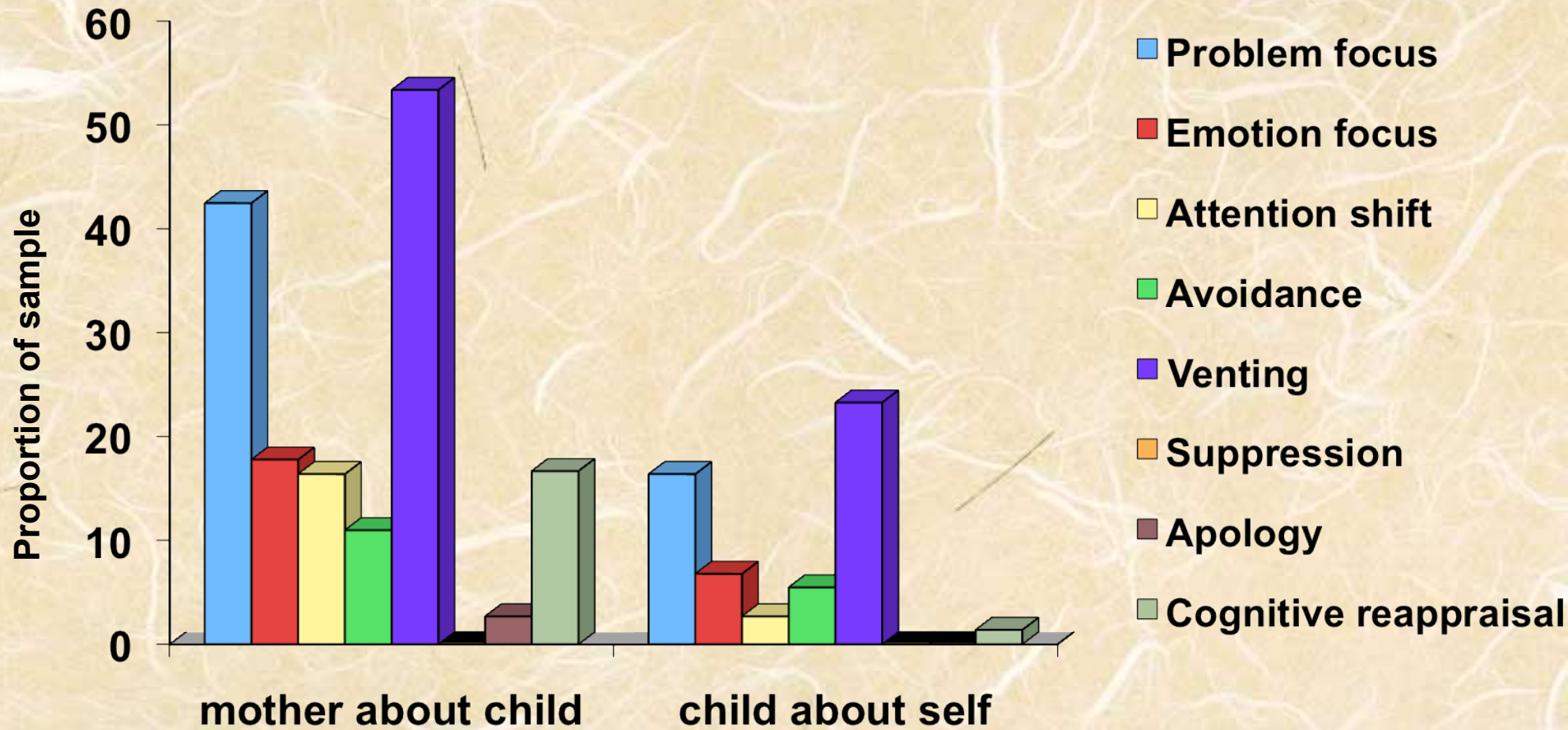
Mothers were not encouraged to talk about emotion regulation strategies and their effectiveness, but they did so anyway . . .

