# Parent Socialization of Emotion Regulation in Preschool Children Who Stutter

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined how parent socialization of emotion regulation differs between preschoolers who do and do not stutter. Participants were mother-child dyads with 7 preschool children who stutter (CWS) and 7 preschool children who do not stutter (CWNS). Both adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation socialization strategies, as well as overall family emotional expressiveness, were measured through maternal report. In addition, maternal socialization of emotion regulation was observed during a semi-structured laboratory task designed to demonstrate the emotion regulation abilities of preschool children: denied request for candy. Although the small preliminary sample size precluded the use of inferential statistics, most mean differences were in the predicted direction. Specifically, mothers of CWS reported more emotion-focused responses to children's displays of negative affect, more expressions of both positive and negative emotion in the family, and displayed fewer emotion socialization strategies during the denied request for candy procedure. Modifying parent-child communication is one important aspect of treatment approaches for preschool children who stutter (e.g., Graham & Conture, in press; Melnick & Conture, 1999; Kelly, 1995). Consequently, data-based descriptions of the characteristics of family environments that contribute to risk factors for childhood stuttering should enhance our understanding of the most salient variables to consider when studying and treating preschool children who stutter and their families.


## BACKGROUND

- Learning to regulate emotion is an important developmental milestone and is strongly influenced by parental modeling and teaching (Parke, 1994).

- Parent socialization of emotion regulation, including parents' implicit and explicit messages about appropriate emotional displays, impacts children's emotional and social development (Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994).

- Parents are thought to socialize emotional expression and regulation in three ways:
  - indirect instruction
  - direct instruction (or coaching)
  - management of children's exposure to potentially emotionally challenging situations (Parke, 1994).

- Recent empirical evidence suggests that children who stutter (CWS) are more emotionally reactive and less well-regulated than children who do not stutter (CWNS) (Karrass, Walden, Conture, Graham, Arnold, & Schwenk, 2005; Karrass, Walden, Conture, & Hartfield, 2006).

- Studies of parents of school-aged CWS suggest that mothers of CWS are more:
  - authoritarian (Langlois, Hanrahan, & Inouye, 1986)
  - passive and anxious (Yanagawa, 1974)
  - democratic and protective of their children (Moore & Nystul, 1979)
  - inconsistent in their parenting (Lasogga & Wedemeyer, 1979)
  - Other studies find no difference between mothers of CWS and CWNS (e.g., Weiss & Zebrowski, 1991).

- Given that parental/family involvement can be an important aspect of treating childhood stuttering (e.g., Graham & Conture, in press; Melnick & Conture, 1999; Kelly, 1995), further understanding of parents' strategies for dealing with emotions should help explain how emotions are experienced and displayed by a child who stutters and/or how these experiences may impact childhood stuttering.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- To investigate differences in emotion socialization in the families of CWS versus CWNS, using both maternal-report and observational data.

- Hypotheses
  - Mothers of CWS were predicted to
    - report use of fewer adaptive strategies for socializing emotion regulation in their children.
    - demonstrate fewer adaptive emotion socialization strategies in a laboratory task.
  - The families of CWS were predicted to be more emotionally reactive.

## METHOD

**Participants:**

- 7 preschool CWS and 7 preschool CWNS, equated for age (M = 44.1 months, SD = 6.0 months) and gender (57% female)

**Procedure**

- Mothers completed questionnaires at home before the laboratory visit.
- At the laboratory, the experimenter gave the child candy and said s(he) could have it if mother agrees.
- The mother denied the request for candy.
- The mother-child interaction continued until an agreement was reached. If no agreement was reached, the interaction was terminated after two minutes.

**Measures**

***Maternal-report data***

- Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES): measures mother's reported emotional socialization strategies in response to her child's negative affect:
  - Adaptive responses: encouragement of emotional expression, and facilitating the child's use of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies
  - Maladaptive responses: maternal distress, punitive responses and minimization

- Family Expressiveness Questionnaire (FEQ): describes the frequency and intensity of emotional expression in the family:
  - positive emotion: submissive (snuggling) and dominant (demonstrating affection)
  - negative emotion: submissive (crying) and dominant (quarreling)

- Data reduction: questionnaires
  - Principal Components Analyses with varimax rotation
  - Factors with Eigenvalues > 1 were selected
  - 4 final variables:
    - **CCNES adaptive emotion socialization strategy use**: high problem- and emotion-focused emotion socialization strategies and low punishment and minimization strategies
    - **CCNES emotion-focused responses:** maternal distress and encouragement of emotional expression
    - **FEQ positive emotion**
    - **FEQ negative emotion**

