ADDENDUM: Developmental Transitions as Windows to Parental Socialization of Emotion

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

This commentary by Calkins and Bell was submitted as a commentary for the target article by Nancy Eisenberg, Amanda Cumberland, and Tracy Sprinrad, entitled "Parental Socialization of Emotion," published in Psychological Inquiry (1998), Volume 9, Number 4. This commentary was inadvertently not submitted with that issue and therefore is being published here.

Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spinrad (1998) set forth a model of the socialization of emotion that is both broad in scope and specific in illustrative description. They pointed out that although assumptions have long been made about parents as socializers of children's emotion expression, understanding, and regulation, only of late have investigators been examining this claim empirically. Furthermore, despite our field's relatively recent focus on this question, it is clear from this review that considerable progress has been made in our understanding of the specific ways in which parents provide a rich context for children's growth in the emotional domain.

The conceptualization of socialization by Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) emphasizes the multifaceted and complex nature of the process and highlights the dynamic interaction between situational factors and individual differences of both parents and children. Eisenberg and colleagues made it clear that the three emotion-related social behaviors (ERSBs) they focused on—reactions to child emotions, discussions of emotion, and emotional expressiveness—are not the only ways through which parents affect children's emotional experiences. Similarly their list of factors that may moderate the relation between ERSBs and child outcomes encourages researchers to think of other moderators. The authors made some explicit suggestions for future research. These include: (a) greater consideration should be given to the bi-directionality of parent–child emotional reactions as children age; (b) researchers should differentiate among various emotions; (c) it is important to examine negative affect that is directed at the child and negative affect directed at other; and (d) the context for the discussion of emotion may be an important factor in understanding the relation between the discussion of emotion and child outcomes. There are many other suggestions that these authors could have made given their thoughtful review of the literature. The result is that their model serves as catalyst for generating new ideas about the socialization of emotion and a jumping-off point for a discussion of developmental process.

One aspect of this model that we find appealing is Eisenberg et al.'s (1998) attempt to link children's emotional functioning to social competence. Typically, studies of social competence in school-age children are approached from a social-information processing perspective (cf. Dodge, 1986). However, it is clear that affective processes are a critical component of social interaction (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Dodge, 1991; Eisenberg, Guthrie, Fabes, & Reiser, 1997; Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992; Murphy & Eisenberg, 1996), and important questions have emerged about how to study the linkages between social and emotional functioning over the course of development. Clearly, Eisenberg and colleagues are encouraging those of us interested in the development of social competencies to delineate the ways in which emotional functioning affects social competence and the role of parents in guiding children to adaptive emotional competence.

At several points in their review, Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) mentioned age-appropriate parental reactions and discussions with children and discussed children's developmental level. These types of data inform us, at least to some degree, about the nature and course of ERSBs as they function in the larger context of early development. At this point, though, the model lacks specificity in regard to how certain processes function to affect particular types of outcomes at different points in development. To be fair, we acknowledge that such a description is both beyond the scope of this article and, perhaps, beyond the current state of the science. Nevertheless, as we think about how to explore the model empirically and how to fill in the gaps in the literature that Eisenberg and colleagues have identified, it may be useful to consider the model from a developmental perspective.

In the following sections, we explore how Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) model may be examined developmentally and draw on some of the processes and factors believed to be influential in emotional socialization. Specifically, we focus on how stage-salient developmental tasks set a context for parents' socialization of emotion. As researchers interested in emotional development, we focus on two salient periods in development—toddlerhood and adolescence—and examine both the kinds of emotional and social developments that are occurring during these periods and the role parents play in this development. By examining these developmental transitions we shift perspective from a description of parental ERSBs and their outcomes to a discussion of developmental process.

Toddlerhood as a Critical Transition Period in the Development of Emotion Regulation

The toddler period is traditionally viewed as one where regulatory abilities become consolidated. During toddlerhood, self-regulation is reflected in the ability to manage impulsivity and behave compliantly. In addition, expectations about and demands for socially appropriate emotional behavior begin to emerge. These issues become critical markers of toddler development and are thought to be heavily influenced by particular kinds of parenting behaviors.

Although emotional processes likely play a role in social interactions during most phases of development, their study during toddlerhood may be especially important, given the young child's newly emerging independent ability to manage emotions and behavior (Kopp, 1982, 1989; Thompson, 1994), their increased engagement in the social world of peers (Howes, 1988), and their developing capacity for cooperative social play (Eckerman, Whatley, & Kutz, 1975). For example, a toddler who develops a pattern of withdrawal from a stimulus that arouses fear

may use this kind of strategy in a social situation that produces anxiety and come to display more socially withdrawn behaviors (Thompson & Calkins, 1996). A child who tends to vent or act out when angered may use such a strategy when with peers and engage in more conflict with peers as a consequence (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Because these emotion regulation behaviors are just becoming part of the child's emotional repertoire, their use may generalize from situations that occur at home with parents and siblings to situations that occur in the peer group (Calkins, 1994). Thus, toddlerhood presents an interesting developmental period for exploring key components of Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) model.

Following Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) model, the factors that may be involved most potently in emotional socialization during this period include parental reactions to child emotion and parents' own emotional reactions. For example, parenting behaviors that are negative, coercive, or controlling may challenge the child's efforts to take control of his or her own emotions and behavior. One possible consequence of such behavior is that the child may express frustration that attempts at autonomy are constantly being thwarted. In our research, we examined links between maternal interactive style and emotion regulation during the toddler period. We observed that at this early point in development, both child factors (temperamental reactivity or arousal) and parenting factors play a role in the kinds of behavioral strategies children use when confronted by stimuli designed to evoke frustration. Specifically, maternal interference, or doing things for the child, was found to be related to greater distress on the part of the child (Calkins & Johnson, 1998). In a second study, we found that positive maternal behaviors were related to behaviors indicative of adaptive regulation, and negative and controlling maternal behaviors were related to poor physiological regulation and less adaptive emotional regulation (Calkins, Smith, Gill, & Johnson, 1998). Thus, important child outcomes at this point in development will very likely be seen in terms of the expression and experience of emotion and the acquisition of particular adaptive versus nonadaptive regulation strategies.

