Parent–Child Emotional Communication and Children's Coping in Middle Childhood

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Abstract

Parent–child communication regarding children's negative emotions and coping were examined in a sample of 75 5th graders (53% boys) and their mothers and fathers. We predicted that emotionally open communication between a parent and his or her child would be related to children's use of constructive coping strategies. Parents reported on how they react to their child's negative emotions, and children reported on how much they share their negative feelings with each parent. Additionally, emotional communication was measured during a parent–child discussion task involving an event that was upsetting to the child. The results indicated that emotional communication, as reported by mothers, fathers, and children, as well as mother–child observed communication, were related to children's coping strategies. The findings point to a need to assess emotional communication using multiple measures that tap both the child's and the parents' perspectives and that use different methodologies.

Keywords: parent-child communication; emotions; coping

The use of adaptive coping strategies has been shown to be an important factor for child adjustment (see Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001 for a review). For example, children's use of constructive coping strategies is linked to greater social competence with peers (Contreras, Kerns, Weimer, Gentzler & Tomich, 2000; Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy, Maszk, Smith & Karbon, 1995) and fewer internalizing or externalizing symptoms (e.g., Herman-Stahl & Petersen, 1996; Sandler, Tein & West, 1994). In contrast to the large number of studies that have examined relations between children's coping and their functioning (Compas *et al.*, 2001), relatively few studies have examined factors that may contribute to the development of children's coping strategies. Several researchers have argued that parents mold children's regulatory styles throughout childhood (Campos, Campos & Barrett, 1989; Casey & Fuller, 1994; Cassidy, 1994; Eisenberg, Cumberland & Spinrad, 1998). In the present study, we tested whether more emotionally open communication is related to children's use of more constructive coping strategies.

Earlier theoretical work on the parental socialization of children's emotional regulation and coping processes (see Contreras & Kerns, 2000, and Kliewer, Sandler &

Wolchik, 1994 for reviews) and relevant empirical research offer a strong basis for the hypothesis that open communication between parents and children would facilitate children's development of constructive coping strategies. First, parents who are able to discuss emotions openly with their children are serving as models for their children. As an application of the social learning theory then, by observing their parents' reactions to their emotions, children can learn how to label their own emotions and can see that talking through one's negative experiences or emotions can be beneficial. A second reason is that children who talk with their parents regarding their negative emotions or upsetting experiences are providing the opportunity for parents to offer suggestions on how to cope. Third, parents who are open with their child regarding topics of emotional significance and are relatively accepting of their child's negative affect are likely to increase their child's support-seeking behavior, one type of coping strategy. This is consistent with the attachment theory, which suggests that parents who are responsive to their children's distress will promote children's use of attachment figures for comfort in times of stress (Bowlby, 1973). Overall, emotionally open discussions between parent and child may help children better understand and modulate their own emotions and develop adaptive coping strategies.

Some empirical research investigating parental socialization of children's coping has examined associations between children's coping and general parenting characteristics, such as the quality of the family environment or the parent–child relationship. Results indicate that more supportive or structured family environments relate to children's reliance on more constructive coping strategies (Hardy, Power & Jaedicke, 1993; Kliewer, Fearnow & Miller, 1996; Stern & Zevon, 1990; Wills, Blechman & McNamara, 1996). Also, children who have formed more secure attachment relationships with their parents employ more constructive coping strategies (Contreras *et al.*, 2000).

Other studies have included assessments that more specifically target how parents react to children's negative emotions, which is important, given that parental responses to children's emotions are distinguishable from a more general construct of parental warmth and can independently predict child regulation and competence (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996; Roberts & Strayer, 1987). Research that has examined parents' responses to their child's negative emotions has shown that parents who report more supportive reactions to their children's negative emotions have children who use more adaptive coping or emotion-regulation strategies (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1998; Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1997; McDowell, Kim, O'Neil, & Parke, 2002; Valiente, Fabes, Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). These findings are consistent with Gottman *et al.*'s (1996) conceptualization of parents with an emotion-coaching philosophy, in which the parents are aware of their own and the child's emotions, validate and help label the child's emotions, and instruct them on strategies to cope with the situation. These types of supportive reactions (e.g., providing problem or emotion-focused coping suggestions) not only provide advice on how children could deal with their emotions or the problem but also are likely to convey a sense of acceptance to the child regarding their negative emotions. By contrast, unsupportive parental responses, communicating hostility, or invalidating the child's feelings, are likely to teach children not to talk regarding their feelings or problems. Consistent with this idea are findings showing that unsupportive parental reactions, such as punitive (i.e., punishing children for sharing their negative emotions), minimization (i.e., downplaying the importance of the child's feelings), or distress reactions (i.e., when parents themselves become upset as a result of the child's negative emotions), are associated with problematic coping by children