Emotion regulation strategies

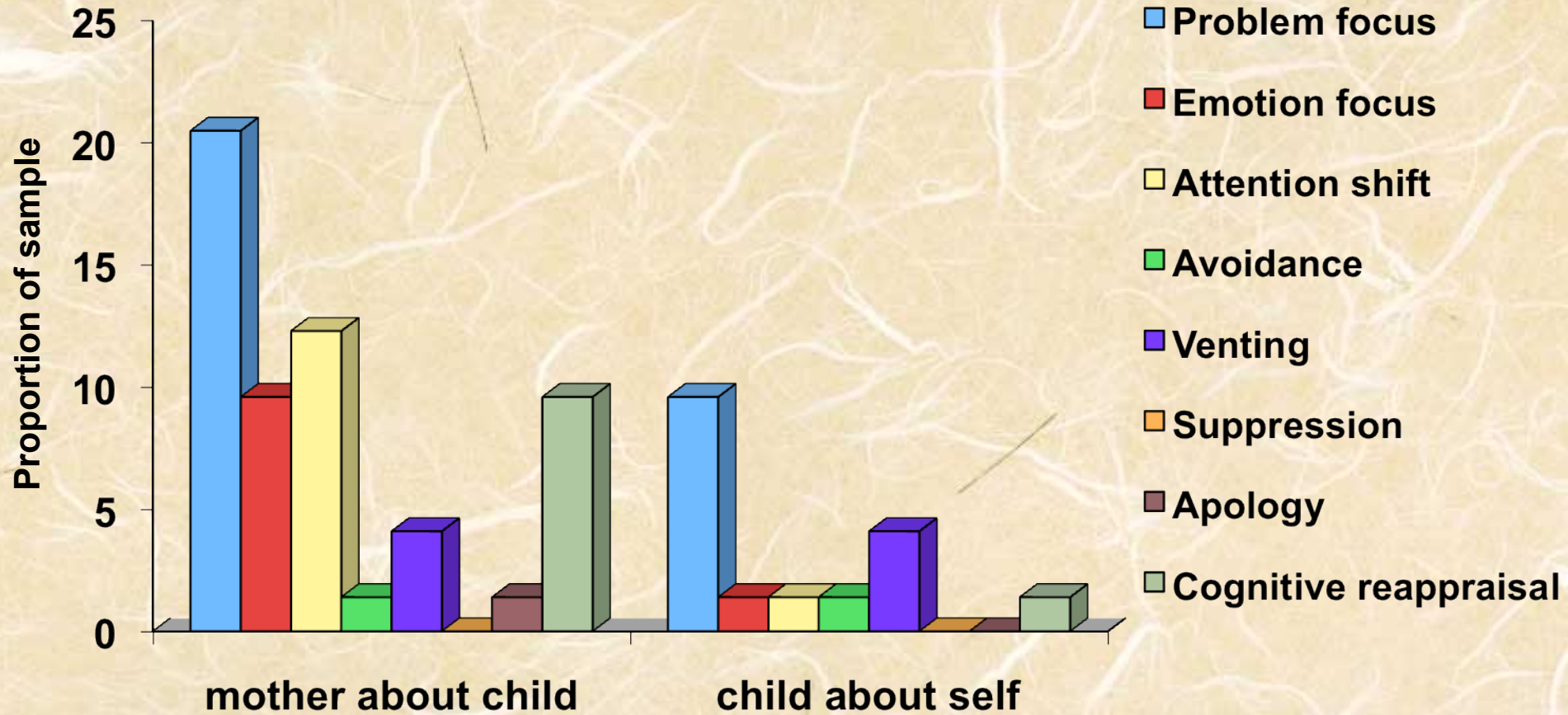
- Problem focused: Addresses the circumstances provoking emotion
- Emotion focused: Manages the feelings aroused by the situation
- Attention shifting: Efforts to distract from the emotion or situation
- Cognitive reappraisal: Refocusing on positive or constructive aspects of the situation
- Avoidance: Leaving the situation or stopping emotion provocations
- Venting: Behavioral or verbal expression of emotion
- Suppression: Efforts not to feel or to display emotion
- Apology: Making amends

In addition, we identified statements of **effectiveness**: when the speaker explicitly indicated that this strategy alleviated the situation or made it better

Emotion regulation strategies identified by mothers and preschoolers in emotional reminiscing



Effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies reported by mothers and children in emotion reminiscing



What do young children know about emotion regulation?

