

Attachment, parental meta-emotion, and emotion regulation in adoptive mother-child dyads

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Abstract:

Adopted children are at risk for a number of unfavorable environmental factors and thus have an increased likelihood of developing social, emotional, cognitive, and attachment issues that can stunt the child's ability to build intimate relationships and regulate emotion. These potential issues may make it difficult for adoptive parents to emotionally connect with their adopted child. Through the theories of parental meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP) and attachment, the researchers explored how adoptive mothers' level of emotion coaching (the ideal PMEP) and their attachment impacted the adoptive child's ability to emotionally regulate. Findings indicated that emotion coaching is an effective method of aiding adopted children's ability to emotionally regulate. The researchers also found that adoptive mothers struggling with attachment may still be able to learn emotion coaching and positively impact her adopted child's emotion regulation development.

Keywords: adoptive families | parental meta-emotion philosophy | attachment

Article:

Many adoptive families experience challenges that biological families may never face. Adopted children, whether domestic or international, face an increased likelihood of behavioral, emotional, developmental (Dalen & Theie, 2014; Jacobs, Miller, & Tirella, 2010), and attachment issues (Barcons et al., 2014) due to their unique pre-adoptive conditions (Weir et al., 2013). These conditions may include insufficient health-care and medical services; inadequate prenatal, perinatal, and postnatal care; psychological deprivation; abuse or neglect; early separation from the child's birth mother; and malnutrition. These unfavorable environmental factors can contribute to difficulties (e.g., emotion regulation, social connection) later as the child tries to adapt to the new adoptive home and connect with the adoptive family. Thus, adoptive parents may encounter more difficulty than biological parents as they attempt to understand and connect with their adopted child's emotions and aid their adopted child in emotional expression and regulation. Such difficulties can prompt adoptive parents to seek family counseling interventions specifically geared toward helping them learn how to approach their children's emotions and promote their children's development of effective behavioral expression and regulation of emotion (Dunsmore, Booker, & Ollendick, 2013).

Indeed, all parents play a key role in shaping how their children express and regulate their emotions (Gottman et al., 1996). A primary way parents aid their children in learning how to deal with their emotions is through emotional coaching, a construct based in a parent's meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP; Gottman et al., 1996). PMEP is defined as parents' thoughts and feelings about their own emotions as well as their child's emotions. Depending on the PMEP, parents may either aid their children in emotional expression and regulation, leading to a child's development of healthy emotion regulation and effective social skills, or suppress their child's emotional expression, thus hindering a child's development of emotion regulation (Gottman et al. 1996). In this way, PMEP impacts a number of child outcomes including child behavior (e.g., disruptive behavior, adaptive skills) and child socialization (e.g., quality of relationships with peers and parents; Daga, Raval, & Raj, 2015; Dunsmore et al., 2013; Gottman et al., 1996; Guss, Rose, & Gilbert, 2015; Katz, Maliken, & Stettler, 2012; Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004).

Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996) identified four types of PMEP in their original research. They labeled the ideal parental meta-emotion philosophy as "emotion coaching (EC)." An EC parent communicates an acceptance of the child's emotion and a willingness to engage the child on an emotional level. For example, this parent would approach an upset child by asking the child open questions to discover how the child is feeling and what led to those feelings (Ellis & Alisic, 2013). This parent also would communicate an understanding of the child's emotion, thus conveying that the feelings are valid. Children of EC parents display higher levels of emotion regulation (Ellis, Alisic, Reiss, Dishion, & Fisher, 2013) and social competence (Katz et al., 2012) than children of parents who ascribe to less helpful PMEPs.

Second, Gottman et al. (1996) described an "emotion dismissing" parent as one who believes that negative emotions are potentially harmful to the child and therefore acts in ways to distance the child from the negative emotion. Third, the "emotion disapproving" parent believes a child's emotions need to be controlled and are often critical of a child's negative emotion. Finally, the "laissez-faire" parent is accepting of all of the child's emotion (both negative and positive) but does not become involved in the child's emotional expression and does not utilize emotional moments as opportunities to teach emotion regulation skills.

