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The transactional relationship between parenting and emotion regulation in children with or without developmental delays

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have identified numerous internal and external factors that contribute to individual differences in emotion regulation (ER) abilities. To extend these findings, we examined the longitudinal effects of a significant external predictor (parenting) on children's ER abilities in the context of an internal predictor (intellectual functioning). We used cross-lagged panel modeling to investigate the transactional relationship between parenting and ER in children with or without developmental delays (DD) across three time points in early and middle childhood (age 3, 5, and 8). Participants were 225 families in the Collaborative Family Study, a longitudinal study of young children with or without DD. Child ER ability and maternal scaffolding skills were coded from mother–child interactions at ages 3, 5, and 8. Compared to children with typical development (TD), children with DD were significantly more dysregulated at all time points, and their mothers exhibited fewer scaffolding behaviors in early childhood. In addition, cross-lagged panel models revealed a significant bidirectional relationship between maternal scaffolding and ER from ages 3 to 5 in the DD group but not the TD group. These findings suggest that scaffolding may be a crucial parenting skill to target in the early treatment of children with ER difficulties.

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1. Introduction

The ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify the intensity and duration of emotional reactions is crucial for competent social functioning and psychological well-being. People are exposed to a variety of emotionally arousing stimuli on a daily basis and therefore need regulatory mechanisms to curtail reactions that would be deemed as socially inappropriate or extreme. Competence in emotion regulation (ER) is associated with better health outcomes and interpersonal relationships, and improved academic and work performance (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010).

1.1. Family factors and emotion regulation

The family is the primary environmental factor for variation in the development of ER. Children learn about ER through observational learning, social referencing, and parenting practices related to emotion and ER. The emotional climate of the household, parenting practices, and parents' modeling of ER all contribute to children's regulatory development (Morris, Silk,

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Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). A main contributing factor to the emotional climate of the household is marital conflict/satisfaction, as exposure to “background anger” places children at risk for developing social and emotional problems (Lemerise & Dodge, 1993). A study of emotion regulation in 6-month-old infants found that infant withdrawal (an early correlate of emotion regulation) was predicted by mothers’ and fathers’ aggressive marital conflict and exposure to marital arguments (Crockenberg, Leerkes, & Lekka, 2007).

To look at a more direct causal relationship between parenting and ER, Hoffman, Crnic, & Baker (2006), examined the longitudinal effects of maternal depression on ER and behavior problems in preschoolers. They found that depressed mothers used scaffolding techniques in interactions with their children less frequently. Furthermore, these lower levels of scaffolding predicted more child emotion dysregulation and behavior problems a year later. This association between maternal depression and child ER is both an example of modeling and specific parenting behaviors, such that these depressed mothers both model maladaptive ER techniques and utilize poor parenting approaches. In a study of adolescents (11–13 years of age), Yap, Allen, and Ladouceur (2008) examined maternal invalidation of positive affect and its effects on depressive symptomatology. They found that maladaptive ER strategies mediated the relationship between invalidation and depression. That is, adolescents whose positive affect elicited dampening responses from their mothers were more likely to utilize maladaptive ER strategies (e.g., inappropriate venting, arguing, etc.) and report more depressive symptoms. Clearly, through various levels of engagement and types of interactions, children explicitly and implicitly learn about their emotional reactions and how to manage them. If children are raised in a hostile environment, do not receive emotional support, and are not surrounded by models of healthy ER, it will be difficult to learn to be an adept emotion regulator.

The transactional model of development asserts that child and environmental factors reciprocally influence each other throughout development. Thus, we should expect that child ER is predictive of parenting quality. We should also expect that resultant parenting then intensifies prior child behaviors and abilities. For example, a child with a more difficult-to-manage temperament might elicit more negative parenting behavior, which then feeds back to exacerbate the child’s emotional and behavioral difficulties. To our knowledge, very few studies have investigated such potential reciprocity in emotion regulation, and other investigators have examined the transactional model in other domains of child development. Yates and colleagues found a bidirectional relationship between parenting and child dysregulation across early and middle childhood among boys in low SES families (Yates, Obradovic, & Egeland, 2010). Additionally, they found a relationship between early intellectual functioning and emotion regulation, and that child IQ rendered the path from early parenting to later academic achievement non-significant. Thus, this study highlights the importance of studying this transactional relationship in the context of developmental and intellectual delays.

In further examination of transactional relationships, Neece, Green, and Baker (2012) examined a reciprocal relationship between parenting stress and child behavior problems across early and middle childhood, among children with or without developmental delays (DD). These authors found evidence that parenting stress and child behavior problems were mutually causal. That is, parenting stress was both an antecedent and consequence of child behavior problems and, simultaneously, child behavior problems were an antecedent and consequence of parenting stress. This transactional relationship was observed in families of children with typical development or developmental delays. Other authors have found emotion regulation to be related with, and even predictive of, behavior problems in early childhood (Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Smith, 1994; Hill, Degnan, Calkins, & Keane, 2006). The present study investigated a potential transactional relationship with intellectual functioning and family processes.

1.2. Emotion regulation deficits in children with developmental delays

In addition, studies of young children with DD have found that, compared to typically developing (TD) children, children with DD utilize fewer adaptive regulation skills (Wilson, 1999) and are less able to self-regulate (Nader-Grosbois, 2014). In a study on ER and parenting predicting social skills in children with and without DD, Baker and colleagues found that children with DD were significantly more emotionally dysregulated than their TD peers (Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007). Furthermore, the DD group had poorer social skills and there was evidence that emotional dysregulation partially mediated the relationship between developmental status and social skills. These findings suggest that cognitive ability may be a constitutional factor for variation in ER development. Currently, however, there is sparse research on the functional pathways through which ER is impaired in individuals with DD. We know that children with DD have more difficulty with regulating emotions and employ fewer adaptive ER strategies, but the field lacks studies explaining this association. While there is evidence that having a child with DD can have a positive impact on families (Blacher & Baker, 2007), several studies have found that caregiver stress is a more common phenomenon among parents of children with severe disabilities than it is among other parents (Friedrich & Friedrich, 1981). Considering that parents who report higher levels of parenting stress are more likely to be authoritarian, harsh, and negative in their parenting (Belsky, Woodworth, & Crnic, 1996), family factors may be a key mediator in this relationship between developmental delay and emotion regulation problems. Research is needed to examine the possible causal relationships between these variables.

Despite the importance of the complex development ER, most studies are either cross-sectional, and therefore cannot investigate causal links or longitudinal within one developmental stage (e.g., early childhood, adolescence). What is most needed is longitudinal research across developmental stages that synthesizes constitutional (e.g., cognitive ability) and environmental (e.g., parenting style) sources of variation in ER. Efforts to identify the transactional process over time

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