

Parenting Sensitivity and Children's Emotion Regulation Development

Griffin Newell, Olivia Kee, Abigail Yates, & Shari L. Kidwell, Mentor, Department of Psychology, College of Science



Introduction

Parenting Affects:

1. Sensitivity refers to a dyadic and "emotional" construct between the child and parent, or other supportive adult (Biringen et al., 2014). Furthermore, sensitivity can be defined as the extent to which a parent responds to their child's needs in a prompt, accurate, attuned, and consistent manner (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Due to the dyadic nature of sensitivity, it's important to note that actions can only be considered sensitive if they appear both desirable from the child's perspective and genuine on the parent's behalf.

2. Covert Hostility encompasses any act with a lack or disregard for the child's feelings (Biringen et al., 2014). Covert hostility includes an array of intrusive and irritated behaviors, creating unnecessary rules for the child, showing impatience or otherwise being dismissive of the child. These actions can range from covert such as eye rolls, sighs and ignoring, to overt acts of scolding, teasing and belittling.

Emotion Regulation:

- Emotion regulation is the act of evaluating, monitoring and adapting emotional reactions to a situation based on their appropriateness to a particular context (Gross & Thompson, 2007).
- Childhood emotion regulation is influenced through interactions with parents and other supportive adults (Gross & Thompson, 2004; Silk et al, 2006).
- Deficits in emotion regulation have been associated with psychopathology in both children and adults (Fernandez, Jazaieri, & Gross, 2016).

Empirical Literature of Parenting and Emotion Regulation:

Sensitivity is widely studied in the infant development literature, primarily as a determinant of child attachment. Halligan et al. (2013), however, found sensitivity associated with emotion regulation across infancy and early childhood, suggesting it is a key influence on emotion regulation. Although there is less data on parental hostility, it has been associated with behavior problems and depression (Easterbrooks, Bureau, & Lyons-Ruth, 2012).

Hypothesis

- Caregivers who display lower levels of sensitivity on the Cookie Task will have children with less adaptive emotion regulation on the Abner Emotions Interview.
- Caregivers who display higher levels of covert hostility on the Cookie Task will have children with less adaptive emotional regulation on the Abner Emotions Interview.

Participants

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

Participants in the Current Study:

A total of 35 families
31 mothers and 4 fathers
35 children between the ages of 5-7 years of age

Procedures

Cookie Task:

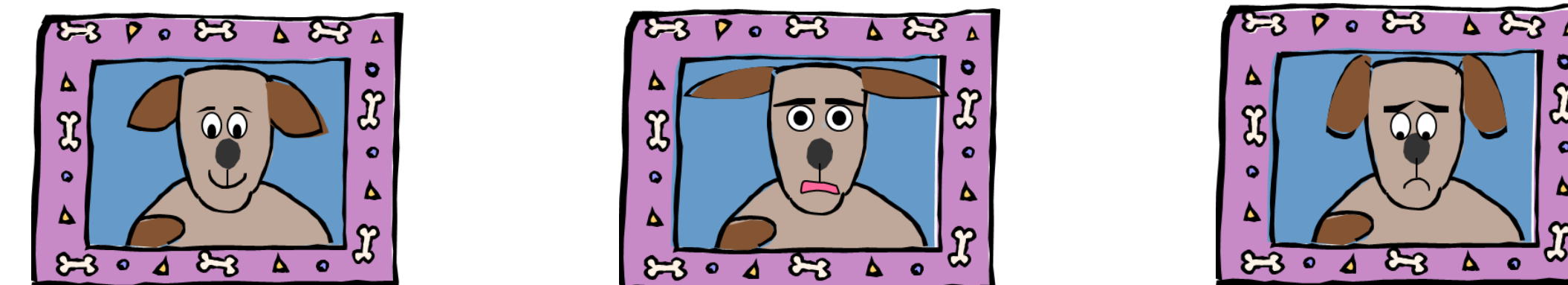
To determine parental affect and behavior towards their children during a frustration inducing situation, the parents and their children participated in the Cookie Task (Silk et al, 2006). Parents completed a questionnaire while their child waited for a clear bag full of small toys and treats. The bag was in view of the child during the 7-minute task, as their parents were working on their surveys. Due to the dynamic nature of emotions and behavior parents expressed, we coded cases using 15-second intervals. Our main focus was sensitive and covertly hostile behaviors, and we derived operational definitions from the Emotional Availability Scale (Biringen, Robinson, & Edme, 2000), observations of the task, and prior work done on the parent-child attachment project. For each 15-second interval, a tally mark was made if the presence of these behaviors was observed. Specifically, the following were noted:

- **Sensitivity-** if a parent smiled, comforted, or interacted in a way the child seemed to find enjoyable.
- **Covert hostility-** if parents displayed behaviors such as mocking, showing impatience, or dismissing the child's likely feelings.

