Parental Socialization of Emotion Expression: Gender Differences and Relations to Child Adjustment

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The present study examined gender differences in children’s submissive and disharmonious emotions and parental attention to these emotions. Sixty children and their mothers and fathers participated when children were 4 and 6 years old. Children’s emotion expression and parental responses during a game were coded. Girls expressed more submissive emotion than boys. Fathers attended more to girls’ submissive emotion than to boys’ at preschool age. Fathers attended more to boys’ disharmonious emotion than to girls’ at early school age. Parental attention at preschool age predicted later submissive expression level. Child disharmonious emotion predicted later externalizing symptoms. Gender differences in these emotions may occur as early as preschool age and may be subject to differential responding, particularly by fathers.

Gender differences in children’s emotion expression have been observed as early as the preschool years, with girls being less likely to show anger, and more likely to show sadness, than boys (Brody, 1999; Saarni, 1984). One source of influence on such gender differences may be socialization pressures that orient girls and boys toward different roles in life (Brody & Hall, 2000; Shields, 2002; Zahn-Waxler, 2001). These socialization pressures, moreover, may not always be obvious or overt (e.g., “big boys do not cry”) but may be subtle, conveyed in the form of differential attention to boys’ and girls’ expressions during emotional events, attention that may subtly encourage the expression of certain emotions and discourage others (Brody, 1999; Fivush & Buckner, 2000). This may contribute to a tendency for girls to be more likely than boys to convey submissive emotions, such as sadness and anxiety, and for boys to be more willing to express disharmonious emotions, such as anger and laughing at another. This point of view has been advanced in discussions that attempt to understand gender differences in different forms of child psychopathology. Researchers have hypothesized that a tendency to express anger may be related to the development of externalizing problems, and a tendency to express sadness may be one marker for later internalizing problems (Cole, Teti, & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Garber & Dodge, 1991; Izard, 1972; Keenan & Shaw, 1997; Kring & Bauchowski, 1999).

Multiple factors influence a child’s emotional expressivity, including innate differences, such as temperament (Kagan, 1994), and experiential factors, such as socialization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Among these factors, there is considerable interest in unraveling the role of emotion socialization in the family (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994; Garner, Robertson, & Smith, 1997; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). For example, evidence suggests that parents, particularly fathers, may show differential attention to boys and girls in ways that reinforce gender role-consistent emotions (e.g., Fivush, 1989; Lytton & Romney, 1991). Unfortunately, empirical studies that are designed to carefully observe emotional interactions between parents and their children are few (Eisenberg et al., 1998). In part this is true because observational work is labor-intensive and tedious. Nonetheless, it is known that gender differences in socialization behavior are often quite subtle (Fivush, 1998). Microanalytic studies of observational data can address the subtleties of parental responses, and these are needed to form a complete picture of gender socialization processes for emotion. The present study used observational methods in a longitudinal design to examine young children’s interactions with their mothers and fathers to explore gender differences in children’s emotion expressions and the attention that parents give to these expressions.

Gender Differences in Emotion Expression

Theorists argue that males and females are socialized to adopt different cultural gender roles for emotion. Specifically, in the United States, women are expected to be more relationship oriented than men, and men are expected to be assertive and even overtly aggressive if needed (Brody & Hall, 2000; Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1991; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Barrett, 1991). Consistent with these roles, females may be more likely than males to express emotions that support relationships, mute emotions that assert one’s own interests over the interests of others, and engage in more covert, relational forms of aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Zahn-Waxler, 2001).

Submission emotions, specifically sadness and anxiety, do not threaten interpersonal interaction in most cases, whereas anger, or
even laughter at the expense of another, has the potential to threaten relationships or interactions (Barrett & Campos, 1987). Sadness and anxiety communicate personal vulnerability; they signal a need for soothing and comfort from others that reflects a willingness to submit oneself to the care of another (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Izard & Ackerman, 2000). By contrast, anger and joy, when it is at the expense of another, are disharmonious emotions; they convey a motivation to achieve one’s own goals or to take satisfaction in one’s success over another (Arsenio & Lover, 1999; Barrett & Campos, 1987; Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994). Therefore, girls may be more likely than boys to convey submissive emotions and less likely to express disharmonious emotions. Evidence for such gender differences has been observed in certain contexts (Cole, 1986; Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Smith, 1994; Saarni, 1984).

