



## Links between mothers' coping styles, toddler reactivity, and sensitivity to toddler's negative emotions

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### ABSTRACT

The extent to which engaged maternal coping styles moderate the association between toddler's temperamental reactivity and mothers' sensitivity to children's negative emotions was examined in 89 mother–child dyads. Primiparous mothers completed a measure of coping styles prenatally. When toddlers were 16 months old, mothers completed a measure of perceived toddler temperament and a self-report of how they respond to toddler negative emotions, and maternal sensitivity and temperamental reactivity were observed during emotionally arousing tasks in the laboratory. Mothers' disengaged coping style was positively associated with self-reported insensitive responses to children's negative emotions. Engaged coping moderated the association between toddler temperamental reactivity and both self-reported insensitive responses and observed maternal sensitivity, such that temperamental reactivity was more strongly linked with less sensitive maternal behavior when engaged coping was low.

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Maternal sensitivity to children's negative emotions is associated with adaptive child outcomes such as attachment security, social competence, better affect regulation, and fewer behavioral problems (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Leerkes, Blankson, & O'Brien, 2009; McElwain & Booth-LaForce, 2006). Yet, relatively little is known about the factors that promote mothers' ability to respond sensitively to children's negative emotions. Given evidence that children's negative emotions are a salient stressor for mothers (Belsky, 1984) and that individual differences in the frequency and intensity of toddler negative emotions (i.e., temperament) likely contribute to variability in the magnitude of this stressor (Rothbart & Bates, 1998), it seems likely that how mothers cope with stress and toddler's temperamental reactivity may be important predictors of how mothers respond to their toddler's negative emotions.

### 1. Maternal sensitivity to negative emotions and child outcomes

Maternal sensitivity refers to mothers' timely and appropriate responses to their children's cues with respect to their developmental level and the demands of the situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Maternal sensitivity is important because it fosters children's adaptive social and emotional outcomes (Denham & Grout, 1993; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001). Specifically, sensitivity to children's negative emotions is associated with children's subsequent ability to be more sympathetic, empathetic, and prosocially responsive (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). Children whose mothers respond sensitively to their negative emotions have an easier time forming peer relationships during preschool and adolescence (Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Aurebach, & Blair, 1997) and are more likely to have secure attachments

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(McElwain & Booth-LaForce, 2006). Mothers who are sensitive in their responses to their children's negative emotions teach their children that their emotions are valid and should be acknowledged, which allows them the opportunity to experience negative emotions in an environment where they are supported and can learn to cope with difficult situations and feelings (Fabes et al., 2001). Alternatively, mothers who dismiss, minimize, or act punitively toward their children's negative emotions convey a negative message about emotions and do not provide the supportive context that promotes children's understanding, acceptance, and regulation of difficult emotions (Dix, 1991; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, 1997), which can undermine children's development. Insensitive responses to children's negative emotions contribute to children's minimization and masking of their own emotions, negative beliefs about their social environment, and maladaptive regulatory skills (Calkins, 1994; Cassidy, 1994). Thus, identifying the factors that promote sensitive responding to children's negative emotions is of critical importance. We turn first to the potential role of mothers' coping styles.

## 2. Links between maternal coping and responsiveness to children's negative emotions

Parenting is an inherently stressful process that occurs within an affective context (Dix, 1991). When toddlers behave in ways that are not congruent with mothers' goals and expectations, negative emotions are likely to occur, and this can create stress for mothers. How mothers cope with this stress is important for the affective context in which the mother–toddler relationship develops and evidence that how mothers think and feel about emotions are an important predictor of their behavior (Dix, 1991) suggests that how mothers cope with their own emotions may predict how they respond to their children's emotions.

Coping with stress is a transactional, dynamic process. Generally, coping is thought of as how people handle situations, what people do to eliminate stress, and how they manage emotions associated with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987; Roth & Cohen, 1986; Skinner & Edge, 1998). Although there are different conceptualizations of coping styles, one useful distinction has been the extent to which individuals actively attempt to solve problems and cope with affiliated emotions, referred to as engaged or problem-focused coping; versus the extent to which individuals attempt to avoid problems and affiliated emotions, referred to as disengaged or avoidant coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987; Roth & Cohen, 1986; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000).

Mothers with an engaged coping style may feel less distressed by crying and approach it as a problem that they can solve, promoting sensitive responses to their children's negative emotions. These mothers may also value emotions and emotional problem solving and deliberately attempt to instill such values in their young children by helping them to cope proactively with their own emotions. In contrast, mothers with a disengaged coping style may be more distressed by their children's negative emotions and either withdraw or respond harshly in an effort to minimize their contact with the stressor, which can undermine sensitivity. Consistent with this view, parents who report valuing and dealing effectively with their own negative emotions tend to also value their children's emotions and have been observed to be more responsive to their children than parents with alternative beliefs about emotions (Gottman et al., 1996; Yap, Allen, Leve, & Katz, 2008). Moreover, mothers' problem-focused coping was associated with engaging in more affiliative behaviors like play and affection during their infants' first year of life in a sample of primiparous mothers (Levy-Shiff, Dimitrovsky, Shulman, & Har-Even, 1998).

## 3. The role of child temperament

Child reactivity has also been linked with sensitivity in early childhood. Reactivity is defined as a temperamental characteristic typically indicated by the frequency and intensity of vocal, facial, motor, and physiological indices of stress (Rothbart & Bates, 1998). Infants who display distress intensely or frequently may be more difficult to care for as evidenced by greater parenting stress (Belsky, 1984) and more negative parental emotions (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003; Dix, 1991) among parents of reactive infants. However, links between temperament and parenting have been mixed (Paulussen-Hoogeboom, Stams, Hermanns, & Peetsma, 2007). In some instances mothers of temperamentally reactive infants were less sensitive as evidenced by less displayed positive emotion or physical contact with their infants than was typical of mothers of less reactive infants (Calkins, Hungerford, & Dedmon, 2004; van den Boom & Hoeksma, 1994). In other instances, temperamental reactivity has been unrelated to parenting or positively related (Hagekull, Bohlin, & Rydell, 1997). These inconsistencies prompted Crockenberg (1986; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003) to argue that the association between temperament and parenting is moderated by other factors. Specifically, temperament may only be linked with less sensitive maternal behavior when resources are low (e.g., low social support) or other stressors are present (e.g., depression). An engaged maternal coping style is another factor that could moderate this relationship. An engaged coping style is a psychological resource that may buffer mothers from the negative effect of temperamental reactivity on sensitivity. Mothers with an engaged coping style may be able to remain calm and sensitive in the face of intense and frequent toddler negative emotions; whereas mothers with a disengaged coping style may become distressed themselves by their temperamentally reactive children, prompting them to respond insensitively to their children's negative emotions.

In sum, in this study we hypothesize that engaged coping styles will be positively associated with mothers' sensitive responsiveness to their children's negative emotions and disengaged coping will be negatively associated with sensitive responsiveness. We also hypothesize that maternal coping styles will moderate the relationship between toddler's temper-

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