- From a constructivist perspective, coaching of emotion regulation by parents is mediated by children's prior knowledge and understanding
- Young children are unlikely to have a keen awareness of the cognitive, attentional, and mentalist strategies for managing emotion
- Prior research indicates that preschoolers' emotion regulation strategies are oriented toward regulating exposure to emotionally-evocative events, eliciting nurturance, or reassuring self-talk (Compas et al., 2001; Denham, 1998; Thompson, 1990, 1994)
- Yet young children may be aware of the effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies that they have difficulty enacting themselves

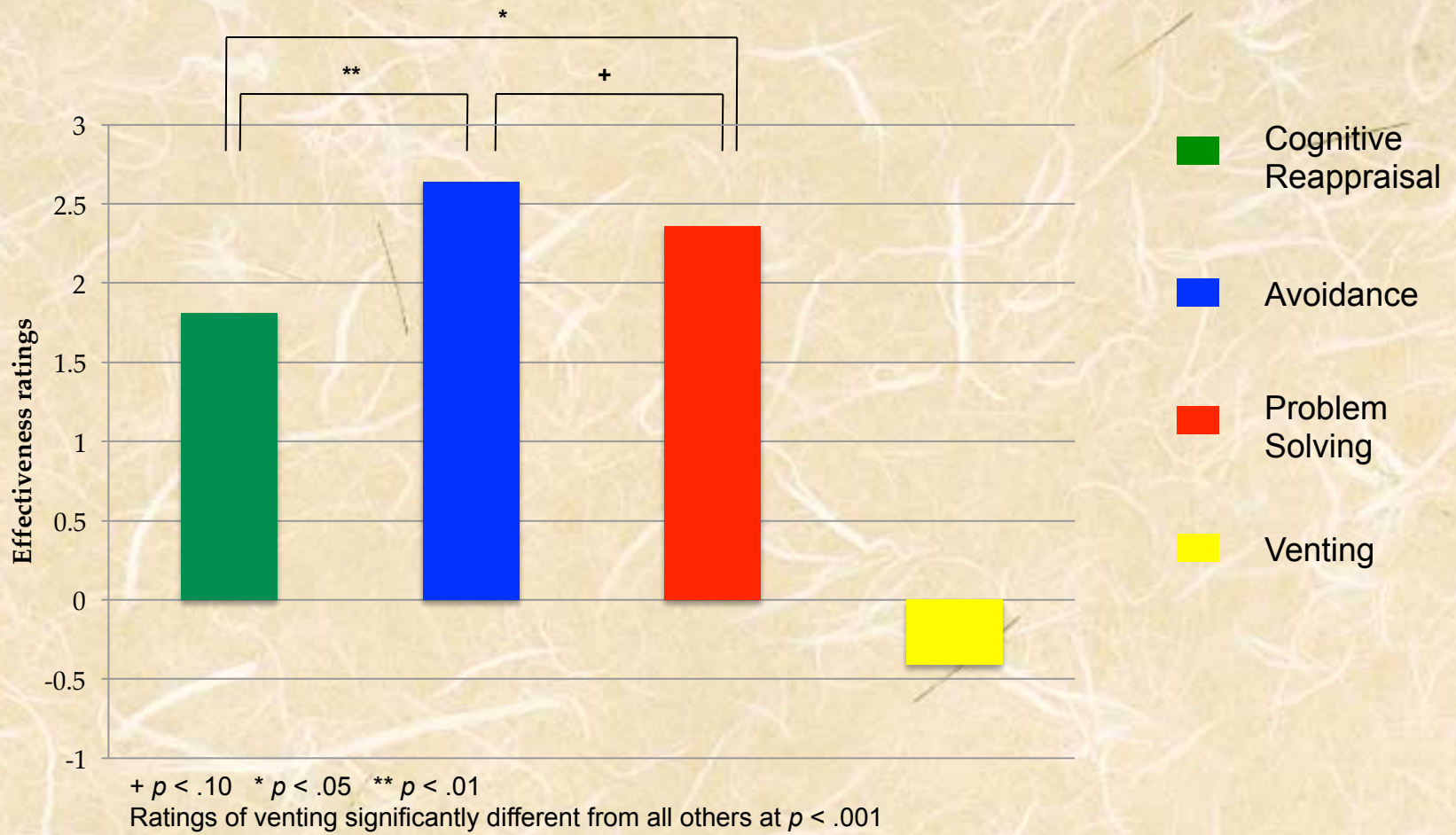
Emotion Regulation Problem Solving Interview