Parental-Contingent Responses to Girls’ and Boys’ Emotion Expressions

The degree to which boys’ and girls’ emotional expressions are met by differential parental responses is not well established. One possibility is that parents socialize their children to express gender role-consistent emotions through practices of which they are consciously aware (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Parke, 1994). Empirical support for this process is mixed. Some studies find that parents report being more accepting of girls’ sadness and anxiety and of boys’ anger (Birnbaum & Croll, 1984; Casey & Fuller, 1994; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996), but other studies fail to reveal gender-differentiated patterns in parents’ self-reported reactions to children’s emotions (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996; Roberts, 1999).

Parents’ differential treatment of daughters and sons often may be outside of awareness and subtle in appearance (Fivush, 1998). Rather than using overt and straightforward strategies (e.g., clear rewards, punishments, or explicit directives) to influence children’s gender roles, parents may be more likely to exert implicit pressure by showing slightly more attention to gender role-consistent expressions (Fivush, 1998). Of course, overt parenting strategies, such as explicit encouraging and discouraging of emotions, are important for children’s development and have been related to aspects of emotional competence (Denham et al., 1994; Gottman et al., 1997). However, for gender role socialization, the sheer amount of parental attention, regardless of the nature of that attention (e.g., punishing vs. encouraging) may also be an important factor, conveying that certain emotions are more appropriate or acceptable (Brody, 1999; Eisenberg et al., 1998).

There is some empirical evidence that parents are more responsive to boys’ disharmonious emotions and to girls’ submissive emotions. Parents use more anger-related words with boys than with girls and refer more to sadness and happiness (although the type of happiness was not specified) with girls than with boys (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995; Fivush, 1989; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Talk about emotion, then, is one mechanism by which parents give more time and attention to certain emotions and do so in gender-differentiated ways (Fivush, 1998; Fivush & Buckner, 2000). Emotions can also be gender socialized through nonverbal processes, as shown in studies of very young children. Radke-Yarrow and Kochanska (1990) found that mothers attended to toddler boys’ anger, even yielded to boys’ anger, but ignored toddler girls’ anger. Malatesta and Haviland (1982) found gender differences in mothers’ responses to infant emotion, with mothers attending more to boys’ happiness and matching sons’ emotions more than daughters’. Interestingly, Malatesta and Haviland did not find gender differences in whether mothers verbally encouraged or discouraged the emotion. In summary, these findings suggest that overall attention given to child emotion is an important feature of emotion socialization that may be particularly gendered.

The present study contributes to the literature by studying the attentiveness inherent in parental reactions to preschoolers’ nonverbal emotion expressions. In addition, the study includes the contribution of fathers as well as mothers. Less research has examined fathers’ reactions to emotion, although there is evidence that fathers may behave in more gender-differentiated ways than mothers in other aspects of parenting (Lytton & Romney, 1991; Siegal, 1987).

Possible Implications of Parental Attention to Emotion

Greater parental attention given to particular forms of emotional expression may lead children to increase their expressions of those emotions and not others. As other factors converge upon a child’s life to contribute to their risk for problems, the presence of different emotional tendencies may become an early marker for the nature of the symptoms. It is not that emotions in themselves create psychopathology. Rather, it is possible that in the course of development, boys’ and girls’ particular forms of psychopathology could be related to their patterns of emotion expression (Izard, 1972; Kring & Bachorowski, 1999; Malatesta & Wilson, 1988). For example, a tendency to express disharmonious emotion has been associated with higher levels of externalizing problems (Cole et al., 1994, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). A tendency to express submissive emotions may be related to internalizing problems, although internalizing disorders themselves generally do not emerge until late childhood or early adolescence (Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Gjerde, 1993; Izard, 1972; Zahn-Waxler, 2001; Zahn-Waxler et al., 2001).

The Present Study

Mothers’ and fathers’ reactions to children’s submissive emotions (sadness and anxiety) and disharmonious emotions (anger, disharmonious happiness) during an emotionally arousing game were observed at preschool age and early school age. This is a particularly interesting period in which to study these issues. Parental socialization of gendered traits, such as children’s toy and activity choices, peaks around the preschool years (Fagot, 1978; Lytton & Romney, 1991). In addition, gender differences in anger expression emerge during the preschool period (Keenan & Shaw, 1997). Also, children’s beliefs in cultural gender stereotypes for emotion expression are strongest at ages 4–5 and then decrease in strength and rigidity by age 7 (Urberg, 1982).