In examining the next step of Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) model of predicting social behavior and social competence, it is important to focus on some of the early emerging skills of toddlers and on early indexes of problematic behavior. Although social behavior and social competence are traditionally studied in school-age children, with good predictability to later adjustment (Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990), it is clear from the developmental literature that the skills that support social competence are acquired well before the child enters school. There is a developmental progression across the first few years of life in the acquisition of skills that reflect social competence; however, there are also individual differences in the quality of children's peer-directed behavior (see Rubin & Coplan, 1992, for a review). In examining relations between child emotional functioning and social competence, one focus could be on the degree to which problematic regulatory behaviors (tantrumming or venting) might be related to early peer-directed aggression. In a recent study of 2-year-olds, we observed such a relation, although the predictors of positive social interaction were less clear than the predictors of negative interactions (Calkins et al., 1998). These data suggest that a developmental investigation of Eisenberg and colleagues' model might focus on the links during the toddler period among parental response to children's emotions, children's emotional regulatory strategies, and early social competence.

Emotional Experiences in Families of Adolescents as a Bridge to Adulthood

Adolescence is usually differentiated from childhood by marked biological, cognitive and social-cognitive, and emotional and self-definitional changes within children. Frequently these physical, intellectual, social, and psychological changes create new challenges and opportunities for parents' socialization of their adolescent offspring (see Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995, for a review of how these changes relate to parenting). In respect to the socialization of emotion, Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) model specifies that parents' ERSB may intensify or soothe adolescents' arousal. Parental expression of emotions or lack thereof may be an especially important predictor of the affective stance adolescents adapt toward themselves and others. For example, many parents tend to tease their daughters about breast growth, which frequently evokes anger in the girls (Brooks-Gunn, 1984; Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1988). In interactions with their children, parents' negative affect increases in relation to the pubertal status of their children (Montemayor, Eberly, & Flannery, 1993), and 8th graders expect less interpersonal support from their mothers than 5th or 11th graders (Zeman & Shipman, 1997).

In some families, all of Eisenberg and colleagues' (1998) ERSBs (parental reactions, discussions, and expressiveness) may increase in negative affect during adolescence. This may be exacerbated under conditions of stress, such as marital discord, adolescent maturation coinciding with school transitions, and in families where attachment styles restrict adolescent autonomy. For instance, late-adolescent, college students' preoccupation with attachment issues has been related to their reports of high levels of dominant negative emotions in their families (Bell, 1998). It may be that when college students recall family expressiveness from their childhoods what they are really doing is recalling the affective climate of early adolescence. Families with overall high levels of expressiveness may be those families that experienced especially difficult transitions during adolescence.

For college students, overall family expressiveness has a negative association with nonverbal decoding skill, whereas in young children overall family expressiveness is positively related to their understanding and labeling of emotion (Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999). This differential relation between parental ERSB and child social competence may be explained, in part, by a relatively large increase of negative affect during adolescence in families that are stressed. If this was the case then an examination of the changes in family experience during adolescence could help make sense of the discrepant patterns of associations among parents' expressivity and child outcomes observed in childhood and reported by adults and college students. Possible changes in valence of parental expression during adolescence could also explain why there is an association between family expressiveness and depressive emotional experience (Cooley, 1992; Satsky, Bell, & Garrison, 1998), but there is no consistent relation between family expressiveness and emotional experience in children (Halberstadt et al., in press).

Despite documented increases in negative affect during the transition to adolescence, most adolescents continue to have effectively positive relationships with their parents (see Flannery, Torquati, & Lindemeier, 1994, for a review). There also is increasing evidence that it is important for adolescents to maintain a positive relationship with their parents while creating more autonomous relationships from them (e.g., Allen, Aber, & Leadbeater, 1990; Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Collins, 1990; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Moore, 1987; Steinberg, 1990). Parents' positive ERSB during adolescence has been

related to positive self-concept. Parental support emotions in both 5th grade and 12th grade are positively related to girls' self-esteem (Kamon, Bronstein, Fox, & VanNess-Knolls, 1998). When fathers demonstrate positive relatedness toward their adolescent children, fathers' hostile criticism appears to challenge adolescents in a way that promotes increases in self-esteem between ages 14 and 16 (Allen et al., 1994). The display of positive emotion during adolescence also would contribute to overall high levels of family expressiveness and could help explain why overall family expressiveness has been associated with positive social behavior (i.e., empathetic responding; Eisenberg et al., 1991) as well less desirable emotional outcomes in adults.

The examples in this section highlight the ways that the burgeoning research on adolescent affective processes can inform the study of parental socialization of emotion and social competence. Specifically, they underscore the importance of differentiating between positive and negative affective experiences and of clarifying how the presence or absence of positive affect may create different contexts for experiencing negative affect.

Summary

Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) offered a model that explores many of the complex issues involved in parents' socialization of emotion. An examination of the developmental context, however, suggests additional ways in which this complex picture can be viewed. When a developmental approach is taken, diverse and apparently contradictory findings may be integrated. By focusing on stage-salient developmental tasks, it will be possible to examine both continuity and discontinuity in family affect and in the relations between parent ERSB and social competence. Ultimately, a developmental perspective may reveal that there is more continuity in the process of parental socialization of emotion than is apparent when a more descriptive approach is taken. Overall, Eisenberg and colleagues set a global framework that assists one in focusing on developmental issues.

Note

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