Thus, parents' thoughts and feelings about their own emotions and the emotions of their child impact how they interact with their child (Gottman et al., 1996). But how does one form a PMEP? How does an adult learn to think and feel about their emotions and the emotions of others? The lens of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Gus et al., 2015) provides one avenue for exploring these questions. By looking through the lens of attachment theory, one can reach a better understanding of how individuals learn to relate and attune to one another.

Originally developed by Bowlby (1969), attachment theory is focused on the relationship between the infant and the primary caregiver, which serves as a foundation for the child's future relationships with others—including future parents' interactions with their child. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), children test out their world by first looking to their primary caregiver for security. When the child makes bids for the primary caregiver's attention and those bids are met with a soothing, attentive response, a sense of safety is created within this intimate relationship. If the child's bids for attention are met with a negative interaction or neglect, then

the child senses a lack of safety within that intimate relationship. These early interactions with the primary caregiver are crucial for the child's ability to relate, empathize, and form bonds with others. Bowlby (1969) emphasized the mother as a primary attachment figure.

The caregiver's early responses to the child contribute to the child's development of a secure or insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1969). Individuals with secure attachment are able to form intimate bonds with others and maintain close relationships, while those with insecure attachment find close relationships very difficult. Importantly, an integral part of forming intimate relationships is being attuned to one's own emotions and the emotions of others (Guss et al., 2015), and attunement is at the heart of attachment development. When the mother is fully attuned to the child's emotional and physical needs and responds to them appropriately, the child feels safe. This felt safety allows the child to learn how to attune to and develop a sense of empathy for others. Adults, then, cannot respond to others with empathy and attunement unless they have developed secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969). This attachment perspective closely aligns with Gottman et al.'s (1996) theory of PMEP. EC occurs when a parent is highly attuned to the child's emotions and is able to respond in ways that aid the child in dealing with feelings and sets boundaries around the child's behavior, even while acknowledging and accepting the emotion being expressed (Gottman et al., 1996). Thus, it seems that mothers may truly be attuned to their child and able to exhibit an EC PMEP only when the mother is operating from attachment security.

To date, researchers (e.g., Chen, Lin, & Li, 2012; Cowen, 1996) have made connections between attachment theory and PMEP in biological families. However, these researchers have primarily focused on the *child's* attachment in relation to PMEP. DeOliveira, Moran, and Pederson (2005) did indicate a relationship between adult attachment and PMEP but only studied biological families. Due to the unique challenges documented in adoptive families, potential relationships between mother-child attachment and parental meta-emotion in the context of adoptive families were explored in this study. Given the relationship between PMEP and children's psychosocial adjustment and emotion regulation (e.g., Dunsmore et al., 2013; Guss et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2012), the child's ability to effectively regulate emotion served as the dependent variable.

Promoting an EC PMEP with adoptive mothers could be a key to connecting with and teaching their adopted children how to better regulate their own emotions and behavior. This study is a first step toward investigating whether such an approach is a viable family counseling intervention when working with adoptive children and their families. In line with Bowlby's (1969) premise that mothers serve as the primary attachment figure, the researchers focused solely on adoptive mothers. The researchers included only adoptive mothers with children aged 8–12 because in middle childhood (ages 8–12), children experience an increased understanding of emotion and an increased ability to make decisions about coping and regulation strategies (Eisenberg & Morris, 2003). Accordingly, this study was guided by the following research question: Are relationships between the adoptive mother's adult attachment and her ratings of her adopted child's emotion regulation mediated by the adoptive mother's PMEP?

Method

Participants

Mothers of adopted children aged 8–12 who had been adopted at least 6 months prior to the study were eligible to participate in the study. Qualtrics B2B was used to recruit a national sample of participants who met the inclusion criteria. In response to a Qualtrics invitation, 115 participants (113 needed per power calculation) accepted the informed consent and completed the survey. All participants were female ($n = 115$, 100%) and adoptive parents ($n = 115$, 100%). Most identified as Caucasian ($n = 101$, 87.8%), middle class ($n = 76$, 66.1%), and nonsingle parents ($n = 88$, 76.5%) who had adopted through nonprivate agencies/organizations ($n = 65$, 56.5%). The average age of the participants' adoptive child was 10.90 ($SD = 1.351$); most children were Caucasian (66.7%) in addition to African American/Black (11.1%), Other (8.5%), Asian (5.1%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (5.1%). The average child age at the time of adoption was 3.63 years ($SD = 3.26$).

