



Modeling maternal emotion-related socialization behaviors in a low-income sample: Relations with toddlers' self-regulation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 April 2011

Received in revised form

17 November 2011

Accepted 27 November 2011

Keywords:

Emotion-related socialization behaviors

Early Head Start

Toddlers

Self-regulation

ABSTRACT

This study tested the validity of an emotion-related parenting construct, indicated by six key emotion-related socialization behaviors (ERSBs) occurring in daily, developmentally salient parenting in a low-income sample of mothers ($N = 123$) of toddlers, and examined the relationship between the ERSB construct and toddlers' self-regulation. Structural equation modeling confirmed a latent emotion-related parenting construct, indicated by observed maternal warmth and supportiveness, observed emotional responsiveness in the home, maternal report of mealtime socialization practices, observed maternal use of mental state language and emotion talk, and maternal report of positive self-expressivity in the family. Emotion-related parenting significantly related to toddlers' effective coping and delay of gratification (medium effect sizes). Maternal demographic risk was negatively related to emotion-related parenting (large effect size) but positively related to toddlers' effective coping (medium effect size); toddler age and gender were not significantly related to ERSBs. Results suggest that maternal ERSBs are cohesive in a low-income population, reflecting emotion-related parenting, and play a role in economically at-risk toddlers' self-regulation. Implications for parenting and family support programs as well as implications for future research are discussed.

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Existing heuristic models of parents' emotion-related socialization behaviors (ERSBs), most notably the seminal model put forth by Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spinrad (1998), posit that specific components of social interactions with parents play major roles in structuring children's social-emotional development, including self-regulation. Such models have proven useful in understanding the ways in which early environments can support early social-emotional development. Yet, these conceptual models have rarely been tested empirically, particularly among low-income populations. This lack of research leaves questions as to whether or not multiple ERSBs are present in parenting in low-income populations and how their effects on children's self-regulation are similar to or different from those found in middle-income and upper-income populations.

1. Defining ERSBs

ERSBs refer to a range of parenting characteristics and behaviors that are particularly salient to children's social-emotional

development. Broadly speaking, ERSBs include characteristics and behaviors such as maternal positive emotional expressivity, support of children's self-regulation attempts (which can be structured either verbally or nonverbally) and emotion discourse between parent and child. Much research to date has examined ERSBs as they relate to strength-based, competent outcomes, including attachment (Laranjo, Bernier, & Meins, 2008; Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001), aspects of children's theory of mind (Meins et al., 2002), emotion understanding (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Warren & Stifter, 2008), and emotional expressiveness (Sallquist et al., 2010; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). However, an emerging body of the literature has examined ERSBs as they relate to self-regulation. For example, in a recent review, Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parish, and Stegall (2006) described relationships between key ERSBs, including parental positive emotion expressivity and emotion talk, and children's regulatory development.

2. Defining self regulation

Self-regulation refers to a variety of skills related to self-management of emotions, responses, and behaviors (McCabe, Cunnington, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). There are several phases of self-regulatory development in toddlers. Skills such as coping effectively with internal and environmental stimuli allow the child

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to engage in intentional, goal-directed behaviors, involving the kind of impulse control that is present in delaying gratification (Kopp, 1982). Here, we examined two self-regulation outcomes reflecting competence in toddlers' everyday experiences: coping effectiveness in sensorimotor organization, which reflected regulation of internal and external stimuli (e.g., regulation of sensory stimuli through adaptive responses and purposeful use of sensory and motor systems) (Zeitlin, Williamson, & Szczepanski, 1988), and delay of gratification, which represented the ability to manage emotions to achieve a goal. Self-regulation is considered to be a key protective factor for children, particularly for children with multiple environmental and economic risk factors (Lengua, 2002). Effective self-regulation has been shown to contribute to young children's positive adjustment (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Lengua, 2002), preschoolers' social competence (Diener & Kim, 2003), school readiness (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010), and achievement (Howse, Lange, Farran, & Boyles, 2003).