The experimenter used puppets to enact short stories resulting in sadness, anger, or fear in the story character; these feelings were explicitly labeled by the experimenter.

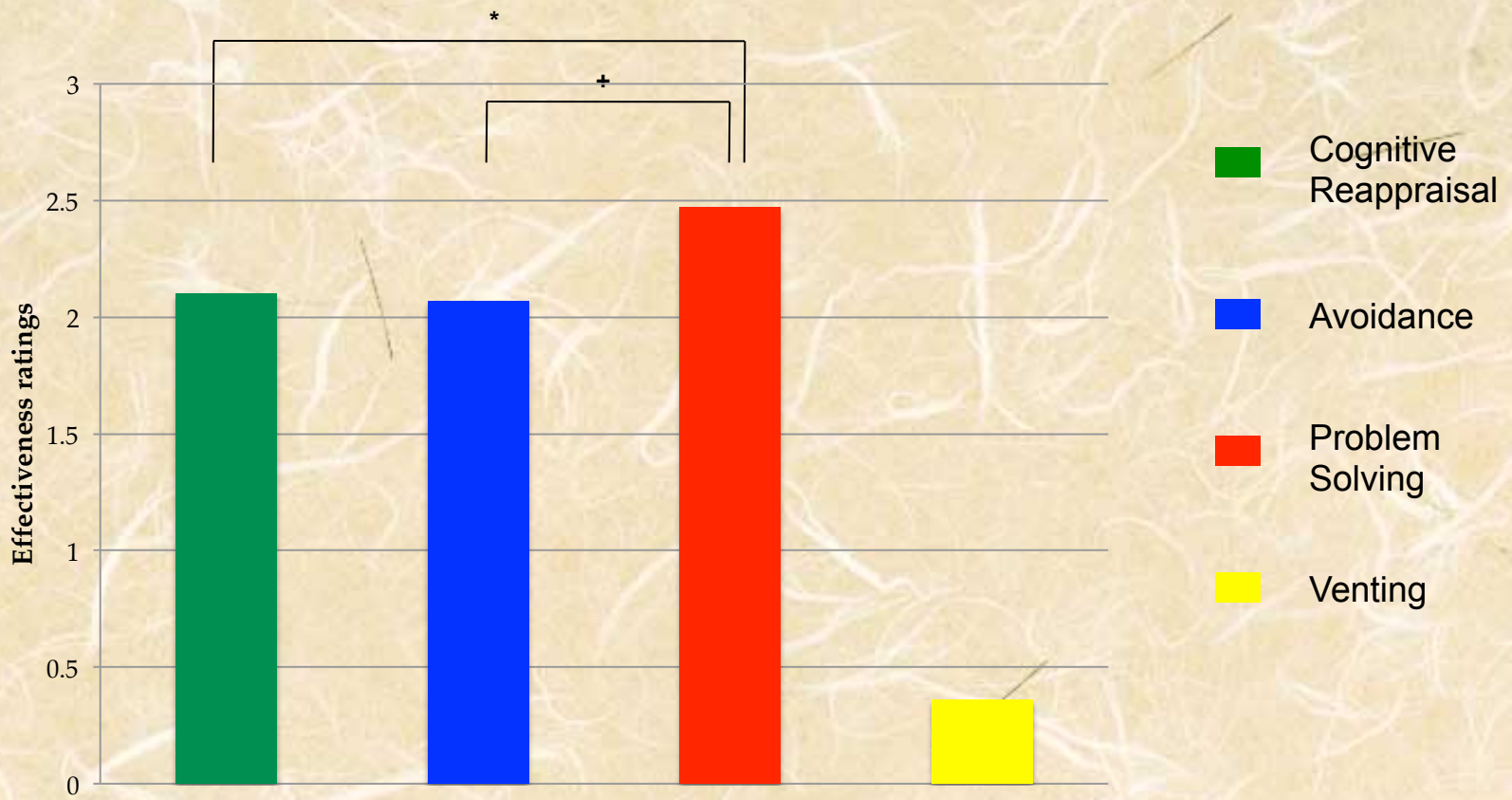
Following each story, the puppets then enacted several different emotion regulation strategies – **problem solving**, **cognitive reappraisal**, **avoidance**, and **venting**.