The present study addressed the presence of gender differences in particular forms of emotion—submissive and disharmonious—predicting that girls would be more likely to convey submissive emotions than boys and that boys would be more likely to show disharmonious emotions than girls. Also, this gender difference may increase with age. Furthermore, it was predicted that parents,
particularly fathers, would give more attention to gender role-
consistent child emotions and that the overall amount of attention
children receive from parents would relate to increases in their
emotion expression over time. Lastly, because the sample included
a high representation of children identified as at risk for behavior
problems, we also examined the hypothesis that higher disharmon-
ious expressions and higher submissive expressions would pre-
dict later externalizing and internalizing symptoms, respectively.

Method

Participants

Participants were selected from a sample of children and their families who participated in a longitudinal study of stability and change in child behavior problems (Cole & Zahn-Waxler, 1988). Preschoolers and their families were recruited from a major urban community via newspaper announcements and flyers. Some advertisements recruited for “hard to manage preschoolers,” and, as needed, other advertisements recruited simply for “preschoolers.” Children with problems beyond the study’s interests (e.g., pervasive developmental disorder, mental retardation) were excluded. Children who participated in both waves of the study were then selected for the present study if they participated in the family visit at both Time 1 and Time 2 using two independent coding schemes (see descriptions below). In each case, coders were trained to 90% accuracy. During coding, coders were checked periodically to ascertain reliability (based on 10% of cases for child emotion, 15% for parental responses). Coders were unaware of what tapes were checked. Each coding team had weekly coding meetings providing opportunities for ongoing clarification. Coders were unaware of study hypotheses.

Child emotion expression. Children’s nonverbal emotion expressions were coded using a system based on Cole, Zahn-Waxler, and Smith (1994). Children’s expressions were categorized as happy, angry, or sad-anxious (for the latter two emotion expressions were coded into one category) using facial, vocal, and postural cues derived from previous research on the nonverbal cues of basic emotions (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1975, 1978; Izard, 1979; Scherer, 1986). Anger cues included brow furrow, lip press, clenched jaw, harsh voice, plosive quality to words spoken, and finger jabbing/pointing. Sadness cues included oblique brow, lip pout, low volume in speech with end of utterance dropping off, and head dropped and tilted. Anxiety cues were mouth retracted; strained voice; or raised, stiff shoulders. Happiness cues included upturned mouth; crinkling around eyes; light, lifting voice; and clapping.

The coding was episode based; that is, any change in the child’s face, voice, or posture was noted and was recorded as the start of an episode of emotion expression. The emotion episode ended when the child returned to a neutral expression for at least 3 s. Once a coder judged that an episode was occurring, the emotion was classified into one of the three categories. Coders could combine codes into “blends” (Ekman & Friesen, 1978) when they judged that two emotions co-occurred (e.g., happy and angry). Given the competitive nature of the game, and given the fact that a child could be happy in the context of mutual pleasure (i.e., sharing happiness with a parent) or enjoying another’s failures (i.e., laughing at a parent’s mistake), happy expressions were further classified as harmonious or disharmonious. Interrater reliability was assessed using Cohen’s kappa following Rovine’s (1994) procedure for redistributing low-frequency cells along the diagonal. Kappas were as follows: .67 for happiness, .92 for anger, .96 for sadness/anxiety, and .76 for the disharmonious/harmonious distinction.

Children’s individual emotion expression codes and blended codes were collapsed into three larger categories: harmonious happiness, disharmonious emotions, and submissive emotions. The present study focused on two categories: disharmonious and submissive emotions. Disharmonious emotions were defined by anger and disharmonious happiness. Blends of anger or disharmon-
ious happiness with any other emotion (i.e., harmonious happi-
ness, sad-anxious) were put into the disharmonious emotion cate-
gory. This rule was based on our observations of the interactions (i.e., disharmonious emotions appeared to be the more salient emotion in a blend) and on the competitive nature of the task.
Submissive emotions were defined by sad-anxious expressions and the blend of sadness-anxiety with harmonious happiness.

