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Managing emotion in a maltreating context: A pilot study examining child neglect[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The primary goal of this pilot study was to examine emotion management skills (i.e., emotional understanding, emotion regulation) in children who had experienced neglect and a control group to determine the ways that neglect may interfere with children's emotional development.

Method: Participants included children 6–12 years of age and their mothers (neglect group, $N = 24$; control, $N = 24$). Participants completed questionnaires and an interview that assessed children's emotional understanding and emotion regulation.

Results: Findings indicated that neglected children, compared to their nonmaltreated peers, demonstrated lower understanding of negative emotions (i.e., anger, sadness) and fewer adaptive emotion regulation skills. Further, neglected children expected less support and more conflict from mothers in response to displays of negative emotion and reported that they were more likely to attempt to inhibit the expression of negative emotion.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that neglect may interfere with the normal acquisition of emotional understanding and emotion regulation skills, highlighting the importance of addressing these skills in the context of clinical intervention with neglected children.

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Introduction

Considerable recent attention has been directed toward understanding the development of emotion management skills and the importance of these skills to children's psychosocial functioning (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Parke, Cassidy, Burks, Carson, & Boyum, 1992; Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). Research in this area has focused primarily on skills within three emotion management categories: (a) encoding and decoding of emotions, which involves the ability to recognize emotional expressions of others and to produce clear, appropriate emotional displays; (b) emotional understanding, which involves understanding the causes and consequences of emotional expression as well as appropriate responses to emotional displays of others; and (c) emotion regulation, which involves the ability to regulate emotional expression and emotional experience. According to functionalist theory (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Saarni et al., 1998), these skills are fundamental to emotional competence because they enable children to apply their knowledge about emotion strategically when responding to emotionally arousing situations, facilitating their adaptation to the social environment. As such, deficits in emotion management skills may place children at risk for other adaptational failures in development (e.g., poor peer relations, psychopathology). Consistent with these theoretical tenets, skills within these emotion management categories have been demonstrated to relate to social competence and psychological health (Cook, Greenberg, & Kusche, 1994; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001; Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Aber, 1995; Shipman, Schneider, & Brown, 2004).

Few studies have examined the development of emotion management skills in children whose life experiences disrupt the normal course of emotional development. In particular, within the child neglect literature (see Erickson & Egeland for review, 1996), researchers have focused on the psychosocial outcomes of neglect (e.g., psychopathology, poor peer relations), with little attention to the developmental processes that may underlie these outcomes. This is surprising given that research suggests that children who experience neglect are at risk for psychosocial difficulties characterized by emotion dysregulation. In particular, research indicates that neglected children are at risk for internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems (e.g., depression, aggressive behavior) and peer rejection (Erickson & Egeland, 1996; Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989; Gaudin, Polansky, & Kilpatrick, 1993). Further, neglectful parents lack a number of characteristics thought to be important to the development of emotion management skills. In particular, neglectful mothers provide less support and acknowledgement of their children, show lower levels of emotional expression in the parent-child relationship, and provide little exchange of emotional information (Aragona & Eyeberg, 1981; Bousha & Twentyman, 1984; Gaudin, Polansky, & Kilpatrick, 1996). In addition, related research investigating physical and sexual abuse has demonstrated that maltreating parents socialize emotion management skills differently than nonmaltreating parents (e.g., provide less support in response to children's emotion, engage in less emotion-related discussion) and that maltreated children show deficits in skills across all three emotion management categories (Camras, Sachs-Alter, & Ribordy, 1996; Shipman & Zeman, 1999, 2001; Shipman, Zeman, Penza, & Champion, 2000). Increased understanding of the impact of neglect on emotional development is essential given that neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment, with 552,000 children estimated to experience neglect each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).

Taken together, this research suggests that neglected children are at risk for psychosocial difficulties characterized by emotion dysregulation and that they develop in a context that is likely to interfere with competent emotional development. To date, however, little research has examined the ways in which neglect may interfere with normative emotional development. Research in this area will help identify

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