Example: a child is building a block tower in the sandbox that another child knocks over. In different story endings, the story character is subsequently shown building another tower (problem solving), leaving the sandbox to do something else (avoidance), thinking that it might have been an accident (cognitive reappraisal), or yelling “mad words” at the perpetrator (emotional venting).

Children used simple drawings of facial expressions to show whether the story character now felt worse (-1), no change (0), or better (1-3), yielding **effectiveness ratings**, with higher scores indicating better emotion regulation.



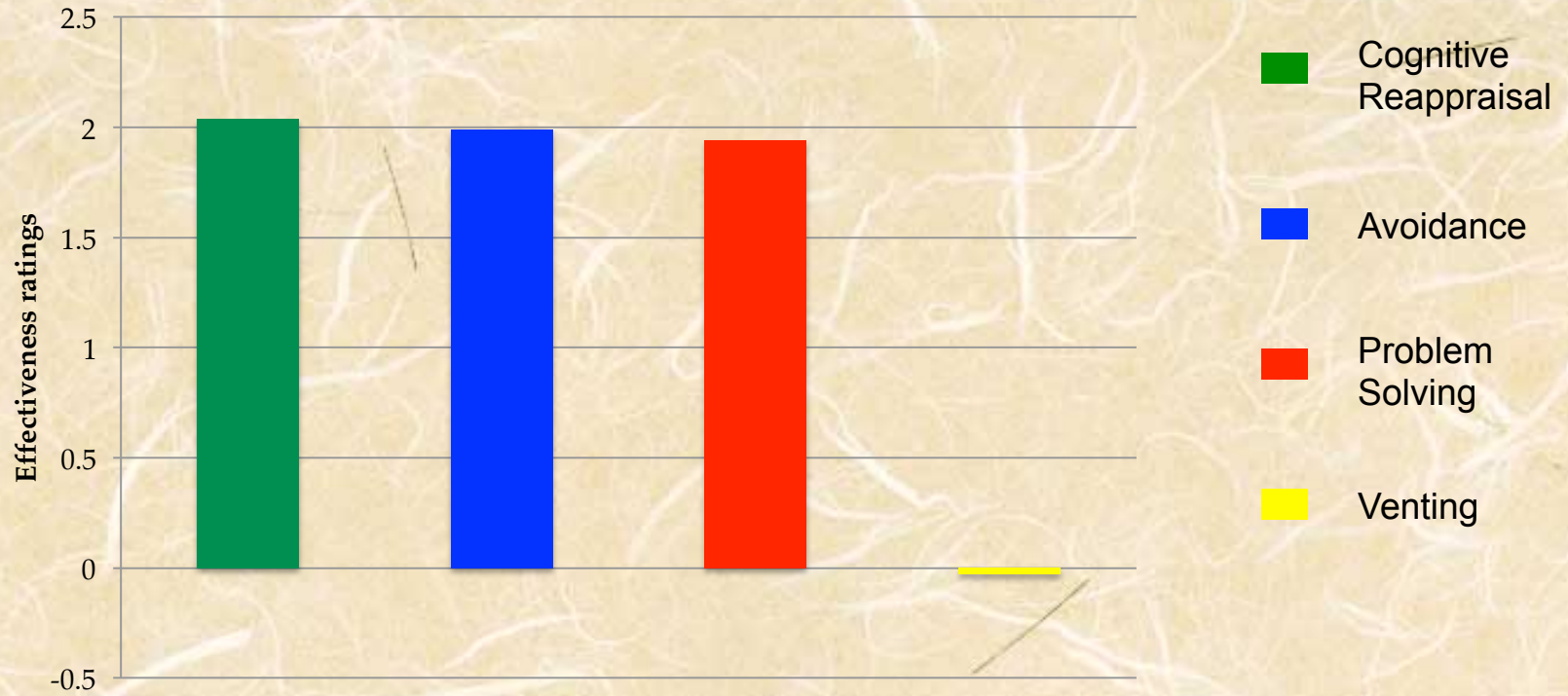
SADNESS



+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$

Ratings of venting significantly different from all others at $p < .001$

ANGER



Ratings of venting significantly different from all others at $p < .001$

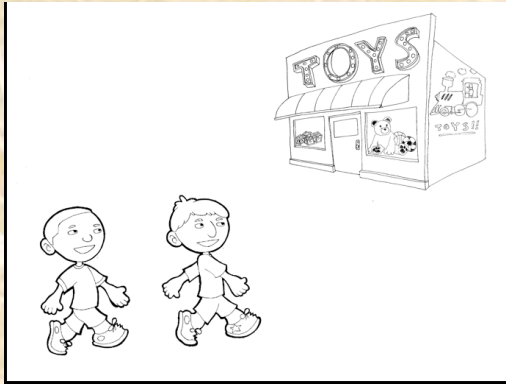
