

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Emotion Expression, Emotionality, Depressive Symptoms, and Stress: Maternal Profiles Related to Child Outcomes

Hooper, E., Feng, X., Christian, L., & Slesnick, N. (2015). Emotion expression, emotionality, depressive symptoms, and stress: Maternal profiles related to child outcomes. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 43(7), 1319-1331. doi:10.1007/s10802-015-0019-6

SUMMARY: Mothers' emotional characteristics play an important role in children's emotion socialization and behaviors. By observing mother-child interactions and administering surveys, the study examined the association between maternal characteristics and child outcomes. Results revealed that higher levels of maternal emotion expression, and lower levels of negative emotionality, stress, and depressive symptoms, were associated with optimal child functioning.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Four maternal emotional profiles were identified: happy (52%), melancholic (21%), stressed (13%), and struggling (14%); the classifications were based on observed emotion expression, reported positive and negative emotionality, depressive symptoms, and parenting stress.
- The melancholic and struggling profiles were negatively correlated with children's emotion expression.
- The stressed and struggling profiles were associated with more child problem behaviors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate military parents on how to regulate their emotions and be responsive to children's emotions
- Participate in professional trainings to learn more about the prevention of problem behaviors in preschoolers

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for military parents who experience depressive symptoms and stress
- Develop workshops for military parents to foster positive emotion expression toward their children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness of the importance of positive parenting on military children's well-being
- Continue to support parent education programs aimed at promoting optimal parenting practices in military families

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METHODS

- Data for the study came from a larger longitudinal project regarding maternal depression and child emotional development.
- Mothers' and children's emotion expressions were observed in two interactive tasks (five minutes each).
- Self-report surveys measured maternal emotionality, maternal depressive symptoms, maternal stress, and child emotional and behavioral behaviors.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 128 mother-child pairs with 65 female children and 63 male children.
- The average age of the mothers was 31.21 years (SD = 5.58), and the average age of the children were 3.32 years (SD = 0.19); all the children were between 3 and 3.5 years old.
- The majority of the mothers were White (63%) or Black (30%).

LIMITATIONS

- Some of the mothers in the study were clinically depressive and anxious, so their results may not be generalized to mothers with no mental health symptoms.
- The two interactive tasks were carried out in the laboratory, therefore mothers' negative emotion expressions may be suppressed due to social desirability bias.
- The cross-sectional design of the study limited the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the maternal profiles and child outcomes.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the associations between paternal emotion expression and child outcomes
- Observe parent-child interactions in the home or naturalistic environment
- Measure child problem behaviors from both parents' and daycare teachers' perspectives

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