

Parental Responses to Negative Emotions and Child Externalizing Behavior: Different Relations for 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds



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Purpose

Parental responses to children's anger, sadness, and fear are powerful methods of emotion socialization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Greater supportive responses that are accepting of children's displays of distress and fewer nonsupportive responses that discourage children's displays have been associated with an array of positive social and emotional outcomes (e.g., Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001). Because most of this work has focused on preschool-aged children, little is known about parents' responses to older children and how the effect of these responses may change as parents demand increasing maturity from children over time.

The current study addresses this question by exploring differences across time in associations between mothers' supportive and nonsupportive responses to negative emotions and children's externalizing behavior problems among 5-year-olds, 6-year-olds, and 7-year-olds.

Participants & Procedure

Participants included 190 children ($M = 77.64\text{mo}$, $SD = 9.48\text{mo}$) and their mothers primarily recruited through letters sent home by kindergarten and first-grade teachers in a metropolitan public school district in the Southwestern U.S.

- 61 five-year-olds, 74 six-year-olds, and 50 seven-year-olds
- 50% female children
- 56% European American, 15% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 21% were of mixed or other ethnicities.
- Income-to-Needs Ratio: 36% of families were considered low-income (ratios < 2), 52% middle-income (ratios 2 - 5), and 12% high-income (ratios > 5).

In year 1, mothers and children visited the university laboratory for approximately one hour. Mothers reported on family demographics, their responses to their child's negative emotions, and child behavior problems. One year later, 163 mothers (86% retention) completed the same questionnaire measures using an online survey.

Measures

Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES; Fabes, Eisenberg, & Bernzweig, 1990)

Mothers reported on their responses to their child's negative emotions in 12 hypothetical situations using the CCNES (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). The measure yields 6 subscales. The expressive encouragement, emotion-focused, and problem-focused subscales were combined to create a supportive responses composite. The punitive and minimizing subscales were used to create a nonsupportive responses composite; distress reactions were excluded due to low internal reliability.

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991)

Mothers reported on how well a range of behaviors describes their child using the CBCL (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat or sometimes true*, 2 = *very true or often true*). The raw externalizing behavior score, a sum of 33 aggression and delinquency items, was used in the current analyses.

Results

Descriptive analyses showed that mothers were significantly less supportive and children displayed fewer externalizing problems over time (see Table 1).

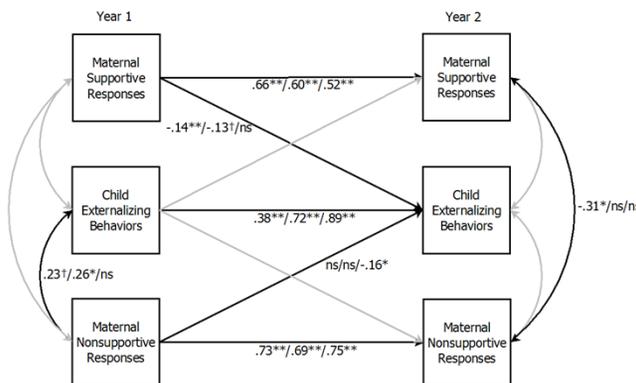
We used path analysis with child age as a grouping variable in Mplus v7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012) to test whether parent responses and child behavior problems were predictive of each other at year 2 while accounting for the stability of these behaviors over time, as well as child gender, child ethnicity, and maternal education. The model, shown in Figure 1, had good fit to the data, $\chi^2(51) = 54.979$, $p = .326$, RMSEA = .036 (90% C.I. = .000-.091); CFI = .988; TLI = .976.

Among the 5-year-olds, more supportive responses at year 1 were related to fewer child externalizing problems at year 2. Among the 6-year-olds, supportive responses at year 1 were only marginally associated with fewer externalizing problems at year 2. Among the 7-year-olds, supportive responses were not a significant predictor, and instead, more nonsupportive responses at year 1 were related to fewer child externalizing problems at year 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Information and Comparisons across Time.

	Year 1		Year 2		t
	M (SD)	α	M (SD)	α	
Maternal Supportive Responses	5.59 (.65)	.88	5.49 (.74)	.91	2.02*
Maternal Nonsupportive Responses	2.44 (.73)	.85	2.45 (.81)	.88	-.19
Child Externalizing Behavior	10.59 (7.23)	.88	8.22 (6.17)	.86	5.72**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.



* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Figure 1. Longitudinal path model examining cross-lagged effects between maternal responses and child externalizing behaviors. The model controls for child gender, child ethnicity, and maternal education on the year 2 variables. Gray lines indicate nonsignificant paths. Black lines indicate significance in at least one of the three age groups. The first coefficient corresponds to the 5-year-old model, the second to the 6-year-old model, and the third to the 7-year-old model.

Conclusions

Together the results show that encouraging and attending to children's distress at a younger age was related to fewer externalizing behavior problems one year later, consistent with past research on the social-emotional benefits of more supportive parental responses to children's negative emotions (Fabes et al., 2001). Mothers' supportive responses had a significant effect on children's externalizing problems among 5-year-olds and a marginal effect among 6-year-olds. However, discouraging the display of negative emotion in the form of more nonsupportive responses by mothers was related to decreases in children's externalizing behavior problems among the 7-year-old children. These findings suggest there may be a developmental shift in mothers' responses to children's negative emotions where supportive responses are less influential and nonsupportive responses may actually facilitate emotional and behavioral regulation as children move from the preschool years into middle childhood.

Limitations & Future Directions

There are some noteworthy limitations to the current study. First, we have inferred developmental changes from the differences observed between the three groups of children, but it is possible that some of these differences may be due to cohort effects. A study that follows the same children over a longer time frame from the preschool years into middle childhood may produce different results than those shown here. Second, only mothers' reports of their responses to children's negative emotions were available. Although mothers tend to be primarily responsible for caregiving and the emotional climate in the home (Erickson, 2005; Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008), children also receive emotion socialization messages from fathers, teachers, peers, and siblings. Future research should examine whether these alternative messages, and the developmental differences in these messages over time, are consistent or inconsistent with mothers' responses, and whether they independently or interactively contribute to changes in children's social behaviors over time.

Overall, the developmental shift suggested by these results has yet to be explored in the emotion socialization literature. Future research should further examine these processes and explore the potential role of parent and child gender, temperament, and emotion regulation.

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