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## The relations of mothers' negative expressivity to children's experience and expression of negative emotion

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### Abstract

Guided by the heuristic model proposed by Eisenberg et al. [Psychol. Inq. 9 (1998) 241], we examined the relations of mothers' reported and observed negative expressivity to children's ( $N = 159$ ; 74 girls;  $M$  age = 7.67 years) experience and expression of emotion. Children's experience and/or expression of emotion in response to a distressing film were measured with facial, heart rate, and self-report measures. Children's heart rate and facial distress were modestly positively related. Children's facial distress was significantly positively related to mothers' reports of negative (dominant and submissive) expressivity; the positive relation between children's facial distress and mothers' observed negative expressivity approached the conventional level of significance. Moreover, mothers' observed negative expressivity was significantly negatively related to children's heart rate reactivity during the conflict film. The positive relation between children's reported distress and mothers' observed negative expressivity approached the conventional level of significance. Several possible explanations for the pattern of findings are discussed.

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*Keywords:* Children's emotions; Maternal emotion; Emotional expressivity; Children's distress; Multimethod

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### 1. Introduction

Understanding factors that contribute to children's emotional expressivity is important because children's ability to experience and express emotion in culturally and socially appropriate ways predicts their social functioning (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999). For example, children's expression of positive versus negative emotion has been found to relate to their

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social competence with peers and adjustment (Denham & Grout, 1992; Sroufe, Schork, Motti, Lawroski, & LaFreniere, 1984). In addition, preschoolers who express high levels of anger and sadness are viewed as difficult and poorly adjusted (Denham & Burger, 1991; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Denham, Renwick, & Holt, 1991). Due to the central role of children's emotional expressions in their social and emotional development, it is important to understand ways parents can promote or inhibit such responses. Therefore, the goal of this research was to examine the relations between children's physiological, facial, and reported expressions of emotion and their mothers' reported and observed negative expressivity. Findings from this study have the potential to further improve interventions and prevention programs that aim to promote children's social interactions through modifying the parent–child relationship.

Although a number of factors likely influence the development of children's emotional expressions, in the present study, we focus on the emotional environment of the family, and specifically on mothers' negative expressivity. It is likely that children first learn about how emotions are typically expressed, the messages they convey, and methods of emotion regulation in family interactions (Denham, 1998; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987; Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991). Negative emotions expressed by parents are likely to affect children's emotional reactivity, the quality and security of relationships with members of the family, and their representations of themselves and of the social world (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997; Halberstadt et al., 1999). Indeed, there is initial evidence that children's expression or regulation of emotion mediates the relations between parents' expression of emotion and children's social competence and adjustment (Brody & Ge, 2001; Eisenberg et al., 2001). Moreover, preschoolers from negatively expressive homes seem to have difficulties interacting in an affectively positive way in their preschool (Denham & Grout, 1993; Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997). Thus, the emotional climate that children experience is viewed as having an important impact on children's overall social and emotional development.

The heuristic model provided by Eisenberg et al. (1998) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing much of the existing data on emotion socialization as well as the relations we examine in the present study. In their model, Eisenberg et al. reviewed the concept of parents' emotion-related socializing behaviors (ERSBs) and identified three ways parents socialize their children's emotions: (a) parental reactions to children's emotions, (b) parents' discussion of emotion, and (c) parents' expression of emotion. Parents' ERSBs are hypothesized to have indirect (through their effect on children's emotional arousal) and direct effects on children's experience, expression, understanding, and regulation of emotion. Eisenberg et al. argued that if parental ERSBs promote optimal levels of emotional arousal, they are likely to foster learning and constructive behavior; if they overarouse the children, they will tend to undermine opportunities for learning about emotions and their regulatory capacities.

For the purpose of the present study, we focus on one aspect of ERSBs—mothers' expression of negative emotion—and its relation to children's responses to a distressing film. Parental expressiveness is usually defined as, “a persistent pattern or style in exhibiting nonverbal and verbal expressions that often but not always appear to be emotion related; this pattern or style is usually measured in terms of frequency of occurrence” (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995, p. 93). Expressiveness often is viewed as either positive, negative dominant, or negative submissive. Positive expressiveness refers to positive emotional expressions, such as praising someone, demonstrating admiration, and/or expressing gratitude. Negative dominant expressiveness involves the display of emotions that are

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