

Parenting Behavior and Child Emotion Regulation During a Delay Task



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Abstract

Emotion skills are critical for children's development. This study examined the association between parenting behavior and children's affect and regulation. Thirty-five families participated in a frustration task. Parental behavior and child behavior were both rated. We found that parental sensitivity was associated with children's sadness, while hostility was associated with both anger and sadness.

Introduction

Emotion Regulation:

Emotion regulation is the process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions based on their appropriateness to the particular context (Thompson, 1994).

Emotion regulation deficits have been associated with psychopathology in both children and adults (Fernandez, Jazaieri, & Gross, 2016).

Regulation of emotions is a chief developmental task of early childhood, and is facilitated through supportive interactions with parents (Silk et al., 2006).

Parenting:

1. **Sensitivity** is defined as the degree to which a parent responds appropriately to a child's needs. This includes accurate, attuned, prompt, and consistent responsiveness (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Sensitivity during frustrating tasks has been found to be predictive of children's attachment (Hopkins, Gouze, & Lavigne, 2013), independent competence (Toth et al., 2000), externalizing symptoms (Mäntymaa, 2009), and adaptive emotion regulation (Leerkes et al., 2009).

Sensitive parents are less likely to be hostile toward their children, and their children tend to be more responsive (Mäntymaa, 2009).

2. **Hostility** is defined as parent behavior that expresses negative affect or indifference. It may involve the use of coercion, threat, or physical punishment to influence the child's behavior (Hopkins, Gouze, & Lavigne, 2013).

Hostile parenting behaviors have been associated with parental stress, depression, and family conflict (Hopkins et al., 2013).

Parents rated as more hostile have been shown to have more dysregulated and distressed children (Little & Carter, 2005) who mirror their traits (Toth et al., 2000). Much less research has been conducted on the role of hostility in the development of emotion regulation, relative to sensitivity.

Hypothesis

- Higher levels of parental sensitivity and non-hostility would be associated with greater positive affect and less negative affect, as well as use of more adaptive emotion regulation.

Participants

The research began with a longitudinal study that assessed the importance of the child-parent attachment style with the preschooler's emotional functioning. Participants recruited from preschool programs serving low-income families in rural Appalachia, KY. All the families were given compensation for their participation.

Participants:

- A total of 35 families
 - 32 mothers and 3 fathers
 - 35 children between the ages of 5-7 years old.

Procedure

Cookie Task:

The parents and the child completed the Cookie Task (Silk et al. 2006), on retrieving our observational ratings. The parents were to complete a total 2 questionnaires with the child in the room. During the task, the child is to wait for the prize bag that is located on the table. No directions were provided to the caregiver on how to manage the delay. The child's behaviors were then coded for in 15 second intervals for a total of 7 minutes. At the end of the task, the parents were then signaled to giving the prize bag to the child.

Measures

Parental Sensitivity:

To assess parental sensitivity toward their child, a technique developed by Biringen, Robinson, & Emde (2000), EAS, 3rd edition, was employed. The behaviors were rated on a scale that ran from (9) *highly sensitive* to (1) *highly insensitive*. Higher scores represent greater levels of parental sensitivity

Non-Hostility:

To Assess parental non-hostility behaviors toward their child, a technique developed by Biringen, Robinson, & Emde (2000) consisted of the EAS, 3rd edition. The behaviors observed rated on a scale that ran from (5) *non-hostile* to (1) *markedly and overtly hostile*. Higher scores represent greater levels of parental non-hostility.

Child Affect and Child Regulation:

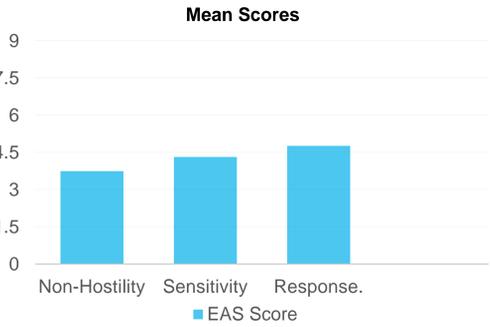
The presence or absence of the strategies were coded for utilizing a developed technique by Silk et al. (2000). The strategies consisted of:

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Active Distraction</i> | Purposeful behaviors. Fantasy play, watching mom fill out the survey, exploration of the room, playing with the door, or looking in the mirror. |
| <i>Focus on Object</i> | Speaking about the prize bag, looking at the prize bag, grabbing/touching the prize bag, or trying to end the act of delay. |
| <i>Passive Waiting</i> | Sitting or standing patiently and quietly |
| <i>Information Gathering</i> | Questions aimed at the prize bag, "What is in it?" But, not aimed at changing the situation. |
| <i>Physical Comfort Seeking</i> | Requesting physical comfort, such as hugging, leaning, or sitting on the parents lap. |



Results

Average non-hostility score of parents was 3.74 (1.21). This indicates a fair amount of covert hostility. Average score of parent sensitivity was 4.76 (1.94). This indicates inconsistent sensitivity. Average score of child responsiveness was 4.31 (2.30). This indicates children were moderately responsive.



Child Regulation Strategy

| | Joy | Anger | Sad |
|-------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|
| EAS Score Sensitivity | 0.05 | -0.28 | -0.33* |
| EAS Score Non-Hostility | -0.11 | -0.49** | -0.49** |

Parent sensitivity was negatively associated with children's sadness. Non-hostility was negatively related to both anger and sadness displays in children.

Child Observed Emotion

| | Active Distraction | Object Focus | Passive Waiting | Info Gathering | Physical Comfort |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| EAS Score Sensitivity | 0.14 | -0.25 | 0.19 | -0.25 | -0.06 |
| EAS Score Non-Hostility | 0.21 | -0.48** | 0.21 | -0.23 | 0.19 |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Parental non-hostility was negatively related to object focus.

Discussion

- Parental sensitivity in this task, where children were likely frustrated, was found to be inconsistent. Many parents were not engaged with their children, and some demonstrated hostility.
- Parents who demonstrated more sensitivity had children who displayed less sadness.
- Parents who expressed greater hostility had children who showed more sadness and anger, and also focused more on the bag of prizes. This strategy was expected to cause greater frustration or stress.
- Future tasks will include examining the implications of children's functioning outside the lab.

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