Inter-rater agreement on 20 percent of cases was excellent.

Abner Emotions Interview:

In this 15-20 minute interview, developed for our study, children were asked to tell stories about times they experienced happy, calm, excited, mad, sad, and scared feelings. Pictures of a dog named Abner expressing these six emotions were utilized to facilitate greater understanding of the emotions, and children chose the order of emotions to be discussed using stimuli such as those below.



To assess the emotional regulation capacities of the child during the Abner Emotions Interview, four behaviors were rated using 4-point Likert scales. Inter-rater agreement for 20% of cases was excellent. Additionally, ratings were summed across the six feelings to create four emotion regulation variables as described below. For each variable, higher scores indicates more adaptive emotion regulation.

Enthusiasm	Both a child's willingness and eagerness participate in the interview.
Affective Range and Appropriateness	The child's ability to regulate their emotions to show affect fitting with the emotion at hand.
Internalizing Symptoms	Signs that the child may be experiencing a sad and or anxious affect. For example, chewing on fingers and eyes facing down may indicate discomfort.
Externalizing Symptoms	Indications of noncompliance, inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity.

Results

	Sensitivity	Hostility
Affective Appropriateness	.271	-.239
Relationship/ Enthusiasm	.277	-.179
Internalizing	.122	.347(*)
Externalizing	.320+	-.259

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). + Correlation is a non-significant trend (p<.10)

- Parents who displayed greater covert hostility during the Cookie Task tended to have children who showed less adaptive emotion regulation on the Abner Emotions Interview. Specifically, children of such parents tended to show greater signs of withdrawal, sadness, or anxiety when completing the emotions interview.
- Parental sensitivity and child externalizing behavior (i.e., noncompliance, hyperactivity) approached significance (p=.06). Greater externalizing scores suggest better-regulated child behavior.
- Notably, the average parent was seen as sensitive in .09% of the 15-second intervals. The vast majority of intervals, altogether, were silent.
- Additionally, when parents did acknowledge their child, they showed hostility in 24% of the 15-second intervals, on average.

Discussion

- Parental sensitivity in the Cookie Task, where children were likely frustrated, was found to be fairly minimal. Most parents were not engaged with their children, and many demonstrated some hostility.
- Our hypotheses were partially supported:
 - 1) At a trend level, parents who demonstrated more sensitivity had children who displayed less externalizing behaviors during the Abner Emotions interview and
 - 2) Parents who expressed greater amounts of covert hostility had children who showed significantly more internalizing behavior during the Abner Emotions Interview.
- Future direction include examining the implications of parenting sensitivity and hostility children's functioning outside the lab.
- Many parents displayed a lack of sensitivity towards their children during the Cookie Task. They appeared less engaged than during other parenting tasks in our project. It will be important to examine which type of task is most related to child well-being.
- These findings were consistent with the literature that demonstrates the importance of the parent-child relationship in the development of children's emotion regulation skills.

Selected References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Walls, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychology study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Biringen, Z., Derscheid, D., Vliegen, N., Closson, L., & Easterbrooks, M. A. (2014). Emotional availability (EA): Theoretical background, empirical research using the EA Scales, and clinical applications. *Developmental Review*, 114-167.
- Biringen, Z., Robinson, J. L., & Emde, R. N. (2000). Appendix B: The emotional availability scales (3rd ed.; an abridged infancy/early childhood version). *Attachment and Human Development*, 2(2), 256-270.
- Fernandez, K. C., Jazaieri, H., & Gross, J. J. (2016). Emotion regulation: A transdiagnostic perspective on a new RDoC domain. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 40(3), 426-440.
- Parke, R.D. (1994). Progress, paradigms, and unresolved problems: A commentary on recent advances in our understanding of children's emotions. *Merrill Palmer Quarterly*, 40, 157-169.
- Silk, J. S., Shaw, D. S., Skuban, E. M., Oland, A. A., & Kovacs, M. (2006). Emotion regulation strategies in offspring of childhood-onset depressed mother. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(1), 69-78.
- Thompson, R. A. (1994). Emotion Regulation: A theme in search of definition. In N. A. Fox (Ed.), *The development of emotion regulation: Biological and behavioral considerations. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 59, 25-52.

This research was supported by MSU RCPC and KY NSF grants, as well as MSU Undergraduate Research Fellowships.