Measures

The experiences in close relationships–relationship structures (ECR-RS)

The ECR-RS (Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015) was designed to assess for attachment across multiple types of relationships (mother, father, friends, and romantic partners) utilizing some of the same items contained in the original measure. Only the fifth section of the measure, which measures general attachment across all relationships, was used in this study. Fraley (personal communication, August 17, 2017) indicated that if a researcher is only interested in a general attachment score, it is appropriate to use only these 9 general items. In line with current trends away from studying attachment categories (Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015), the ECR-RS assesses attachment across the two dimensions of attachment: anxiety (e.g., “I often worry that other people do not really care for me”) and avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down”). Participants respond using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Because some items on the ERC general attachment scale are reverse scored, a lower score indicates more secure attachment. Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, and Segal (2011) reported α reliability estimates of ECR-RS scores were comparable to those of longer assessments. The relationship between anxiety and avoidance scores across domains was positive but not strong. The authors created composite scores for avoidance and anxiety based on all items across the four categories (e.g., secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized; Fraley et al., 2015); reliabilities of these composite scores were high (.88 for avoidance, .85 for anxiety). They also found relatively high correlations between anxiety and avoidance in each type of relationship. For the purposes of this study, the average of the 9 items was used such that lower scores indicated attachment security, with an α of .71.

The Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC)

The ERC (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997) is a parent/caregiver-report measure designed to assess a child's ability to manage and regulate emotion. The ERC contains 24 items divided into two subscales: Lability/Negativity (Emotion Dysregulation) and Emotion Regulation. Parents/caregivers indicate the degree to which their child exhibits certain emotion regulation qualities on a 4-point scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *almost always*). Higher scores indicate higher levels

of emotion regulation and lability. Shields and Cicchetti (1997) reported Cronbach's α of .86 for Lability/Negativity and .92 for Emotion Regulation, high convergent validity, and strong discriminate validity. α s in this study were .90 for Lability/Negativity and .72 for Emotion Regulation.

The emotion-related parenting styles self-test–Likert (ERPSST-L)

The ERPSST-L (Hakim-Larson, Parker, Lee, Goodwin, & Voelker, 2006), a measure of PMEP, contains four subscales: EC, Parental Acceptance of Emotion, Parental Rejection of Negative Emotion, and Uncertainty/Ineffectiveness in Emotion Socialization. Hakim-Larson, Parker, Lee, Goodwin, and Voelker (2006) reported Cronbach's α coefficients for the four parenting styles ranging from .72 to .91. In terms of validity, they reported a statistically significant positive correlation between scores on the EC subscale and expressive encouragement and positive expressiveness. Only the EC subscale was used as it was the most relevant to the research question, with an α of .90.

Demographics Questionnaire

Participants provided demographic information about themselves and their adopted child, including adopted child's age, age at adoption, race/ethnicity, and source of adoption, as well as their own race/ethnicity, whether the adoptive mother was a single parent.

Procedures

Following full approval from the institutional review board, the first author recruited individuals based upon the inclusion criteria through Qualtrics B2B, a national database of individuals who have volunteered to be participants in research. Those who agreed to participate in the study after reading the informed consent were directed to an online survey packet comprised of the ECR-RS General Attachment Scale, the ERC, the ERPSST-L Emotion Coaching Scale, and Demographics Questionnaire (in that order).

Data Analyses

Preliminary analyses using analysis of variance indicated no significant differences between scores of adoptive mothers who identified as single versus two-parent families and no significant differences among sources of adoption (e.g., agency adoption, private adoption, adoption through foster care). Then, analyses were completed to test whether EC mediated the relationship between parents' adult attachment and their child's ability to emotionally regulate. For the full sample, a series of pairwise correlations between parents' adult attachment, EC, and the child's ability to emotionally regulate were computed.

