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## Discrepancies in parents' and children's reports of child emotion regulation

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### ABSTRACT

The ability to regulate one's emotions effectively has been linked with many aspects of well-being. The current study examined discrepancies between mothers' and children's reports of child emotion regulation. This investigation examined patterns of discrepancies for key aspects of emotion regulation (i.e., inhibition and dysregulated expression) and for three emotions (anger, sadness, worry). A total of 61 mother–child dyads (mean children's age = 9.3 years) participated. As hypothesized, discrepancies for inhibition subscales were of a larger magnitude than those for dysregulated expression subscales. Furthermore, age was related to discrepancies in both anger subscales, parent reports of child externalizing symptoms were related to anger dysregulated expression discrepancies, and child reports of internalizing symptoms were related to sadness dysregulated expression discrepancies. Overall, the findings suggest that patterns of discrepant reports are not random but rather may provide meaningful and useful information about the nature of emotion regulation.

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### Introduction

Emotions can be broadly defined as nonpermanent motivating feeling states that occur in response to an individual's interaction with the environment (Barrett & Campos, 1987). The process of learning to regulate these complex and powerful feeling states is one of the most important tasks of childhood (Calkins & Hill, 2007; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000) and has been linked

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with many aspects of later well-being and adjustment (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002; Spinrad et al., 2006; Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006). Across multiple methods (e.g., questionnaire, interview, observation) and informants (e.g., parent, child self-report), deficits in emotion regulation (ER) abilities have been linked to internalizing and externalizing psychopathology (Casey, 1996; Suveg, Southam-Gerow, Goodman, & Kendall, 2007; Tull, Stipelman, Salters-Pedneault, & Gratz, 2009). Furthermore, understanding of the developmental trajectory of ER has informed treatment development and been linked with successful treatment outcomes (Suveg, Kendall, Comer, & Robin, 2006), suggesting that the study of ER is a highly relevant topic for clinical child/adolescent researchers.

Assessment of ER presents numerous methodological and conceptual challenges (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004; Zeman, Klimes-Dougan, Cassano, & Adrian, 2007). Emotion and its regulation are elusive and dynamic processes that lack a “gold standard” for assessment, and measurement of ER is necessarily inferential (Cole et al., 2004). Researchers are encouraged to obtain information from multiple methods (e.g., questionnaire, observation) and informants (e.g., parents and children) (Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995; Zeman et al., 2007). However, even within one aspect of measurement such as questionnaire reports, different informants might not provide converging information. Indeed, research demonstrates that different informants contribute unique value and nonoverlapping predictive information in the study of child behavior (Kerr, Lunkenheimer, & Olson, 2007; Kraemer et al., 2003).

The fact that different informants often diverge in their reports of the same behavior poses profound challenges to the interpretation of findings in child development research. Because informant disagreement on ratings of child behavior and psychological symptoms is a consistent finding in the literature (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005), researchers might reasonably anticipate that parents and children will provide discrepant ratings of children's ER. Surprisingly, there is little empirical literature that sheds light on how parents and children differ in their reports of ER. To address this gap in the literature, our study investigated discrepant reports of ER using parallel parent and child report measures (Zeman, Cassano, Suveg, & Shipman, 2010; Zeman et al., 2007). A number of paper-and-pencil rating scales have been developed over the past decade to measure ER (Zeman et al., 2007), but researchers are left with few guidelines for making sense of conflicting information when it occurs. This study conceptualizes discrepancy itself as a useful construct and presents a novel approach for examining ER.

Much like ratings of psychopathology and behavior, there is inherent difficulty in obtaining reports from both parents and children on a construct that is sometimes not observable. Parents cannot directly observe children's thoughts and internal emotional states, and children may lack objectivity in their ratings of cognitive and emotional processes. Furthermore, even “observable” (i.e., behavioral) ER is subject to the observer's opportunity to “observe” the regulation. Research has shown that children report expressing emotion differently when in the presence of different social partners (e.g., Shipman, Zeman, Nesin, & Fitzgerald, 2003; Zeman & Garber, 1996; Zeman & Shipman, 1996, 1998), suggesting that informants might not be privy to the range of children's emotional functioning. In the absence of a gold standard informant, researchers must find ways to integrate information from different informants or make sense of discrepant information when it occurs (Achenbach et al., 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kraemer et al., 2003). The primary purpose of the current study was to examine discrepant reports along inhibited and dysregulated dimensions of ER. A secondary goal was to examine child informants' characteristics associated with discrepancies. By examining informant discrepancies as a construct and investigating factors associated with discrepancies, we might glean important information from differing informant perspectives.

### *Informant agreement*

The congruence or concordance in ratings between two informants is often referred to as “informant agreement.” Correspondence and discrepancies are commonly used to examine informant agreement when the data are ordinal or continuous. Correspondence between informants addresses whether informants' ratings are correlated, whereas discrepancies or difference scores between informants reflect differences in informants' reports (Richters, 1992; Treutler & Epkins, 2003). Correspondence provides no information as to whether informants indicate a similar level or severity of

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