(Eisenberg, Fabes & Murphy, 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Guthrie, Murphy & Reiser, 1999; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff & Martin, 2001).

An even more explicit form of parental socialization of children's coping is the specific suggestion that parents make to their children regarding their coping efforts. This is similar to (and could be part of) the parental reactions discussed above (e.g., problem-focused reactions). In samples of children in middle childhood, some evidence has been found that parents' encouragement or discouragement of particular coping styles relates to the specific strategies that children report using (Kliewer *et al.*, 1996; Miller, Kliewer, Hepworth & Sandler, 1994). For example, mothers who made more cognitive restructuring suggestions to girls related to girls' use of more support-seeking coping (Kliewer *et al.*, 1996).

In summary, prior research has provided some evidence of how parent–child communication relates to children's coping. However, one limitation of earlier studies is that researchers relied predominantly on self-report questionnaires to measure parental influences on child coping in middle childhood. In one exception, McDowell *et al.* (2002) had triads of mothers, fathers, and children discuss difficult issues and found evidence that parents' positive interactions and controlling demeanor during the discussion and their focus on the child as the source of the problem related to children's coping in middle childhood. In the present study, we also included a discussion task, in which we asked parent–child dyads to discuss an event that was upsetting to the child, so that we could assess the degree to which parents encouraged children to talk about their feelings and accepted their child's negative emotions. This dyadic observation task allows for mothers' and fathers' communication with the child to be assessed in separate interactions, and it can complement our self-report measures of emotionally open communication. Self-report measures capture an insider's perspective, which may be difficult to tap with other techniques, but they also may include biases or reflect people's beliefs regarding how they behave rather than how they actually behave (Fivush, 1998). By contrast, the assessment of behavior through observational methods can provide an outsider's perspective of parent–child interactions (Furman, Jones, Buhrmester & Adler, 1988). Although behavioral measures are also susceptible to self-presentation effects, parents and children have less control over the image that they convey because of the dyadic and interdependent nature of discussions.

A second limitation of research on the parental socialization of children's coping is that, until recently (see Eisenberg *et al.*, 1999; Fabes *et al.*, 2001 for exceptions), parents were often portrayed as unidirectionally influencing children's regulatory ability. One aspect of the parent–child relationship that may affect the impact of the parent is the children's willingness to talk with their parents regarding upsetting experiences. Because parents are not always in the vicinity of children's experiences to guide their children's coping responses, children who are more willing to talk with their parents regarding their negative emotions or upsetting experiences would provide parents with a greater opportunity to offer coping suggestions. This role of the child may become increasingly important as children get older, because they are likely to spend more time away from parents, and they may become more selective in terms of when and with whom they discuss negative events and emotions. In middle childhood then, the child's contribution in establishing emotionally open communication may be crucial to understanding parental socialization of child coping. Therefore, in the present study, we included a self-report measure of children's perspective on the degree to which they talk with their parents regarding their negative experiences and feelings.

In the discussion task, we also measured how emotionally open the children were when talking regarding their negative feelings to their parents. Additionally, because of the interdependence among people involved in a discussion, we created a dyadic coding scheme that takes into consideration the nature of both parent's and child's contribution to the discussion.

