



Emotion regulation strategy use in children and adolescents: The explanatory roles of personality and attachment

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ABSTRACT

Emotion Regulation (ER) is a fundamental aspect of healthy psychological functioning. A sample of 682 children and adolescents aged between 10 and 18 years, participated in this study, which examined the roles of the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality and parental attachment in the use of the ER strategies of Reappraisal and Suppression. Higher scores on Extraversion and Openness predicted more Reappraisal use, while higher scores on all FFM variables predicted less Suppression use, with the exception of Neuroticism which was positively related to Suppression use. Regarding attachment, higher Communication predicted more Reappraisal and less Suppression use while higher Alienation predicted less Reappraisal and more Suppression use. The current findings contribute to our understanding of factors underlying the use of specific ER strategies.

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1. Introduction

Functional regulation of emotions is of considerable importance for the etiology, expression, and course of psychological disorders (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994; Gross & Munoz, 1995; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). In contrast, poor Emotion Regulation (ER) is implicated in more than half of the axis I, and all of the axis II disorders, included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Gross & Levenson, 1993). Despite this, there is a paucity of research examining ER during the later childhood and adolescent years with most research being focussed on the periods of infancy, early childhood, or adulthood (Gross, 1998; Thompson, 1994). Given that adolescence represents one of the peak risk periods for the development of psychopathology (Betts, Gullone, & Allen, 2009; Lewinsohn, Joiner, & Rohde, 2001), further examination of ER during this period is warranted.

ER involves extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for managing one's emotions toward goal accomplishment (Thompson, 1994) and include the manipulation of both positive and negative emotions. Processes aimed not only at reducing the intensity and frequency of an emotional response, but also at generating and sustaining an emotional response (Cole et al., 1994).

The few studies that have examined ER during late childhood and adolescence have not been based on a sound theoretical framework, with few exceptions (e.g. Gullone, Hughes, King, &

Tonge, 2010). Gross (1998) process-oriented model is of relevance as it provides a detailed framework through which to conceptualise ER.

This model proposes that the generation of emotions occurs over time, thus ER strategies can be categorised on the basis of their temporal location along the emotion generative process. At the broadest level, strategies are classified as *antecedent-focussed* referring to those strategies that are employed before an emotional response has become fully activated, or *response-focussed*, referring to those adopted after an emotional response has already been generated.

Two ER strategies have been operationalised among the many proposed in the model. They are *Cognitive Reappraisal* (CR), an antecedent-focused strategy which involves reinterpreting an emotion eliciting event in order to change its emotional impact and *Expressive Suppression* (ES) which is a response-focused strategy that involves actively inhibiting the observable expression of emotional experience (Gross & Thompson, 2007). These two strategies have been related to various psychological outcomes.

Noting that there may be situations where these findings do not apply, studies among young adults have found CR to be a healthy, adaptive strategy while ES has been found to be predictive of poorer mental health (John & Gross, 2004). Reappraisers, for example are more likely to deal with stressful situations by reinterpreting the situation proactively. They consequently experienced and expressed more positive affect and less negative affect, and reported greater self-esteem and life satisfaction compared to infrequent users of CR (Gross & John, 2003). In contrast, suppressors expressed less positive affect and less negative affect compared

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to non-suppressors. Importantly, they *experienced* more negative affect and less positive affect, and reported lower self-esteem and life satisfaction compared to individuals who rarely use ES (Gross & John, 2003).

Regarding gender and age differences in use of CR and ES, research has consistently found that males report greater use of ES than females, while CR has not been found to differ by gender (Flynn, Hollenstein, & Mackey, 2010; Gross & John, 2003; Gullone et al., 2010). Regarding age differences, in a sample of 9–15 year olds, Gullone et al. (2010) found that older children reported less use of both CR and ES than younger children.

This study is concerned with examining the individual differences and interpersonal correlates that are associated with ER strategy use during the childhood and adolescent years. Such understanding has important implications for an individual's affective experiences and interpersonal functioning. Two constructs that are of particular importance for the development of ER include personality and attachment (Cassidy, 1994; John & Gross, 2004; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002).

Of note, efforts to regulate one's emotions early in life have been proposed to be influenced by individual differences in temperament (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). In a study of 9–12 year old children, Jaffe, Gullone, and Hughes (2010) found temperamental-based dimensions to be associated with the use of CR and ES. Specifically, children with a lower tendency to experience positive mood and to respond flexibly to changes in their environment were more likely to use the ES strategy to regulate their emotions. A weaker tendency to approach novel objects, persons, or situations, predicted ES use while a stronger tendency predicted CR use (Jaffe et al., 2010).