Then, a mediation analysis was completed testing the theoretical model indicating parents' adult attachment affected their level of EC, which in turn affected their child's ability to emotionally regulate ($X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$ and $X \rightarrow Y$). Specifically, the mediation analysis included the computation of a regression model of parents' adult attachment affected their level of EC (path a), a second regression model of EC predicting their child's ability to emotionally regulate (path b), and a

third regression model of parents' adult attachment predicting the child's ability to emotionally regulate (path c'); finally, the mediation analysis computed the impact of the parents' EC as a mediator of the relationship between the mother's attachment and the child's ability to emotionally regulate (path ab). Because the Emotion Regulation Checklist has two subscales (Emotion Regulation and Lability), the researcher conducted a second mediation analysis testing the theoretical model indicating how parents' adult attachment affected their level of EC, which in turn affected their child's level of lability. This mediation analysis included the computation of a regression model of how parents' adult attachment affected their level of EC (path a), a second regression model of EC predicting their child's ability to emotionally regulate (path b), and a third regression model of parents' adult attachment predicting the child's level of lability (path c'); finally, the mediation analysis computed the impact of the parents' EC as a mediator of the relationship between the mother's attachment and the child's level of lability (path ab).

Results

In initial Pearson correlations, there was a statistically significant negative relationship between EC and adult attachment ($r = -.308, p < .01$)($r = -.308, p < .01$), indicating that adoptive mothers who reported more secure attachment (lower scores) were more likely to report they practiced EC. A second statistically significant positive relationship between EC and emotion regulation ($r = .366, p < .01$)($r = .366, p < .01$) suggested adoptive mothers who ascribed more to an EC PMEP were more likely to have children with effective emotion regulation skills. A nonsignificant relationship between EC and lability ($r = -.059, p = .528$)($r = -.059, p = .528$) indicated that an EC adoptive mother would not have a significant impact on her adopted child's level of lability.

The first step in the mediation analysis yielded a significant effect of the adoptive mother's attachment on her ability to practice EC ($a = -.1695, p = .0008, r^2 = .0021$) and a significant effect of the adoptive mother's ability to practice EC on the child's level of emotion regulation ($b = 2.1869, p < .001, r^2 = .1390$); the mediation analysis indicated that variables other than the adoptive mother's attachment were impacting the child's level of emotion regulation ($c' = .2288, p = .4239, r^2 = .0021$). According to Hayes (2013), "the quantification of effect size in mediation analysis is an evolving area of research" (p. 185). However, one possible measure of effect size is a completely standardized indirect effect (Hayes, 2013). The standardized indirect effect computes the expected change in standard deviation units. The completely standardized indirect effect for the current mediation analysis was $-.1199$. Note that this fully standardized indirect effect describes the fact that, for 1 standard deviation unit increase in ECR-RS, one would predict a $.1199$ decrease in standard deviation units of the Emotion Regulation Scale. These results indicated that EC mediated the relationship between the mother's attachment and the child's ability to emotionally regulate ($ab = -.3707, p = .008$; lower scores on the ECR-RS indicate more secure attachment and higher scores on the ERC subscale indicate more effective emotion regulation). Based on these results, participants with more secure attachment were estimated to differ from participants with insecure attachment by $-.3707$. In short, participants having more secure attachment had higher child's emotion regulation scores as a result of the effect of adopted mother's attachment on her ability to utilize EC, which in turn affected the child's level of emotion regulation. As attachment scores went down

(increase in attachment security), the child's emotion regulation increased (increase in ability to emotionally regulate; see Figure 1).

