



# Infant emotion regulation: Relations to bedtime emotional availability, attachment security, and temperament



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 January 2014

Received in revised form 14 May 2014

Accepted 14 June 2014

Available online 2 July 2014

### Keywords:

Maternal emotional availability

Attachment security

Infant temperament

Emotion regulation

## ABSTRACT

The present study examines the influences of mothers' emotional availability toward their infants during bedtime, infant attachment security, and interactions between bedtime parenting and attachment with infant temperamental negative affectivity, on infants' emotion regulation strategy use at 12 and 18 months. Infants' emotion regulation strategies were assessed during a frustration task that required infants to regulate their emotions in the absence of parental support. Whereas emotional availability was not directly related to infants' emotion regulation strategies, infant attachment security had direct relations with infants' orienting toward the environment and tension reduction behaviors. Both maternal emotional availability and security of the mother–infant attachment relationship interacted with infant temperamental negative affectivity to predict two strategies that were less adaptive in regulating frustration.

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## 1. Introduction

The ability to regulate emotions and related behaviors in socially adaptive ways is an essential aspect of children's successful development (Calkins & Leerkes, 2010; Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001; Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1994). Lack of emotion regulation skills during infancy and toddlerhood is not only indicative of later aggressive or withdrawn behaviors (Calkins, Smith, Gill, & Johnson, 1998) but also predictive of problems in cognitive and social development through the preschool and early school years (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007).

Both theory and empirical studies indicate that the parent–infant relationship exerts significant influence on infants' regulatory capacities (Cassidy, 1994; Kogan & Carter, 1996; Sroufe, 1995, 2005). The quality of parent–child interactions has been particularly emphasized as an influence on children's developing emotion regulation (Spinrad & Stifter, 2002; Sroufe, 1995). It is during healthy interactions with parents that a child acquires knowledge of emotions and adaptive regulatory strategies (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Parke, Cassidy, Burks, Carson, & Boyum, 1992). Indeed, the ways in which mothers respond to their children's emotional cues are related to children's emotional competence (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Morris et al., 2007). Despite the wealth of studies examining relations between the quality of parenting and child regulatory outcomes, most studies relate individual dimensions of parenting (e.g., sensitivity) in relation to various aspects of emotional competence in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (e.g., emotion understanding, intensity and duration

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of emotional expression, and emotion regulation strategies). We thus employ, in the present study, the multidimensional construct of emotional availability that involves affective attunement to the child's emotions, needs, and goals, an acceptance of both positive and negative emotions in the child, and adaptive regulation of emotional exchanges during interactions with the child (Biringen, 2000; Emde & Easterbrooks, 1985). Emotionally available parents engage in sensitive, structuring, non-intrusive, and non-hostile behaviors that enable the child to use the parent for comfort and support as well as engage in adaptive emotion regulation strategies (Biringen, 2000; Biringen, Robinson, & Emde, 1998; Kogan & Carter, 1996; Little & Carter, 2005).

The present study examines parental emotional availability during the context of bedtime as a predictor of child emotion regulation. Bedtime is a naturalistic, daily-occurring context for which parents have the goal of bringing the child to a comfortable, restful, and non-distressed affective state so that the child can fall asleep and sleep throughout the night, typically apart from parents. Cessation of parent–infant interactions and separation from parents during bedtime may potentially be distressing for children who wish to maintain contact or interaction with their parents (Sadeh, Tikotzky, & Scher, 2010). Emotionally available parents who respond contingently and appropriately to child signals, make effective use of bedtime routines to facilitate children's sleep by avoiding intense or high-level stimulation of the child when the child is settling to sleep at bedtime, and refraining from overt and covert expressions of irritability or anger when interacting with the child. These routines are expected to promote a safe and secure affective state in their children, and to enable adaptive emotion regulatory capabilities during distressing situations.