Temperamental tendencies predict the development of distinct personality traits (Caspi, 1998). Of relevance, the FFM of personality provides a comprehensive representation of personality structure (Graziano & Ward, 1992) and several authors have reported associations between the FFM traits and specific ER strategies (Hasking et al., 2010; John & Gross, 2004; Wang, Shi, & Li, 2009). In young adults, Extraversion has been associated with greater ES use, and lower levels of Neuroticism with greater CR use (Gross & John, 2003; Wang et al., 2009). Wang et al. (2009) reported a positive relationship between Extraversion and CR. Less Extraverted individuals are more likely to feel self-conscious in social situations and consequently may use ES to distance themselves from potential rejection. In contrast, individuals higher in Extraversion, and lower in Neuroticism, are less likely to feel overwhelmed by negative affect, affording them greater opportunity to reappraise a stressful situation (Gross & John, 2003).

A recent study carried out by Hasking et al. (2010) with adolescents investigated the importance of the FFM traits and ER for self-injury. They found small to moderate relationships between all of the five FFM traits and ER strategies, with the exception of Neuroticism. These traits were positively related to CR and negatively related to ES. Importantly, Hasking et al. (2010) found these relationships to be larger for adolescents compared to those reported in previous research with adult samples.

While intrinsic factors such as personality undoubtedly influence ER strategy use, extrinsic factors also play an important role (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). An important extrinsic factor is the parent–child attachment bond (Bowlby, 1969; Calkins & Hill, 2007). According to attachment theorists, an infant's expression and ER develop from the strategies used to maintain the attachment relationship (Bretherton, 1985; Cassidy, 1994).

Securely attached children develop the expectation that their emotion signals will be attended to sensitively and predictably. Consequently, they openly express their emotions and are able to manage them flexibly depending upon their environment (Cassidy, 1994). In contrast, insecurely attached infants develop expectations

that their emotion signals will only be attended to selectively or unpredictably. Consequently, they show impairment in affective communication and are likely to develop maladaptive ER strategies such as minimisation or exaggeration (Cassidy, 1994).

Previous research examined the relationship between ER and the quality of attachment in an adolescent sample (Biasecker, 2001). Based on the Inventory for Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenburg, 1987), it was demonstrated that higher levels of Trust and Communication, and lower levels of Alienation predicted the use of more adaptive ER, while lower levels of Trust and Communication, and higher levels of Alienation, predicted the use of maladaptive ER (Biasecker, 2001).

The aim of the current study was to examine the predictive roles of the FFM personality traits and the quality of attachment for the use of CR and ES in late childhood and adolescence. Following examination of gender and age differences, we tested the hypotheses that:

- Higher levels of Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, and lower levels of Neuroticism would predict greater use of CR, while lower levels of Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness would predict greater use of ES.
- Higher levels of Trust and Communication, and lower levels of Alienation, would predict greater use of CR, while lower levels of Trust and Communication, and higher levels of Alienation would predict greater use of ES.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 306 males and 376 females aged between 10 and 18 years ($M = 13.56$ years, $SD = 2.30$), who were drawn from the sample of a larger longitudinal study (Gullone et al., 2010). Participants were recruited either through their respective schools in Victoria, Australia, or through having previously participated in the longitudinal study. The sample was broken down into three age-groups (1. 268 10–12 years; 2. 232 13–15 years; 3. 182 16–18 years), for examination of developmental differences.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotion regulation

A revised version of the 10-item *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (Gross & John, 2003) was used to assess the use of two ER strategies; Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression. The ERQ for Children and Adolescents (ERQ-CA) was used to optimise completion by children and adolescents (Gullone & Taffe, in press). The items are responded to on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Gullone and Taffe (in press) reported good internal consistency for the ERQ-CA strategies (i.e. CR scale: alpha coefficients ranged from .82 to .86; ES scale, the alpha coefficients ranged from .69 to .79. Sound convergent and construct validity for the ERQ-CA was also reported (Gullone, in press).

2.2.2. Personality

The traits of the FFM of Personality were assessed with the *Big-Five Questionnaire for Children* (BFQ-C; Barbaranelli, Caprara, Rabasca, & Pastorelli, 2003), a 65-item self-report measure for children. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from “almost never” to “almost always”. In the current study minor revisions in item wording were made to the BFQ-C to enhance comprehension by an Australian sample (e.g. “I have a great deal of fantasy” was changed to “I

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