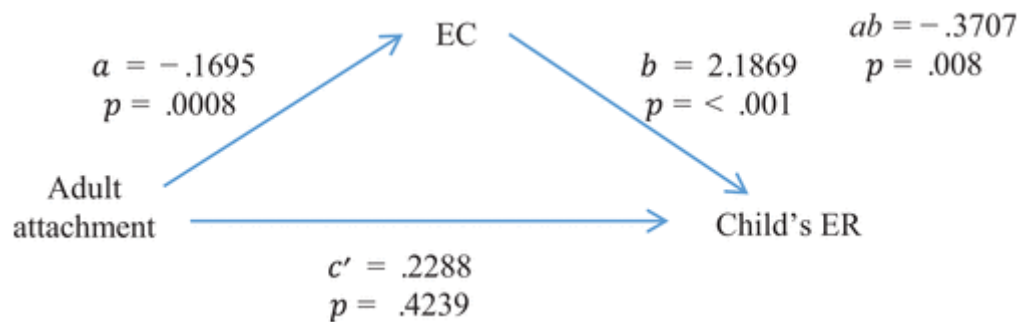


Figure 1. Mediation between adult attachment, emotion coaching, and child's emotion regulation.

The second mediation analysis yielded a nonsignificant effect of the adoptive mother's ability to practice EC on the child's level of lability ($b = .0503$, $p = .9667$, $r^2 = .0419$); the adoptive mother's attachment was the only variable predicting the child's level of lability ($c' = 1.4013$, $p = .0364$, $r^2 = .0419$). Therefore, EC did not mediate the relationship between the mother's attachment and the child's level of lability ($ab = -.0085$, $p = .9680$). The completely standardized indirect effect for the current mediation analysis was -0.0013 . A higher score on the Lability subscale of the ERC indicated an increase in lability. Based on these results, increasing secure attachment by 1 point, while holding EC constant increased lability scores by 1.4013 ($p = .0364$). As attachment scores went up (decrease in attachment security), child lability increased (decrease in ability to emotionally regulate effectively; see Figure 2). Together, these results indicated that the mother's EC impacted the two outcomes (i.e., child's emotion regulation and lability) differently, resulting in the finding that EC acted as a mediator only between the adoptive mother's attachment and the adopted child's emotion regulation.

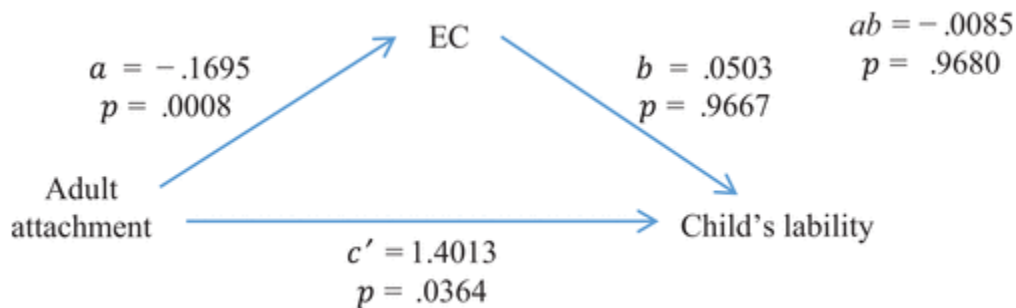


Figure 2. Mediation between adult attachment, emotion coaching, and child's lability.

Discussion

Results suggested that adoptive mothers who have a difficult time building intimate relationships with others (high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance) may be less likely to be able to view their adopted child's emotional moments as opportunities to connect and teach them about emotion regulation (low on EC). From the lens of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and PMEP

(Gottman et al., 1996), these findings are consistent with expectations, but this is the first time this relationship has been empirically supported in adoptive families. The more securely attached parents are, the more likely they will be able to connect emotionally with their child, model effective emotion regulation skills, and guide their child in finding healthy ways of expressing and regulating their own emotions, thus functioning as a parent high in EC skills. These results indicated that when an adoptive mother is able to connect with the child and teach effective emotion regulation skills when the child is emoting (high level of EC), the child is more likely to be able to develop appropriate expression of emotions and show empathy for others (high level of emotion regulation). This finding is consistent with previous research on biological families indicating that children of parents who operated from an EC PMEP were more likely to display effective emotion regulation (Ellis et al., 2013).