***Observational data***

- Sum of number of different strategies mothers used, coded from videotape, adapted from Stansbury and Zimmermann (1999):
  - Comforting (physical or verbal management of emotions)
  - Cognitive restructuring (reinterpreting the event)
  - Distraction (changing the focus of attention from the event)
  - Instrumental coping (changing the event)

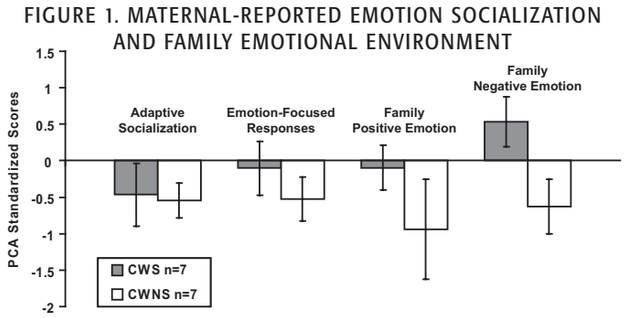
- To ensure that the procedure did successfully elicit negative emotion, child affect was coded on a scale from +3 (very positive) to -3 (very negative).

## RESULTS

**Maternal-report data**

- Although small preliminary sample size precluded the use of inferential statistics, most mean differences were in the expected direction.
- Mothers of CWS reported more emotion-focused responses to their children's emotional displays (see Figure 1).
- Mothers of CWS reported more expressions of both positive and negative emotion in the family (see Figure 1).
- There was no appreciable difference in maternal reports of the use of adaptive emotion socialization strategies (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. MATERNAL-REPORTED EMOTION SOCIALIZATION AND FAMILY EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT




**Observational data**

- Mothers of CWS displayed use of fewer emotion regulation strategies during the denied request for candy procedure (see Figure 2).
- Children's affect ratings averaged below 0 for both groups, indicating that the procedure did elicit negative affect (see Figure 3).
- Affect ratings did not differ appreciably between CWS and CWNS (see Figure 3).

DENIED CANDY PROCEDURE

FIGURE 2. MOTHERS' EMOTION SOCIALIZATION STRATEGIES

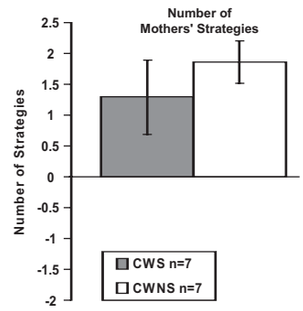
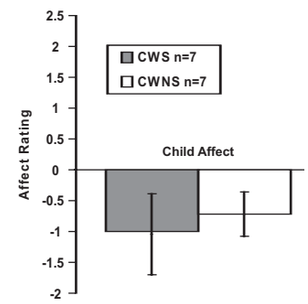



FIGURE 3. CHILDREN'S AFFECT




## DISCUSSION

**The present study resulted in three main findings:**

- Consistent with hypotheses, mothers of CWS reported
  - Finding 1: More emotion-related responses to their children's displays of negative affect
  - Finding 2: More positive and negative emotional expressions in the family
- Also, consistent with the hypothesis, mothers of CWS reported/showed:
  - Finding 3: Fewer emotion regulation strategies in the denied request for candy procedure.
- In contrast to hypotheses, there was no evidence that mothers of CWS differed in their reported use of adaptive emotion socialization strategies. Mothers of CWS perceive themselves to be adaptively socializing emotion regulation in their children more than they actually are.
- This heightened emotional reactivity in the families of CWS and mothers' emotionally focused responses to their children's emotional displays might contribute to the greater emotional reactivity and poorer emotion regulation abilities seen in preschool CWS. It is also possible that CWS may be inherently more emotionally reactive and poorer in terms of regulating their reactions, which in combination with greater parental emotionality, may negatively impact the speech fluency of young children who stutter.
- Future studies should incorporate different emotion-eliciting observational tasks to gain a more comprehensive picture of how mothers socialize their children's emotion regulation (i.e., situations involving sadness, embarrassment, fear, etc.).

## CONCLUSION

Present findings were taken to suggest that both researchers and practitioners need to understand the family environment in which the child who stutters is developing his or her emotion regulation abilities. Such knowledge, together with continued insights provided by empirical research in this area, should help in the design of treatments for developmental stuttering that more effectively take into account important family characteristics.

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Presented to the annual convention of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Miami, FL (November, 2006). Poster constructed by the Graphics Core of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Vanderbilt University, supported in part by NICHD Grant P30 HD15052. The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center is devoted to unlocking the mysteries of the brain and child development, and improving the lives of people with disabilities. kc.vanderbilt.edu