

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Child Regulation of Negative Emotions and Depressive Symptoms: The Moderating Role of Parental Emotion Socialization

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SUMMARY: Parent responses to children's emotional expressions play a large role in the way that children learn to regulate and cope with emotions. Families in the current study reported on child emotion regulation and depressive symptoms and parent responses to child expression of anger and sadness. Results suggest that unsupportive parental responses (e.g., dismissing, invalidating) to sadness and anger are associated with child emotion dysregulation and poor coping, as well as greater depressive symptoms.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Unsupportive responses to children's emotions of sadness and anger by both mothers and fathers was associated with greater child emotion dysregulation.
- Unsupportive responses to sadness by mothers and to anger by fathers, but not vice versa, were associated with increased child depressive symptoms.
- For children whose parents were unsupportive of expressions of anger or sadness, high levels of emotion dysregulation and poor coping were associated with greater depressive symptoms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Attend trainings about parenting in military families to better understand parenting within the military culture and how it may impact military parents' responses to child emotional expression
- Collaborate with programs for military families to promote parent education on youth emotion socialization for all families

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military parents about how their responses to their child's emotions may impact emotion regulation and about positive ways to respond to child emotional expression
- Offer workshops for military children on healthy emotion regulation skills and coping

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote the development of education programs for military parents on youth emotional development and socialization
- Recommend education for professionals working with military families about normative emotional expression in military families

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METHODS

- Families with elementary school children in a Southeastern U.S. city were recruited via letters.
- Children completed questionnaires about depressive symptoms and their parents' responses to emotions; parents completed questionnaires regarding their child's emotions and coping.
- Associations between unsupportive parent emotional responses, gender, children's anger and sadness dysregulation and coping, and children's depressive symptoms were examined.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participant families included 84 elementary school children, who were 57% male, had an average age of 10.1 years (SD = 1.00), and had two parents in the home.
- Children identified as primarily White (84%), Black (6%), or Asian-American (2%), and parents identified as primarily White (86%), Black (6%), or Latino (3%).
- Parents were biological (92%), adoptive (4%), or step- (4%) parents of the child participant.

LIMITATIONS

- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, the direction of the associations cannot be determined.
- Researchers combined several subscales of parent responses to child emotion into a single variable measuring unsupportive parenting responses, which may have over-simplified findings.
- Only two-parent families were recruited, and results may not generalize to families with other structures, such as single-parent families.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Continue to examine parent responses to child expression of other negative emotions (e.g., jealousy, guilt) and the impact on child emotion regulation and coping
- Conduct a similar prospective longitudinal study to explore the direction of effects
- Examine the effect of parent support of emotional expression in adolescence as risk for depression increases among youth during this period

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