In contrast, the adoptive mother's EC and her ratings of her adoptive child's lability scores were not significantly related. Level of lability refers to the child's level of sensitivity and reaction to emotion-eliciting events and a child's level of emotion/adaptive regulation (Hill & Updegraff, 2012). An individual with high lability experiences very intense emotions and has difficulty regulating them. It is unclear from the results why EC would have a significant relationship with the Emotion Regulation subscale but not the Lability subscale. One hypothesis is that the influence of an EC adoptive parent may increase the adopted child's ability to manage emotion but does not impact the child's level of emotional sensitivity. So, while the child may have an increased number of tools to regulate emotion, the child may still have intense emotional reactions to emotion-eliciting events. However, according to Garner and Hinton (2010), the emotionally labile child has difficulty utilizing effective emotion regulation skills. Thus, more research is needed to understand why EC by adoptive mothers only seems to have an impact on the child's emotion regulation and not lability.

Although results indicated adoptive mothers' attachment does impact the adopted child's ability to emotionally regulate, it was not the only variable that had an impact. The adoptive mother's ability to emotion coach also plays a role in her adopted child's emotion regulation development. So, for mothers who may be struggling with attachment, there is still hope that, if she is able to learn how to become an EC parent, she may still be able to positively impact her adopted child's emotion regulation development.

Limitations

As with all studies, this study had several limitations. Although Qualtrics B2B was a highly effective means of reaching the required sample size, it was convenience sampling, based on a group of parents who have indicated willingness to participate in research. Thus, the sample may not be representative of adoptive families in the United States, limiting generalizability of results. Participants were predominately White and had high levels of education. This sample may be representative of White adoptive parents but not of all adoptive parents (Vandivere, Malm, Trends, & Radcl, 2009).

The α coefficients for the ECR-RS and ERC were moderately strong but acceptable for social science research (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 2008). Two measures were self-report (ECR-RS and ERPSST-L) and one was parent report (ERC). Participants may have answered the

questions based on how they wished they would parent or interact with others instead of how they actually behave. Participants also may have been prone to underreport some of their child's behaviors, although some may have overreported their child's behaviors, depending on how challenged they feel by their child. Although correlations between adoptive mothers' attachment scores and their children's emotion regulation and lability were statistically significant, they were relatively low correlations, and the effect size was small. Thus, results should be viewed with some caution.

Implications for Counseling

This study has contributed to the limited adoption research in counseling (cf., Liu, Jacoby, Jany, & Li, 2019) by highlighting the effectiveness of EC parenting in helping an adopted child's ability to emotionally regulate. Thus, family counselors can consider targeting interventions that enhance adoptive parents' EC behaviors. One resource for this work is a five-step method published by The Gottman Institute designed to increase parents' EC abilities (<https://www.gottman.com/product/emotion-coaching-the-heart-of-parenting-video-program/>). The program, including six video modules and workbook, could be a helpful tool for family counselors working with adoptive parents struggling to support their adopted child's emotion regulation. Other counseling approaches that target attachment with adopted families, such as child-parent relationship therapy (Carnes-Holt, 2012; Carnes-Holt & Bratton, 2014) and trust-based relational intervention (Lancaster, Ovrebo, & Zuckerman, 2017; Purvis, Cross, & Pennings, 2009), may be important adjuncts to the EC program. Each of these forms of therapy is designed to enhance the parent-child bond, which may be a precursor to a parent's ability to employ EC.

Suggestions for Future Research

As an initial test of efficacy of EC in adoptive families, the mediational analyses only included PMEP EC scores, and attachment scores were not separated into the two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. Future researchers could test a more complex mediation model by including all four PMEPs and by looking at each attachment dimension separately in relationship to the adoptive child's emotion regulation. This approach might yield a more complex and richer understanding of the relationships found in this study. Future researchers also might include children's reports of their own attachment and emotion regulation in addition to parental ratings of these variables. Clinical studies of the impact of family counselors using The Gottman Institute EC program with adoptive families would have great practical value. Experimental studies of parents trained to be emotion coaches could include pre-post, and perhaps longitudinal, tests for changes in children's ability to emotionally regulate. Future research with families of color, who may support a different parenting style (Haltigan et al., 2014) also is needed. Replications of this study with adoptive fathers could identify their role and level of influence on their adopted child's emotion regulation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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