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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated how transfer from marital conflict affects parents' ability to regulate their children's negative affect displays and how these parent responses impact their children's academic and social adjustment. In addition, the study examined whether parents' gender is associated with parents' reactions to their children's negative affect and their children's adaptation. Parents were videotaped interacting with their preschool-age children alone in one instance; in another instance they were videotaped interacting with their children and spouses simultaneously. In their interactions with children alone, parent reactions to children's displays of negative emotion were categorized using a behavior coding system. In interactions with children and spouses simultaneously, parental interactions were rated on a number of emotional dimensions. Findings suggested linkage between the quality of marital relations and parents' ability to regulate children's emotions during interaction. While unhappily married parents have difficulty with their children's negative affect displays, mothers' and fathers' reactions were characterized by particular patterns: mothers' responses were characterized by a compensatory pattern (soothe and praise), whereas fathers' responses were characterized by more negativity (escalates, commands, takes items away). These findings differ from previous research which suggests that fathering is more sensitive than mothering to transfer from marital distress. Instead, these results suggest that mothering and fathering show different vulnerabilities. (EV)

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Emotion Regulation 1

Running head: EMOTION REGULATION IN MARITAL AND PARENT-CHILD

Emotion Regulation in Marital and Parent-Child Relationships: Predicting Academic and Social  
Outcomes in Children

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## Abstract

The relationship between parents' emotion regulation skills in interactions with spouses and children is investigated. Parents were videotaped interacting with their preschool-aged children alone in one instance, and in another instance they were videotaped interacting with their children and their spouses simultaneously. In their interactions with children alone, parent reactions to children's displays of negative emotion were categorized using a behavior coding system. In interactions with children and spouses simultaneously, parental interactions were rated on a number of emotional dimensions. Results suggest linkage between the quality of marital relations and parents' ability to regulate children's emotions during interaction. Implications for children's emotional development are discussed.

## Emotion Regulation in Marital and Parent-Child Relationships: Predicting Academic and Social Outcomes in Children

Family researchers have demonstrated that marital distress is associated with parenting quality and child adjustment (Wilson & Gottman, 1995; Grych, 1998); however, very little is known about how these processes are related.

Previous work (Katz & Gottman, 1997) has suggested that emotion regulation is the process that accounts for the amount of transfer from marital conflict into parent-child interactions. Other research has shown that gender plays a role in how unhappily married parents respond to their children. Fathering is more sensitive than mothering to negative transfer from the parents' relationship as a couple in unhappily married parents (Kerig, Cowan & Cowan, 1993; Gerber, 1997).

This study provides evidence that parent emotion regulation is one of the mechanisms that mediates the effect of marital distress on children's academic and social adjustment. The present study will look more closely at how transfer from marital conflict affects parents' ability to regulate their children's negative affect displays and how these parent responses impact their children's academic and social adjustment. In addition, this study will examine whether parents' gender is associated with parents' reactions to their children's negative affect and their children's adaptation.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were 93 families (52 boys, 41 girls, and the children's parents) recruited from Northern California schools in the School Children and their Families project. In the year before the children entered kindergarten, the five- and six-year-olds were videotaped in separate interactions with their mothers and fathers. Parents were asked to help their children to complete four tasks including story telling, maze navigation, counting, and a conservation task. Two years

after the parent-child interactions were videotaped, children's first grade teachers completed the CABI, a 106 item rating scale questionnaire which provided a measure of children's academic and social behavior (teacher CABI data were not available for 13 boys and 8 girls) (Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994). Emotion regulation in marital interactions was assessed using both questionnaire and interaction data. Both parents completed the Couples' Communication Questionnaire (Cowan, Cowan, & Kerig, 1993). In an interaction with the entire family (parents, participating child, and siblings, if any) parents' interactions as a couple were rated on the following dimensions: positive emotional displays, negative emotional displays, and conflict.

### Coding

Videotapes of parent-child interaction were coded by 20 coders using an event coding strategy. Coders watched the videotapes for instances of children displaying negative affect (anger, pout, whine, sadness) and categorized parent responses as Negative (escalates conflict, gives an order, takes toy away), Positive (soothes or praises child), or Gives-in (complies with child request, switches to a new task).

## Results

### Links between marital conflict and parent responses to children's negative affect

Unhappily married mothers and fathers have difficulty managing their children's negative affect (mothers compensate with increased soothing and praising  $r(56) = .38, p < .01$ , while fathers exhibit a transfer effect and are more negative  $r(51) = .29, p < .05$  and less positive  $r(56) = -.26, p < .05$ ).

### Links between parent responses to children's negative affect and children's academic and social competence

Children of fathers who are more permissive (give in to children's negative affect, start new games, do what child wants) have low social competence  $r(43) = -.35, p < .05$ , are more

hyperactive  $r(43) = .32, p < .05$ , and more anxious/depressed  $r(43) = .33, p < .05$ . In addition, children of fathers who respond with positive emotion (soothe & praise) to negative affect displays have children who are less hyperactive  $r(43) = -.29, p < .05$ .

Children of mothers who respond negatively (escalate, command, take item away) to children's negative affect are more hyperactive  $r(45) = .29, p < .05$  and more anxious/depressed  $r(45) = .32, p < .05$ . On the other hand, children of mothers who respond positively (soothing & praising) show less aggression  $r(45) = -.38, p < .01$ .

### Discussion

While unhappily married parents have difficulty with their children's negative affect displays, mothers and fathers reactions were characterized by particular patterns: mothers responses were characterized by a compensatory pattern (soothe and praise), whereas fathers responses are characterized by more negativity (escalates, commands, takes item away). These findings differ from previous research which suggests that fathering is more sensitive than mothering to transfer from marital distress. Instead, these results suggest that mothering and fathering show different vulnerabilities.

More generally, mothers' and fathers' responses to their children's negative affect have implications for their children's academic and social adjustment. In particular, the children of fathers who consistently yield to their children's negativity are more likely to have social problems. Alternatively, fathers who attempt to regulate their children's negative affect displays with positive affect seem to be modeling emotion regulation skills. Children whose mothers respond to negative affect displays in a manner which is likely to increase emotional distress are more likely to show both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. While it is not surprising that children whose mothers respond positively to negative affect displays are less aggressive, this finding is somewhat puzzling in light of the link between this compensatory response pattern and marital distress reported above. It may be that in some cases compensatory

mothering may have both positive (as seen here in the case of mothers) and potentially negative effects for children of unhappily married parents. When parents respond to children's negative emotions in the context of misbehavior with compensatory reactions (i.e. praising and soothing), they may be encouraging negativity and decreased emotion regulation.

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