Parental attention to child emotion expression. Mothers’ and fathers’ attention was defined by whether or not the parent showed any verbal, behavioral, or emotional response immediately following each child emotion expression episode. Mothers’ and fathers’ attention was coded separately by a different team of coders from the child emotion team. To capture a parent’s attention to a child’s emotional expression, coders considered the parent’s action, emotional tone, and speech in the first 5 s after the onset of the child’s emotional expression. Any observable response, positive or negative, that was relevant to the situation was coded as attention. Irrelevant parent actions (e.g., parent asks other parent what they are having for dinner) were not coded as attention. Interrater reliability was good (κ = .73).

Codes of parental attention were then further classified by coders as discouraging/encouraging and then as event/expression-focused, based on past research (e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Encouraging responses included parents’ paraphrasing the child’s speech, helping the child with the blocks, or matching the child’s expression. Discouraging responses included parents’ disagreeing with the child’s wishes, knocking down the child’s block, or showing an opposite valence emotion from the child (e.g., child smiles and parent frowns). Coders then further rated each encouraging or discouraging response as focused on the event, the emotion expression, or both. Event-focused responses included commenting on the game and fixing or knocking over the block-head tower. Expression-focused responses included commenting on the emotion, expressing an emotion, and hugging or picking at the child. Weighted Kappas for encouraging/discouraging and for event/expression were .69 and .76, respectively.

Child symptoms: Mother-reported. Mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) at both Time 1 and Time 2. The internalizing raw score and the externalizing raw score from the CBCL were used as indices of child internalizing and externalizing symptoms, respectively.

Child symptoms: Self-reported. Children were interviewed by a trained clinician using the Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents–Revised (DICA-R; Reich, Welner, & Herjanic, 1991) at Time 2 only. The depressive symptom total from the DICA was used as an index of child-reported depressive symptoms. The sum total of the DICA attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder symptoms was used to index child self-reported externalizing symptoms.

Results

One-tailed significance values were used for all tests with a hypothesized direction of effect.

Gender Differences in Child Emotion Expressions

Means and standard deviations for child submissive and disharmonious emotion expressions at preschool age (Time 1) and early school age (Time 2) are presented in Table 1. As is typical of observed emotion data, the distributions of emotion expression scores were skewed. To improve normality of the data, these scores were transformed using log transformation (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The log-transformed scores were used for analyses, but, for ease of interpretation, raw scores are presented in the text. As shown in Table 1, the block-head task appeared to be emotionally arousing, and there were more disharmonious than submissive expressions. Children’s frequency of expressing each emotion was moderately stable between preschool and early school age (for submissive emotions: r = .42, p < .01; for disharmonious emotions: r = .61, p < .001).

We hypothesized that girls would express greater submissive and fewer disharmonious emotions than boys (Child Gender × Emotion Type interaction). Also, this gender difference may widen with age. To test this, one mixed-design repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted, with level of emotion expression as the dependent variable. Child emotion type (submissive, disharmonious) and time (Time 1, Time 2) were the within-subjects factor, and child gender was the between-subjects factor. As predicted, there was a significant Child Gender × Emotion interaction, F(1, 58) = 31.00, p < .001. Also, there was a main effect of emotion, with children expressing more disharmonious than submissive emotions overall, F(1, 58) = 298.51, p < .001. There was a trend for a three-way interaction of Child Gender × Emotion × Time of Measurement, F(1, 58) = 3.72, p < .10.

To better understand the Child Gender × Emotion interaction, follow-up t tests were conducted examining gender differences in submissive and disharmonious emotions at each time period. As predicted, girls expressed significantly more submissive emotion, and did so at both preschool age, t(58) = −2.12, p < .05, and early school age, t(58) = −4.74, p < .001. For disharmonious emotions, the gender difference was not significant, although at early school age, girls showed marginally less disharmonious emotion than boys, t(58) = 1.44, p < .10.

