

# **BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES FOR EMOTION REGULATION IN TODDLERS: ASSOCIATIONS WITH MATERNAL INVOLVEMENT AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONS**

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Ninety-four mothers and their 18- or 24-month-old children participated in four laboratory episodes designed to elicit fear or anger. Mothers' behavior was constrained for the first part of each episode; mothers were then instructed to help their children. Toddlers' behavioral strategies differed as a function of maternal involvement and as a function of the emotion-eliciting context. Only some of the behavioral strategies assumed to minimize expressions of distress truly did so; other behaviors showed maintenance effects on fear and anger expressions. The different pattern of results for the fear and frustration episodes highlights the importance of examining behavioral strategies across contexts designed to elicit different emotions.

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emotion regulation   toddlerhood   mother involvement   coping

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The ability to effectively regulate emotions is a primary goal of socioemotional development (Garber & Dodge, 1991) and is vital for many aspects of functioning (Thompson,

1994). For example, research with infants and preschoolers suggests that behavioral strategies are associated with both attachment quality and sociometric status (Braungart &

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Stifter, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 1993). Emotion regulation may also be related to successful cognitive performance (e.g., Sarason, 1984), and associated with psychopathology (e.g., Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994). Given the importance of this domain of development, it is important to understand emotion regulation processes in early childhood, as well as the role caregivers play in supporting emotion regulation in young children. The current study will examine these issues, with a particular focus on the importance of caregiver support for behavioral strategies, and the effectiveness of these behavioral strategies for modifying and maintaining emotional expressions.

Although research on emotion regulation has increased dramatically in recent years, there is no consensus definition of emotion regulation. A common conceptualization is to consider emotion regulation to be the processes, both extrinsic and intrinsic, responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions for the purpose of accomplishing one's goals (Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1994). The current study focuses on one aspect of Thompson's conceptualization of emotion regulation: children's use of behavioral strategies that may modify or maintain emotional reactions, as measured by emotional expressions. Despite differing definitions of emotion regulation, a common approach is to examine the actions or behavioral strategies assumed to change, reduce, or maintain distress, such as approach, withdrawal, distraction, social referencing, and self-soothing—i.e., thumb sucking, hair twisting, and using transitional objects, such as a blanket, for security and comfort (e.g., Grolnick, Bridges, & Connell, 1996; Mangelsdorf, Shapiro, & Marzolf, 1995; Rothbart, Ziaie, & O'Boyle, 1992). This approach has been important for identifying and defining behavioral strategies and describing how these strategies change over development.

Kopp (1989) suggests that external support from caregivers is crucial for emotion regulation in infants and young children. Infants

learn to associate caregivers with the potential to change their negative states. As toddlers come to understand the causes of emotional distress, they may use planful strategies aimed at changing or eliminating the cause of distress. Kopp hypothesizes that these planful strategies may require maternal support in order to be implemented. Thus, one question that is raised is how children's behavioral strategies differ when their caregivers, in this case their mothers, are relatively unavailable versus how they respond when their caregivers are available to help them. To date, however, little empirical research has explored the role of maternal support on children's behavioral strategies. One exception is a study by Grolnick et al. (1996) that found that children used the most active orienting away from attractive objects and toward other toys (distraction) during delay situations when an adult was available and involved. This distraction technique may be an effective strategy in that those children who use it are able to delay longer (Mischel & Ebbenson, 1970). Taken together, these findings indicate that caregivers may facilitate effective behavioral strategies.

Such findings are in line with Kopp (1989), who suggests that the most important advance in emotion regulation at the end of the first year of life concerns its social interactive aspects. Infants are able to cue their caregivers in specific ways to manipulate their caregivers' behavior. They actively recruit others, rather than using the unplanned signals produced by younger infants. Thus, toddlers view caregivers as a source of assistance.

Empirical evidence supports the claim that infants increasingly enlist the support of caregivers. For example, Rothbart et al. (1992) found that older infants were more likely to orient towards their mothers and were less likely to focus on inanimate aspects of the environment. Oral self-soothing, by comparison, peaked at 3 months and decreased until 13.5 months. Similarly, Parritz (1996) found that 18-month-olds engaged in greater direct-

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