

Infant Emotion Regulation with Mothers and Fathers

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This study was designed to examine infant emotion regulation within mildly frustrating delay situations with mothers and fathers. Contextual influences on, and consistent individual differences in, observed strategy use and expressed emotion were assessed in a sample of 12½-to 14-month-old infants, each seen on two occasions, once with each parent. Infants were seen in two delay situations with each parent, one in which the parent was asked to remain fairly inactive, and one in which no restrictions were placed on parental behavior. Results suggested strong contextual (parent-passive vs. parent-active) influences on the level of expressed negative versus positive emotion, and on the types of emotion regulation strategies used by infants, but few sex-of-parent effects. Overall, results suggest that expressed emotion and strategy use are more similar than different in interactions with mothers and fathers. However, some differential use of particular emotion regulation strategies may reflect developing adaptations made by infants to different characteristics of relationships with mothers and fathers.

free play cross-parent attachment emotion regulation
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Over the past several years, the importance of emotion regulation has gained recognition in the literature on early socioemotional development (Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Fox, 1994; Kopp, 1989). It has been suggested that early emotion regulation may be influenced by qualitative aspects of infant-caregiver interactions (e.g. Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Cassidy, 1994; Tronick, 1989). To date, however, research has focused exclusively on emotion and emotion regulation in infant-mother interactions. The purpose of this article is to expand this focus by exploring the similarities and differences in infant strategy use and expressed emotion in differing contexts with both mothers and fathers.

Within the literature on early emotional development, the primary focus has been on developmental trends and individual differences in emotional expression. Emotion regulation researchers have expanded this focus by examining the behavioral strategies used to regulate

emotion, as well as the associations between expressed emotion and strategy use (e.g., Braungart & Stifter, 1991; Eisenberg & Faber, 1992; Gianino & Tronick, 1988; Grolnick, Bridges, & Connell, 1996; Stifter & Braungart, 1995). Braungart and Stifter, for example, found that distressed 12-month-olds tended to orient toward objects during reunion episodes of the Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) strange situation, rather than orienting toward their mothers, exploring toys, or self-soothing. They theorized that temporarily focusing attention away from the source of distress (mother) to more neutral objects aided in reducing negative arousal.

Other researchers have begun to examine the role that psychological context plays in emotion regulation (e.g., Grolnick et al., 1996). A systematic focus on contexts is consistent with the functionalist perspective on emotion (J. J. Campos, R. G. Campos, & Barrett, 1989; J. J. Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & R. G. Campos, 1994), and with a more general trend among developmental researchers exploring diverse issues ranging from cultural influences on cognition (Gauvain, 1995) to stress and coping in childhood (e.g., Bridges & Grolnick, 1995; Weisz & Dennig, 1993).

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Despite increasing awareness of the importance of context, however, there are few published reports that directly examine the influence of variations in psychological context on the organization of infant emotion and behavior. In one recent study involving assessments of 24-month-olds and their mothers, Grolnick et al. (1996) reported strong context influences on emotion regulation strategies across four mildly to moderately stressful contexts—two separations from the mother and two frustrating delays with the mother present. They reported that play or active engagement with the environment was most common in situations where an adult was available to interact with the child, whereas comfort-seeking behavior was most common in a delay situation in which the mother was uninvolved with the toddler.

Recognition of the important role that fathers may play in children's emotional development has increased in recent years (e.g., Bridges, Connell, & Belsky, 1988; MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Parke, 1996). Little research exists, however, on emotion regulation in infant-father interactions. In one relevant study, Bridges and Connell (1991) examined cross-parent consistencies in infant emotion and behavior in two contexts: a free play and the strange situation. The behaviors examined were attachment-relevant social interactive behaviors described by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978)—proximity- and contact-seeking, contact maintaining, playful distance interaction, resistance, and avoidance. All of these may be seen as strategies for regulating emotion, although this perspective has appeared infrequently in the research literature. Cross-parent consistency in emotion was found for the stressful strange situation episodes, but not for free play. Cross-parent consistency was also found in some social interactive behaviors, most notably, contact-seeking and maintaining during the strange situation.

This study was designed to expand the literature on early emotion regulation by examining consistencies and inconsistencies in expressed emotion and strategy use across contexts with mothers and fathers. The contexts used in this study were two delay situations during which the infant was required to wait to obtain an attractive object. The primary contextual variation was the extent to which the parent actively

interacted with the infant. During one delay, the parent was told to interact freely, but in the other delay, the parent was asked to work on a set of questionnaires. Such a task requires the parent to focus most of his or her attention away from the infant's ongoing activities.

Our first set of hypotheses involved differences in infant emotion and strategy use across parents and across contexts. It was expected that there would be context effects on the level of negative emotion exhibited by infants. Specifically, infants were expected to exhibit more distress during delays in which the parent was preoccupied (and therefore unavailable to support the infant's emotion regulation efforts) than during delays in which the parent was free to interact. Furthermore, we expected that there would be context influences on strategy use. Based on the Grolnick et al.'s (1996) findings, strategies involving active engagement with some aspect of the environment (other than the delay object) were expected to be more prevalent when the parent was interactive than when the parent was preoccupied, whereas the opposite was expected to hold for other behaviors, such as seeking comfort or caregiving.

Bridges and Connell (1991) did not find differences in the mean levels of emotion expressed with mothers and fathers in the strange situation, and few differences in behaviors. No previous studies have included both mothers and fathers in contexts such as were used in this study, however, and no studies examining infant behavior with both parents have focused on behavioral strategies for emotion regulation. Therefore, mother versus father presence was included in all analyses examining context effects on infant emotion and strategy use, although no specific hypotheses were made.

A second set of hypotheses involved consistencies in individual differences in expressed emotion and strategy use cross-context and cross-parent. Despite possible mean-level differences across the two different contexts, we expected that infants who were relatively more negative in one context would be relatively more negative in the other context as well, and that strategy use would also show cross-context consistency. Such consistency has been reported previously for older toddlers (Grolnick et al., 1996). Although similar contexts have not been used in investigations of infant emotion regula-

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