Next, the trend for a three-way interaction (Child Gender × Emotion × Time) was considered. As shown in Table 1, boys’ average number of submissive expressions decreased by about 50%, from 1.56 to .75 from preschool to early school age, whereas girls’ submissive expressions stayed about the same over time (Ms = 3.04 and 3.13). The decrease in submissive expressions for boys was a nonsignificant trend, t(35) = 1.85, p < .10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Submissive expression</th>
<th>Disharmonious expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (n = 36)</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>10.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (n = 24)</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>9.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N = 60)</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>10.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early school age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (n = 36)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>10.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (n = 24)</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N = 60)</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>9.38</td>
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</table>
Parental Attention to Children’s Emotional Expressions

Preliminary analyses/data reduction. The present study tests the hypothesis that parental attention to child emotion would differ as a function of both the child’s gender and the type of emotion expressed. As a first step, however, we investigated whether it would be necessary to differentiate attention in terms of its nature. We conducted analyses of variance (ANOVA)s, and there were no significant Child Gender × Emotion × Nature of Response interactions, either for encouraging versus discouraging, for mothers, $F(1, 26) = 0.37, p > .05$; for fathers, $F(1, 26) = 3.27, p > .05$, or for event versus expression focus, for mothers, $F(1, 26) = 0.22, p > .05$, or for fathers, $F(1, 26) = 0.01, p > .05$.

As such, the four types of responses (encourage, discourage, event, expression) were tallied to form an overall score for parent attention to submissive and disharmonious expressions. To control for child expressivity, these scores were divided by children’s standard deviations for mother and father attention proportion or disharmonious emotion. Proportion scores could not be formed for child expressivity, these scores were divided by children’s attention to submissive and disharmonious expressions. To control for event, expression) were tallied to form an overall score for parent emotion interaction for proportion of attention, $F(1, 26) = 3.27, p > .05$. This finding was identical with one exception: Mothers were more attentive to girls’ submissive emotions than to boys’, $F(1, 58) = 4.46, p < .05$. The additional finding for mothers’ attention to girls’ submissive emotions is apparently attributable to the fact that girls expressed more submissive emotions, and hence, it is not present in analyses using proportion scores.

Prediction of change in child emotion from parental attention. We hypothesized that greater disharmonious and submissive expressions at preschool age, $t(38) = -2.03, p < .05$. There was also a trend for fathers to give greater attention to girls’ submissive expressions at early school age, $t(33) = -1.62, p < .10$. Also, as predicted, fathers showed greater attention to boys’ disharmonious expressions than to girls’ at early school age, $t(56) = 1.70, p < .05$. There was no significant child gender difference for fathers’ attention to disharmonious expressions at preschool age ($t < 1.0$).

For mothers, the predicted Child Gender × Emotion interaction was not significant, $F(1, 26) = 1.74, p < .10$. There were significant main effects of time and emotion type. These main effects were subsumed by a Time × Emotion interaction, indicating that mothers gave more attention at Time 2, particularly for disharmonious emotions, $F(1, 26) = 25.39, p < .001$.

Because proportions do not reflect the frequency of a parental response, the analyses were repeated using frequency data. The findings were identical with one exception: Mothers were more attentive to girls’ submissive emotions than to boys’, $F(1, 58) = 4.46, p < .05$. The additional finding for mothers’ attention to girls’ submissive emotions is apparently attributable to the fact that girls expressed more submissive emotions, and hence, it is not present in analyses using proportion scores.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
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<th>Disharmonious</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>$n = 22$</td>
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<td>0.79</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.12</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early school age</td>
<td>$n = 15$</td>
<td>$n = 20$</td>
<td>$n = 36$</td>
<td>$n = 22$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relations Between Child Emotion Expression and Early School-Age Symptoms

Means and standard deviations for child symptoms at preschool age (Time 1) and early school age (Time 2) are presented in Table 4. Data were not available for mother-reported symptoms at Time 2 for 6 children. There was one significant gender difference; girls had higher levels of mother-reported internalizing symptoms at Time 1 than boys.

We hypothesized that greater disharmonious and submissive expressions at Time 1 would be related to higher Time-2 mother-reported externalizing and internalizing symptoms, controlling for Time-1 symptoms. Two hierarchical regressions were conducted, with symptoms at Time 2 as the dependent variable, symptoms at Time 1 entered in the first step, and child emotion expression at Time 1 entered in the second step. Outliers were examined (Neter et al., 1996). There was one outlier case in each regression (stu-
dentized deleted residuals > 2.42), both with high influence (Cook’s distances; Di > .07). Analyses were performed excluding the outlier cases.  

