



Emotional context, maternal behavior and emotion regulation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the importance of emotion-eliciting context (positive and negative) and mother's behaviors (constrained and involved) on toddlers' emotion regulation behavioral strategies, emotional expressiveness and intensity, during three episodes eliciting fear, frustration/anger and positive affect. Fifty-five children between 18 and 26 months of age and their mothers participated in the study. Toddlers' regulatory strategies varied as function of emotion-eliciting context (children exhibited behavioral strategies more frequently during positive affect and frustration/anger episodes and less frequently during fear episodes) and maternal involvement. Toddlers' expression of emotion varied as function of emotion-eliciting context (children exhibited more emotional expressions, both negative and positive during fear and frustration/anger episodes compared to positive affect episodes). Toddlers' expression of emotion was not strongly related to maternal involvement, however, the intensity of emotional expression was related to the interaction of context and maternal involvement.

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Rothbart and Sheese (2007) argue that emotion regulation should be construed as a biopsychosocial behavioral system responsible for the modulation of emotional reactions, including its inhibition, activation or graded modulation. This system involves changes in latency, rise times, magnitudes and durations of responses in behavior, experience and physiology, depending on an individual's goals (Gross & Thompson, 2007; Thompson & Meyer, 2007). According to the functionalist perspective (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994) emotion regulation is concerned with relations between emotion(s) and the person's immediate or long-term objectives. When emotions are experienced in a flexible and controlled manner (i.e., regulated), they are useful in mobilizing the individual's behavioral resources in the service of goal attainment, including establishing inter-personal relationships, engaging in pro-social initiatives, self-assertiveness, etc., according to the social and cultural demands of the context and the individual's objectives. In principle, advances in emotion regulation skills promote adaptive behaviors and appropriate and flexible responses to the initiations of others (Denham, 1998; Fox, 1994). Failure to attain age-appropriate emotion regulatory skills (i.e., dysregulation) is reflected by the use of developmentally primitive regulatory strategies and the inability to make decisions regarding appropriate conduct across diverse social contexts (Denham, 1998; Fox, 1994). Furthermore, emotional dysregulation has been associated with psychopathological symptoms and/or deviant developmental trajectories in childhood and adolescence (Cole, Michael, & Teti, 1994; Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002).

1. Regulation of positive and negative emotions (fear and frustration/anger)

During *fear* contexts, strategies such as withdrawal (Buss & Goldsmith, 1998) avoidance and fussing to mother (Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999a), were associated with a decrease in the intensity of children's fear expressions. On the other hand, when

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children used approach and interaction strategies with the stimulus (Buss & Goldsmith, 1998) or played with it (Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999a), there was no change in the intensity of fear expressions.

In the study of anger regulation, decreases in anger were associated with three strategies in children: shifting attention away from sources of frustration, passive waiting and seeking information; while focusing on the frustrating event was associated with increases in anger intensity (Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg, & Lukon, 2002).

When comparing strategies used in the regulation of fear and frustration/anger episodes, research suggests that children tend to use more regulatory strategies during frustration/anger contexts, than during fear episodes, probably due to the fact that the frustration object is unattainable and children try more strategies in a repeated way in order to get it back, whereas this is unnecessary during fear episodes (Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999a).

A review of literature points to a lack of attention to positive affect in the study of emotion regulation. To our knowledge, few studies (Beauregard, Levesque, & John, 2001; Giuliani, McRae, & Gross, 2008; Kim & Hamann, 2007) have analysed the regulation of positive affect, and none of these included children. Research on the regulation of positive affect is essential, particularly, the study of strategies that maintain and increase the experiences of positive emotions, since cultivating them may be particularly important for building resilience to stressful events (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). The regulation of positive affect also includes the modulation of high intensity positive affect in contexts where it is not appropriate. Intense positive experiences can have undesirable consequences, such as greater arousal or physiological reactivity, which may impair the benefit of positive emotions. Therefore, although intense positive experiences are desirable at the time they are experienced, they may not be related to long-term well being (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991). The regulation of positive and negative affect is equally important, particularly, if it contributes to the attainment of one's immediate or long term goals (Campos et al., 1994). However, no studies have been done to show if there are any differences in the number of regulatory strategies exhibited during positive affect episodes, compared to negative affect ones. According to learning and operant conditioning theories, behaviors are strengthened by the consequence of experiencing a positive condition, but also by the consequence of stopping or avoiding a negative one (Malott & Trojan, 2008). This also suggests that there might be no differences in the frequency of regulatory strategies exhibited during positive and negative emotion-eliciting contexts.

2. The role of mother's involvement

Maternal involvement is extremely important in regulating the child's physiological and emotional arousal states, either by: (1) providing the means for the child's physical survival and well being (food, shelter, clothing, and physical soothing); or (2) through more complex interactions (caregiving styles or explicit training, like discipline, modeling, and reinforcement), which teach the child how to manage stress, frustration and how to control impulses (Calkins, 1994). This process of external regulation is progressively internalized by the child and becomes a source of self-regulation, particularly, when sensorimotor behavior and locomotion are developed, and social referencing skills are acquired. These new developmental processes allow the child to regulate physical and emotional proximity to the caregiver and people in general, and to facilitate access to new sources of information (Kopp, 1989).

Children between 18 and 24 months, use different behavioral strategies as a function of maternal involvement, in situations of fear and anger (Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999a). For example, they are more likely to behave in ways that distract them from a goal-object during delay situations when an adult is available and involved (Grolnick, Bridges, & Connell, 1996). They also engage, social reference their mothers, play with the stimulus, and express more positive than negative affect during mother involved periods, as compared with periods during which maternal behavior is constrained by experimenter instruction (Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999a).

Research also suggests that maternal involvement and the quality of the attachment relationship influence children's emotional expressiveness. Insecure children, tend to either minimize or exaggerate emotion expressiveness (Cassidy, 1994; Bretherton, 1990). On the other hand, secure children are characterized by an open, direct, and active expression of affect to the mother in case of distress and the pair often exchange expressions of joy during positive affect episodes that serve to maintain interest in their relationship (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bretherton, 1990).

3. Aims of the study

The main goal of this study was to explore the influences of the emotion-eliciting context (positive and negative affect) and maternal behaviors (constrained or involved) on toddlers' emotional expressiveness, intensity, and the exhibition of behaviors that might regulate either expressiveness or intensity. Observations were conducted at children's homes and not at the laboratory, which may provide important insight to the understanding of children's emotion regulation during daily-life events, outside more controlled settings. Our approach to emotion regulation focuses on the study of frequency of strategies and emotional expressions as function of maternal involvement, and not on the study of changes in the intensity of emotional expressions (Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999a). This approach is supported by the work of Diener et al. (1991) which argues that happiness researchers should assess primarily the relative frequency of positive *versus* negative emotional experience. Two reasons are presented by the authors: (1) the relative frequency of positive emotions can be more accurately and validly measured; (2) frequent positive affect is both necessary and sufficient to produce the state we call happiness, whereas intense positive experience is not, since it can have undesirable features.

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