

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## The Influence of Mother-Child Emotion Regulation Strategies on Children's Expression of Anger and Sadness

Morris, A. S., Silk, J. S., Morris, M. D., Steinberg, L., Aucoin, K. J., & Keyes, A. W. (2011). The influence of mother-child emotion regulation strategies on children's expression of anger and sadness. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(1), 213. doi:10.1037/a0021021

**SUMMARY:** Parents play an important role in helping children regulate their emotions. By observing mothers and children interacting when the children were disappointed, researchers examined the relation between maternal use of emotion regulation strategies and children's expression of negative emotions. Results revealed that certain maternal strategies were useful in the socialization of children's negative emotions.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Mothers' use of attention refocusing (i.e., shift the child's attention away from the emotion-provoking stimulus) was related to less anger and sadness expression by children.
- The joint mother-child cognitive reframing (i.e., interpret the situation differently so that it's no longer negative) can also help children manage the expression of negative emotions.
- Maternal attention refocusing was more useful for younger children, and reframing was more effective for older children.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate military parents on strategies to cope with children's sadness and anger
- Participate in professional trainings to learn more about emotion regulation strategies that can be used by parents, and how it is relevant in the military context

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop workshops for military parents to foster effective emotion regulation strategies with their children
- Offer support groups for military parents to promote communication and peer support

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support parent education programs aimed at promoting optimal parenting practices in military families
- Promote additional research on parental emotion regulation strategies, especially in military families

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited from public elementary schools and daycares via newspaper ads and flyers.
- Data were collected during home visits through questionnaires and a three-minute observational task; in the observational task, children were intentionally disappointed in the presence of the mother.
- Children's anger and sadness intensity and mothers' emotion regulation strategy attempts were coded during the observational task.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 153 mother-child pairs with 67 female and 86 male children.
- The children were in preschool, first grade, or second grade; the average age of the children was 6.17 years.
- Most of the children were Black (48%), followed by White (43%), Latino (3%), and other (5%).

## LIMITATIONS

- The disappointment induction task used in the study was only mildly stressful for most children according to the authors, so it is not clear whether the mothers' emotion regulation attempts and the children's responses would be different in more stressful situation.
- The observational task was only three minutes long, so it may be hard to capture all the strategies mothers could use in real life.
- The cross-sectional design of the study limited the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the parent-child effects.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the associations between fathers' use of emotion regulation strategies and children's expression of negative emotions
- Increase the number and length of the observational tasks so that the results are more comprehensive
- Explore how other parent emotion regulation strategies (e.g., acceptance of emotions) reduce children's negative emotions

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