For mother-reported externalizing symptoms, results were consistent with the hypothesis. As shown in Table 5, child disharmonious expression at Time 1 significantly predicted mother-reported externalizing symptoms at Time 2, controlling for externalizing symptoms at Time 1. However, child submissive expression at Time 1 was not related to mother-reported internalizing problems at Time 2 (β = -.01, p > .10) [submissive expression Time 1]).

Two regressions were also conducted predicting child-reported externalizing and depressive symptoms at Time 2 from child emotion expression at Time 1. It was not possible to control for child symptoms at Time 1 because these data were not available. Diagnostic tests identified two outliers for externalizing symptoms in the sample but were average in disharmonious expressions. Regressions, including the outliers, were not significant (mother-reported externalizing symptoms at Time 2 (R² = .05), F(1, 57) = 2.71, p < .10).

Discussion

The present longitudinal study examined gender differences in children’s nonverbal emotional expressions and in parents’ differential attention to those expressions by using an observational method. As expected, girls expressed more submissive emotion, including sadness and anxiety, than boys. Moreover, there was evidence that parents, notably fathers, responded to these emotions in gender-differentiated ways. Specifically, fathers attended to girls’ submissive expressions more than to boys’ at preschool age and to boys’ disharmonious expressions more than to girls’ at early school age. In addition, parental attention to emotion predicted increases in children’s expressions of emotion over time for submissive, but not disharmonious, emotion. Lastly, as predicted, higher levels of disharmonious expressions at preschool age were related to greater externalizing symptoms 2 years later, after controlling for initial symptoms.

Gender Differences in Children’s Emotion Expression

Submissive emotion. Submissive emotions are consistent with the stereotype for female role socialization, that is, helping a child become motivated to take care of others and to avoid selfishness or overt aggression that might threaten relationships (Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Zahn-Waxler, Klimes-Dougan, & Slattery, 2000). This study demonstrates, using observational evidence, that young girls express submissive emotions more than boys and thus is one of the few studies to demonstrate this difference through nonverbal assessment (as opposed to self-report or parental report). Other

1 For externalizing analyses, the outlier cases had the highest externalizing symptoms in the sample but were average in disharmonious expressions. Regressions, including the outliers, were not significant (mother-reported β = .17, p > .05; child-reported β = .17, p > .05). For internalizing analyses, the outliers had the highest internalizing symptoms in the sample and were high in submissive expressions. Regressions, including outliers, were significant for child-reported depressive symptoms (β = .32, p < .05) but not for mother-reported internalizing symptoms (β = .17, p > .05).
research has not found gender differences in sadness and anxiety in this age group (e.g., Hinde, Tamplin, & Barrett, 1993; Roberts & Strayer, 1987). We may have found differences because this competitive game task, in which children experienced the anticipation of waiting for the tower of blocks to fall and the failure of having their own tower fall, elicited a range of sad and anxious expressions, enabling us to observe gender differences.

Interestingly, there was a trend for the gender difference in submissive expressions to widen between the preschool and early school-age observations. Whereas the level of girls' expressions of submissive emotions with their parents remained stable, boys' expressions of sadness and anxiety decreased by 50% from pre-school to school age. This may reflect the fact that pressures to conform to gender roles are most intense before and during the entry to school because of increased pressure from parents (Fagot, 1978; Lytton & Romney, 1991) and the added socialization influences of teachers and peers (Keenan & Shaw, 1997).

Disharmonious emotion. The prediction that boys would express disharmonious emotions more than girls was not found in this study. There were no gender differences at either age, although it is noteworthy that there was a nonsignificant trend for boys to show more disharmonious emotions at early school age than girls. Perhaps the context of the observations was not highly sensitive to girls' tendency to limit expressions of anger or disharmonious emotions. The setting elicited frustration and was also a game context with family. In game contexts, slight expression of anger at losing may be seen as acceptable for both boys and girls. The presence of family may also be significant. In our larger study, we have observed the preschool girls to mask anger more so than boys in the presence of an assistant (Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Smith, 1994) but not in the presence of their mothers (Cole et al., 2003).