Taken together, the findings of studies that have examined individual dimensions of parenting (i.e., sensitivity, structuring, intrusiveness, or hostility) in relation to infant emotional competence indicate that early caregiving plays an important role in the development of children's emotion regulation (Kogan & Carter, 1996; Leerkes, Blankson, & O'Brien, 2009). Children with mothers that respond sensitively to their changing emotional cues tend to show lower negative reactivity and more regulatory strategies than children whose mothers are less sensitive (Spinrad & Stifter, 2002). Sensitive responsiveness to children's distress also seems to engender children's use of more age-appropriate emotion regulation strategies that are less self-oriented (e.g., thumb sucking) and more parent-oriented (e.g., focuses gaze on parent; Eisenberg et al., 1998). Parents structure children's self-regulation of emotion through encouraging the child to shift attention, and modeling the use of adaptive strategies in response to distress (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, & Cohen, 2009; Raikes & Thompson, 2006). Mothers who engage in emotionally available structuring pace their activity level in response to the child's cues such as gaze aversion, scaffold self-soothing by providing security objects, and provide positive guidance that will help children learn to regulate their emotions in adaptive ways (Calkins et al., 1998; Leerkes et al., 2009). When parents react negatively (e.g., reject, punish, or ignore) to children's distress, negative arousal is less likely to decrease, and maladaptive regulation in the form of minimization or over-regulation of emotions is likely to occur (Cassidy, 1994). Studies have shown that maternal intrusive and hostile behaviors (e.g., being constantly at the child, expressing irritation or anger, and scolding or teasing) that exert excessive or negative control over the child are linked with greater orienting toward sources of frustration and fewer adaptive emotion regulation strategies in the child (Calkins et al., 1998; Chang et al., 2003; Little & Carter, 2005).

Along with parenting quality, the mother–infant attachment relationship has both theoretical and empirical links to children's emotion regulation. According to attachment theory, parent-initiated regulation of emotions during face-to-face interactions in the earliest months, help infants to gain the ability for dyadic coregulation in the first year (Cassidy, 1994; Sroufe, 1995). With repeated interactions with parents in emotion-laden contexts, infants become increasingly able to autonomously use strategies to regulate their emotional arousal (Calkins et al., 1998; Feldman, Greenbaum, & Yirmiya, 1999; Kopp, 1989). The organization of behaviors within the attachment relationship thus affects how children organize and regulate their emotions and behaviors toward the environment (Ainsworth, 1979; Sroufe & Waters, 1977; Thompson, 2008).

Attachment theory posits securely attached children to show more adaptive emotion regulation than children with insecure attachment (Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Cassidy, 1994; Sroufe, 2005). Children who have confidence in the parent's capacity to provide assistance in regulating their affective states will be able to better regulate emotional arousal and also effectively explore their environment which, in turn, has positive implications for adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Sroufe, 1995, 2005). Indeed, secure attachment is associated with more adaptive emotion regulation (Diener, Mangelsdorf, McHale, & Frosch, 2002; Waters et al., 2010), including more parent-oriented and less object-orientated emotion regulation strategies during a frustration task (Braungart & Stifter, 1991; Diener et al., 2002; Leerkes & Wong, 2012).

On the other hand, children with insecure attachments show greater emotion dysregulation (Sroufe, 2005), placing them at greater risk for externalizing and internalizing problems, and psychopathology (Cassidy, 1999; Madigan, Moran, Schuengel, Pederson, & Otten, 2007). Insecure-avoidant infants who likely experienced repeated rejection from their parent tend to engage in less parent-oriented, more object-oriented, and more self-comforting emotion regulation strategies (Braungart & Stifter, 1991; Crugnola et al., 2011; Diener et al., 2002; Leerkes & Wong, 2012; Martins, Soares, Martins, Tereno, & Osório, 2012). Insecure-resistant infants are more likely to employ high levels of parent-oriented emotion regulation strategies possibly due to their uncertainty of parental emotional availability based on a history of inconsistent care (Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Cassidy, 1994). They are also more likely to use tension-reduction strategies, such as hitting or throwing the object (e.g., toy) when distressed (Calkins & Johnson, 1998; Leerkes & Wong, 2012).

Both temperament and attachment perspectives on children's emotional development agree that the emotion regulation abilities of infants are based on an interaction between the infant's temperamental characteristics and environmental influences (Calkins & Leerkes, 2010; Sroufe, 1995; Thompson, 1994). Given the bidirectional nature of parent–infant

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