3. Relevance of ERSBs to self-regulation and gaps in the literature

Because ERSBs are a critical part of the underpinnings of early social-emotional development and are a likely entrée for intervention methods in families with very young children, it is critical that the significant gaps in the existing work be addressed. First, most research related to ERSBs has been carried out with children of preschool age or older children, despite the fact that social-emotional development in the toddler period appears to be exceptionally malleable in response to environmental differences (Raffaelli, Crockett, & Shen, 2005). Second, we know little about the occurrence of ERSBs and how they relate to child outcomes in low-income populations. A wealth of the literature suggests that children from low-income families are at higher risk for problems with self-regulatory skills (Morris & Gennetian, 2003; Raikes, Robinson, Bradley, Raikes, & Ayoub, 2007), and that parent-child interactions are less positive than in higher-income families (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000). Other research has shown that low-income preschoolers demonstrate emotion-regulation skills comparable to their more economically advantaged peers (Garner & Spears, 2000). As we discuss later, parenting practices, too, vary widely within low-income samples, with many parents engaging in emotionally supportive parenting (Whiteside-Mansell, Pope, & Bradley, 1996). To explore multiple ERSBs and their effects on self-regulation, a modeling approach that tests a multi-dimensional operationalization of an ERSB construct is needed. In this study, we addressed all three issues: we studied toddlers, in very low-income families, and used structural equation modeling to examine multiple maternal ERSBs as they related to toddlers' self regulation.

4. ERSB components

As noted by Eisenberg et al. (1998), a wide variety of parental ERSBs exist. Over the past decade, an impressive body of work has emerged examining various ERSB components, including positive parental expressivity (Valiente, Fabes, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2004; Valiente, Eisenberg, et al., 2004; Valiente, Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Reiser, 2006), supporting self-regulation efforts (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, & Cohen, 2009; Cole, Teti, & Zahn-Waxler, 2003), emotional supportiveness (Warren & Stifter, 2008), and use of mental state language and emotion talk (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Jones & Garner, 1998; Warren & Stifter, 2008) as they relate to children's outcomes. Further, Baker, Fenning, and Crnic (2011) have suggested that, as a collection, ERSBs reflect a cohesive construct. In the only study

we know of to formally test an ERSB construct, Baker et al. (2011) examined three ERSBs (parental reactions to children's emotions, family emotional expressiveness, and parental emotion coaching) in a structural model. For mothers, they found that reactions to emotions and positive emotional expressiveness were significant indicators of an emotion-related parenting latent construct.

As described, a variety of ERSBs exist across the literature. In the current study, we offer one example of an ERSB construct. We included exemplars of ERSBs that represent emotional and cognitive support for toddlers' developing self-regulation. These ERSBs are thought to be imbedded in the parent-child interactions that occur in daily life, focusing on maternal warmth, emotional supportiveness, emotional responsivity, maternal use of mental state language and emotion talk, and positive self-expressivity in the home. We selected these variables because they represented multiple aspects of parenting across a variety of contexts (teaching tasks, mealtime, book sharing) salient to the everyday experiences of toddlers, and, therefore, increased the ecological validity of the putative ERSB construct. We first begin by reviewing the literature on emotion-related parenting in low-income samples, and then address each ERSB component that we hypothesized would form a latent ERSB construct in our study.

5. ERSBs in a low-income population

Virtually all of the research on parental emotion-related socialization behaviors, to date, has focused on middle-income families (Evans & English, 2002; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007; Morris & Gennetian, 2003; Raikes et al., 2007). There is a startling paucity of research on the patterns of ERSBs in low-income families with toddlers. This gap is underscored by the fact that outcomes for children raised in poverty are more often problematic than for middle-class children. However, it is also likely that there is great variability in the trajectories these children follow and in the patterns of resilience they may show. A more nuanced examination of parenting characteristics allows us to delineate these pathways toward resilience. Generally, the literature suggests that low-income parents are more likely to use punitive parenting techniques than are middle-income parents (Pinderhouse, Dodge, Zelli, Bates, & Pettit, 2000). However, in our own work (Brophy-Herb, Schiffman, et al., 2011; Brophy-Herb, Zajicek-Farber, McKelvey, Bocknek, & Stansbury, under review), as well as in others' research (Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994; Garner & Spears, 2000; Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, Owen, Randolph, & Cauce, 2003), results demonstrate a more positive view of low-income families. Many of these parents are engaging in supportive, emotion-related socialization behaviors, signaling significant variation in parenting among low-income populations.

The existing work on ERSBs in low-income populations has primarily been conducted by Garner, whose work has focused on low-income mothers' emotion-socialization efforts with their preschoolers (Garner, 2006; Garner et al., 1994), emotion talk between preschoolers and their low-income parents (Garner, Dunsmore, & Southam-Gerrow, 2008), and emotion expression in preschoolers (Garner, Jones, Gaddy, & Rennie, 1997). Garner et al. (1994) found, for example, that low-income mothers' emotion-socialization practices, particularly positive emotion expression, were related to their preschoolers' more optimal regulation of anger and sadness. Likewise, low-income mothers' conversations about emotions with their preschoolers were associated with the preschoolers' emotion-regulation (Garner, 2006) and their emotion knowledge and role-taking abilities (Garner et al., 1997). Collectively, these studies provide important evidence linking emotion talk and low-income mothers' positive responses to children's emotions with preschoolers' regulatory skills, specifically their

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