Parental Attention to Emotion

There was some evidence for greater parental attention to children's gender role-consistent nonverbal emotion expression. This converges with past observational research, which has found gender differences in mothers' use of emotion words with daughters and sons (e.g., Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Fivush, 1989; Fivush et al., 2000). Interestingly, the present gender differences were more apparent for fathers than for mothers. Fathers focused on girls' submissive emotions more so than they did on the expressions of sadness and anxiety by boys at preschool age, and there was a nonsignificant trend for this at early school age as well. Moreover, fathers were more attentive to boys' disharmonious emotions than to girls', but only by the time the children had reached early school age. This adds to past findings that fathers engage in more gender socialization than mothers across other aspects of children's social and emotional development (Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993; Lytton & Romney, 1991).

Our study demonstrates a subtle form of socialization pressure, that of attending to the child in certain emotional states but ignoring others. Although we assessed parental behaviors that encouraged or discouraged children's emotions, this distinction was not as predictive. The findings highlight that the amount of parent attention may be an important dimension of parental socialization. Whether the attention is encouraging or discouraging is clearly important for many aspects of emotional development but is often not gender differentiated (Denham et al., 1994; Gottman et al., 1997; Stevenson-Hinde & Shouldice, 1995). However, the subtle giving of attention, whether it is positive or negative, may function to reinforce or affirm particular gender roles for emotion.

In addition, the present findings provide initial evidence that the amount of parental attention to emotion may be related to children's later emotional expressivity. Greater attention to sad and anxious emotion at preschool age predicted higher levels of children's expression of these emotions by the early school-age assessment. Of course, differential parental responsiveness itself may be originally influenced by inborn differences in children's sad or anxious emotional styles or temperaments (Kagan, 1994; Lewis & Weinraub, 1979). However, it is interesting that parental attention to submissive emotion was related to submissive expression level 2 years later, even after controlling for children's tendencies to express submissive emotions at preschool age. This prediction was not found for disharmonious expressions, perhaps because these were more stable across time. Children in this sample, who were recruited as hard to manage, may have already developed styles of anger and disharmonious happiness before the study began, through temperament or early socialization.

Relations Between Child Emotion and Externalizing Symptoms

Because our sample included a number of children who were rated as hard to manage, it was possible to determine whether patterns of emotion expression in boys and girls were systematically related to their behavioral symptoms. As predicted, preschoolers' expressions of disharmonious emotion were related to their early school-age externalizing symptoms, even after the level of symptoms at preschool age was taken into account. This finding is consistent with a growing literature suggesting that children's emotion expression styles may be associated with particular psychological symptoms (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994; Garber & Dodge, 1991). For example, greater angry emotion expression has been correlated with higher externalizing symptoms in school-age children (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2001; Zeman et al., 2002).

This same line of thinking has been used to argue that a higher rate of expression of submissive emotions might be related to the development of internalizing disorders (Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Zahn-Waxler et al., 2000). In the present study, submissive expressions at preschool did not relate to internalizing problems at early school age. This relationship may become more robust later in development, such as in adolescence when disorders like depression are more likely to be observed and to be seen more often in girls than in boys (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994).

Conclusions

There remains much to discover about the many sources of gender socialization of emotion. Our study examines a brief (10-min) interaction between children and their parents. The study provides evidence that gender differences in emotional presentation may exist as early as preschool age, and that, at least in this specific context (a family game context), fathers engage in gender-differentiated socialization. The study has the advantage of focusing on actual behavior, rather than tapping cultural stereotypes about boys' and girls' emotional expressivity and parents' beliefs about their behavior. However, observational research is a tedious
and time-consuming venture, often resulting in relatively short sampling of behavior. This study’s findings suggest that even in a brief observation, in a particular and limited context, we can detect gender differences in young children, differences that may be reinforced by selective parental attentiveness.

Future research is needed to determine whether these findings extend beyond family interactions to other contexts, such as peer contexts. As well, the present study focused on primarily White, middle-class families. The findings may be different for other cultural groups, who may have different gender roles for emotion expression (Saarni, 1999). Furthermore, the study was limited in that it observed a small number of families for a short time period. Despite these limitations, the study provides important evidence that preschoolers show gender role-consistent patterns of emotion expression, particularly for submissive emotions, and that these patterns are reinforced by fathers and are related to externalizing symptoms 2 years later.

References


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