

Parents Need to Regulate Their Own Emotions in Order to Help a Child Cope



As part of DugDug’s ongoing series on leading researchers in family relationship studies, we have had the unique privilege of interviewing Dr. Pamela Cole, a Professor of Psychology and Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University. Trained as a child clinical and developmental psychologist, Dr. Cole is interested in how children typically acquire the ability to manage their emotions, like frustrations and disappointments, in early childhood. Her recent paper, titled *A Longitudinal Examination of Maternal Emotions in Relation to Young Children’s Developing Self-Regulation* was published in the journal *Parenting, Science and Practice*. The paper studies the emotional relationship between a mother and her child.

What led you to this study?

As we have studied young children’s development of anger regulation and parents’ contributions to it, we realized how much parents have to regulate their own emotions in order to help a child cope. When they don’t, it can often interfere with the child learning to control his or her anger. But, we thought, parents are people too. Although there were many studies that focused on parenting stress, marital conflict, and so on, we could not find many studies that simply described parents’ emotions and explained what predicted them.

So, we decided to ask mothers how they felt during a lab procedure during which their child had to wait to open a gift. In this task, the child is given a brightly wrapped gift. The mother tells the child: “That is for you but you have to wait until I finish my work to open it.” The mother then settles into completing some questions about how her child usually handles waiting and the child has only a boring toy with which to play. This procedure was 8 minutes long and repeated at child ages 18, 24, 36, and 48 months. After the mother writes her answers to various questions about her child’s usual wait and how she usually handles it, she encounters questions about how her child and she are feeling during the wait. This allowed us to ask: what is it about the child’s behavior and behavior change over time that helps us predict the mother’s feelings during the wait. The most important question to us was understanding how mothers’ emotions change over time as children learn to wait and what about the child’s development might predict mothers’ emotions over time.

What were some of your learnings?

1. We learned that mothers’ emotions in this procedure changed between her child’s ages of 18 to 48 months. Her negative emotions decreased between child ages 24 and 36 months, and her positive emotions increased steadily between child ages 18 and 36 months. Another way to look at these findings is that mothers felt relatively equal degrees of positive and negative emotions during the toddler years, but felt much more positively than negatively during the preschool years. So we wondered if this could be explained by growth in a child’s learning to wait.
2. Do mothers’ negative emotions change as a result of improvements in child anger and misbehavior during a frustrating wait from toddler to preschool age? Mothers’ negative emotions were linked to child anger and not to child misbehavior. Particularly interesting was that toddlers who tended to be angrier than other toddlers but who improved over time had mothers whose negative emotions also improved over time, but toddlers who were angry and stayed angry over the course of this period of early childhood had mothers whose negative emotions did not decline.
3. Do mothers’ positive emotions change as a result of improvements in children’s contentment and ability to try to cope on their own between toddler and preschool age? Mainly mothers feel positive emotions at any age if their child is more content and better able to distract from the gift by playing. Interestingly, mothers’ positive emotions were also tied to children calmly talking to them about the long wait but this dropped off by the time the children had reached 48 months of age. Perhaps then mothers thought they should be able to handle the wait and not interrupt their mothers’ work.

How can we use these findings?

We can begin to appreciate that parents are humans and that it is both challenging and rewarding to raise young children. Moreover, we can appreciate that children who have difficulty learning self-regulation, e.g. learning to wait, may contribute to a mother’s negative emotions. Of course mother’s negative emotions can influence her child’s anger so the story is a bit more complicated than our study examined. When we encourage parents to help promote children’s self-regulation, we should take into consideration they might also appreciate a little understanding and help in regard to how the challenges and successes make the parents feel.

We are continuing to study these questions using a number of different approaches, including (a) examining how both mothers’ emotion influences the child’s and how the child’s influences the mothers at each age and over time, (b) talking to mothers during their day to day lives, instead of in the lab, about the emotions they experience in the context of parenting a young child, and (c) examining how child and parent anger are processed in the brain.

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