FEAR

Other findings

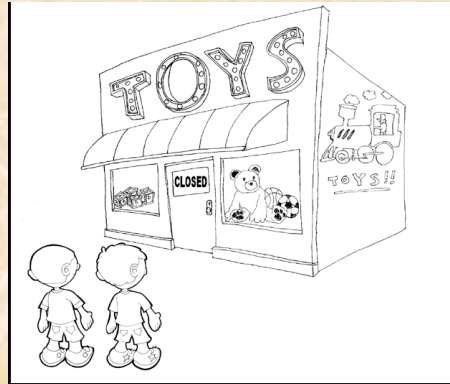
- Aggregated effectiveness ratings across strategies indicate that young children viewed **fear as most difficult to manage**, anger the easiest, with sadness in-between.
- Do young children have a preferred emotion regulatory style? When we aggregated effectiveness ratings across emotions, there was **little evidence that preschoolers have a “go to” strategy**: most endorsed problem-solving, avoidance, and cognitive reappraisal as comparably effective.
- **Girls** endorsed venting when afraid significantly more often than boys. **Boys** viewed cognitive reappraisal as more effective than girls for managing fear and anger.
- Children who were **securely-attached** were significantly less likely to regard venting as an effective regulatory strategy (combined across negative emotions) than were insecurely-attached children.

Concluding thoughts . . .

