

Child Emotion Regulation, Parenting, and Child Behavior Problems in Families with Internationally Adopted Children



Kristine Freeark¹, Katherine L. Rosenblum¹,
Lisa Zakaria², Michael MacKenzie¹

¹ University of Michigan, ² University of Indianapolis

Introduction

The literature on adjustment of adopted children has been dominated by an emphasis on maladjustment so a need remains for studies of individual differences and process variables likely to influence successful adjustment. By studying a homogeneous, low-risk sample of internationally adoptive families with young children the Family Stories Project aims to investigate how family processes protect or confer risk on adopted children's outcomes.

Objectives:

▪ Investigate the relations between child emotion regulation, parenting style and child behavior problems.

▪ Determine whether child emotion regulation moderates the effects of parenting style on child behavior outcomes.

Significance of ER for adopted children

▪ **Emotion Regulation (ER)** is the ability to inhibit, modulate or maintain internal feeling states and their physiological, behavioral and social concomitants.

▪ Preschool and early elementary school years are important periods in children's evolving capacity for effective ER. They learn to rely less on adults and more on their own ability to self-regulate.

▪ During this period children acquire a more complex understanding of adoption, recognizing relinquishment as well as adoption. Negative as well as positive feelings often arise.

▪ Emotional challenges in adoption may require modulation of internal feeling states and effective emotional expression, within and beyond the family.

▪ ER predicts socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems

Significance of ER for adoptive parenting

▪ Child ER develops through ongoing interactions with adult caregivers

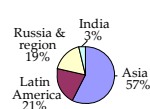
▪ Parenting behavior may be an important external influence on child ER abilities; sensitive parenting may aid regulation and model appropriate emotion expression; overcontrolling or harsh parenting may impede effective ER

Methods

Study population:

- Low risk, middle to upper-middle class, non-clinical sample.
- 67 families with internationally adopted children. Mothers and fathers participated.
 - children between the ages of 4 and 7 years old
 - placed with their family by 13 months of age
 - 31 girls and 36 boys

Birth Country Regions



Measures:

Parent Report Questionnaires completed independently by mothers and fathers

- **Emotion Regulation Checklist** (ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997)
 - Composite ERC score includes:
 - Emotional regulation
 - Lability/negativity
- **Child Behavior Checklist**
 - Two dimensions:
 - Internalizing (withdrawal, anxiety, depression)
 - Externalizing (delinquency, aggression)

Family Drawing Task

- Family interacts for 15' during lab visit. "Draw a picture that tells one of the stories of how your family began". Family decides together what story to draw and works together on the picture.
- Videotapes coded for child-centered parenting by both parents working as a co-parenting unit.

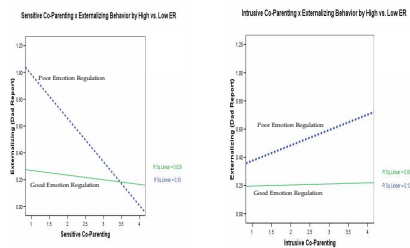
Child-Centered Parenting

- High in Sensitivity & low in Intrusiveness (Cox, 1998);
 - Sensitive co-parenting reflects awareness of child's needs, mood, interests & capabilities;
 - Intrusive co-parenting reflects adult-centered rather than child-centered interaction.

Results

Correlations conducted within and across informants for each of the measures. Results indicated:

- Agreement between mothers and fathers on reports of child emotion regulation and behavior problems
- No age or gender differences in child variables
- No significant relation between Child-Centered Parenting and Emotion Regulation
- Significant associations between Child Behavior Problems and Emotion Regulation
- Few direct associations between Child-Centered Parenting and Behavior Problems
 - Sensitivity inversely related to father-reported Externalizing
- Significant interactions between Child Emotion Regulation and Co-Parenting.
 - Child Emotion Regulation moderated the link between Co-Parenting and Externalizing Behavior Problems (see Figures below)
 - No effects observed for Internalizing Behavior Problems.



Discussion

- Even in this low-risk sample, the significance of sensitive, child-centered parenting for the behavioral adjustment of children who struggle to modulate their emotional reactions was evident.
- Well-regulated children are better able to adjust to lapses in sensitive co-parenting behavior.
- Parents of poorly-regulated children may find themselves engaged in a vicious cycle:
 - by responding to their child's emotional vulnerability with more intrusive and less sensitive strategies in an attempt to help;
 - parents may overcompensate in ways that only exacerbate the child's regulatory problems rather than soothe them.
- The findings have implications for early intervention services that educate and empower parents to enhance their child's regulatory abilities.
- Examining the co-parenting behavior and parental reports of both mothers and fathers maximizes ecological validity in the study of children raised in two-parent homes.



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