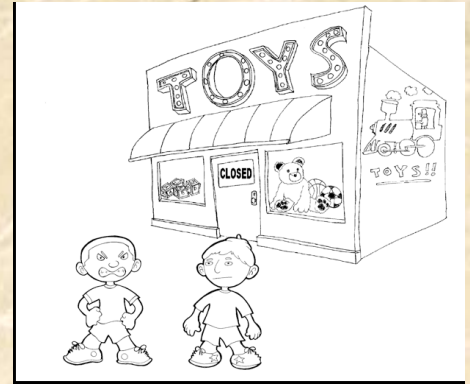
- Young children have a surprisingly nuanced appreciation of the effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies for different negative feelings – even endorsing the value of cognitive reappraisal (which they do not talk about using), and recognizing that venting is ineffective.
- Mother-child conversations about past emotional events are an understudied context for emotion regulation coaching – but even mothers seem to underestimate the range of self-regulatory strategies of which young children are aware.
- Young children's understanding is influenced by gender-related experiences and relational experience (e.g., attachment security), which are likely to shape emergent emotion regulatory styles.



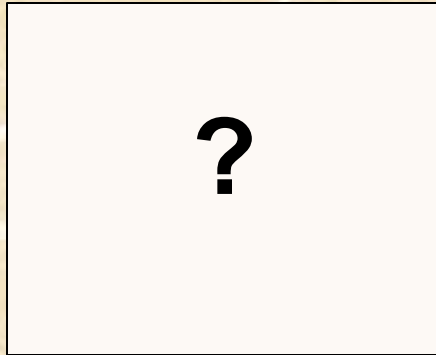
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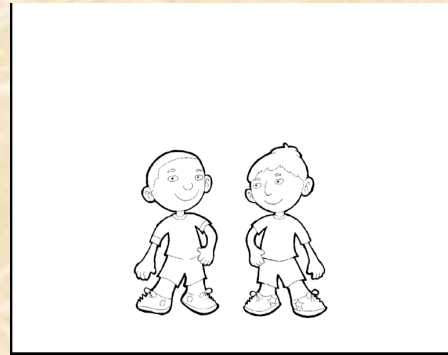
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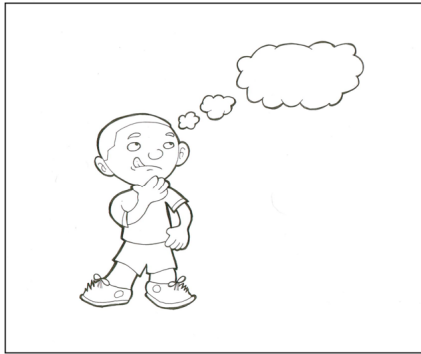
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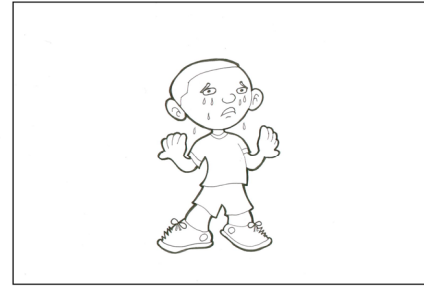
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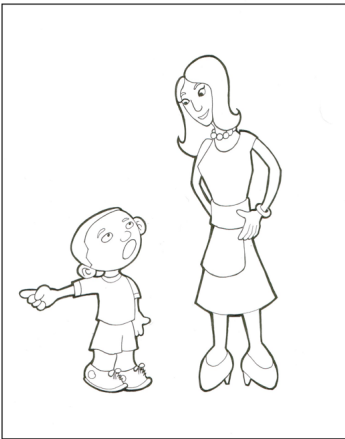
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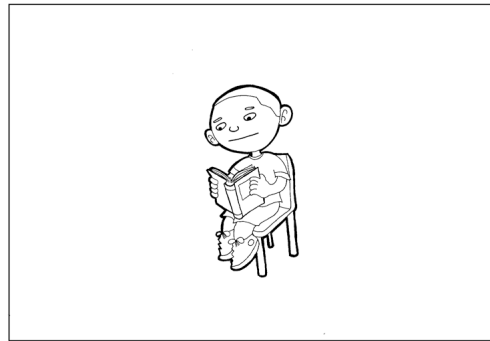
Cognitive restructuring



Venting



Adult intervention



Avoidance
(doing something else)

Also:

- Problem solving
- Emotional support seeking
- Aggression
- Doing nothing

Thanks!

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