To summarize, we obtained both parents' and children's reports of how they respond when the child is upset and observed how each parent–child dyad communicates when discussing an event that was upsetting for the child. Because of the multidimensional nature of the construct and the lack of established measures, it was our first goal to explore ways in which parent–child emotional communication can be measured. Emotional communication could include overt discussion of emotions as well as expressions of emotion through both verbal communication and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., Saarni & Buckley, 2002). We focused our investigation on emotional conversation regarding children's upsetting experiences, because we considered that under this circumstance, parental socialization of children's coping is likely to occur explicitly. Our self-report measures focus on reactions when the child is upset, whereas our discussion task focuses on parent–child dyads talking regarding a prior experience that was upsetting for the child, which provides somewhat different socialization experiences. Regarding associations among the measures, parental reactions and children's emotional openness could be expected to be related, because prior research has shown that a child who expects a supportive response from a parent is more likely to want to express emotion to the parent (Fuchs & Thelen, 1988; Zeman & Shipman, 1997) and that adolescents who have positive views of family communication and relationships also report greater emotional self-disclosure to parents (Papini, Farmer, Clark, Micka & Barnett, 1990). However, because of reporter and contextual differences with our measures of emotional communication, associations among them could be tempered. Thus, all of the measures tap different aspects of emotion communication, but by obtaining both parents' and children's perspectives on communication centered around children's emotions and by relying on different methodologies, we sought to create a comprehensive assessment of this multifaceted construct.

Our second goal was to test the hypothesis that more open and accepting parent–child communication relates to children's use of more constructive coping strategies. We expected that parents' supportive reactions to children's expression of or talking about negative affect, which include providing coping suggestions to change the situation or comforting their child, should be associated with the child's use of more problem-solving or support-seeking coping strategies. By contrast, parents who report the use of more unsupportive reactions (e.g., punitive or minimizing) or who exhibit rejecting attitudes toward the child's feelings during the discussion task are likely to have children who use less constructive coping strategies (i.e., more avoidant or aggressive strategies). Regarding the children's contribution, their willingness to be emotionally open with their parents (indexed by self-report and observational data) is also expected to relate to their use of more constructive coping strategies.

We tested our hypotheses with a sample of 5th graders, because this is an age when the ability to regulate emotions is particularly important for children's social adjustment. A key developmental task at this age is to gain acceptance from one's peers, and Parker and Gottman (1989) propose that regulating emotion is critical for this task. There is also ample evidence that the quality of peer relationships is related to children's emotional competence in middle childhood (Hubbard & Coie, 1994). Given that families play a central role in emotion socialization (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1998), we

wanted to explore how parent–child relationships are related to child coping in preadolescence.

The third goal of the study was to examine children's emotional communication with both mothers and fathers. Fathers have been less often studied than mothers, but their contribution to their child's emotion-regulation development is nonetheless important. For example, with young children, fathers' expressions of emotion or responses to their children's emotions have shown unique or stronger links to children's regulation (Carson & Parke, 1996; Gottman *et al.*, 1997), competence (Roberts & Strayer, 1987), or peer acceptance (Isley, O'Neil & Parke, 1996) than shown for mothers. Given that physically playful interaction tends to evoke intense emotions and arousal, fathers' tendency to engage in these types of interactions with their children provides them with an ideal context in which their behavior can influence how children learn to cope with negative emotions (Parke, 1996). However, in other studies, weaker or fewer relations between fathers' behaviors and children's coping emerged compared with those for mothers (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1999; Kliewer *et al.*, 1996; Valiente *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, one study found parent–child gender differences, in that stronger relations between parent–child interactions and children's coping emerged for mother–daughter dyads than for mother–son or father–daughter dyads (McDowell *et al.*, 2002). As a result of the varied findings in prior studies, although we expected a similar pattern of findings for mothers and fathers, the strength of the findings or the specific types of links between parents and children may differ depending on parent gender.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 75 5th graders and their parents. Although 79 families participated, data from four families were excluded from analyses because of problems with the videotaped segment. Specifically, one parent (a single mother) and child dyad chose not to be videotaped, and three parent–child interactions were videotaped, but because of technical problems, these could not be heard. One stepfather chose not to be videotaped, but the family is still included in the sample, because the mother and child completed the videotaped tasks. From the sample of 75 families, 63% ($n = 47$) were two-parent families; 11% ($n = 8$) were stepfather families; 24% ($n = 18$) were mother-headed single-parent families; and 3% ($n = 2$) were father-headed single-parent families. In two-parent families, both parents were asked to participate; however, for eight two-parent families, only the mother and child participated, and for one two-parent family, only the father and child participated. The racial distribution of the children in the sample was 93.3% Caucasian, 2.7% African-American, 1.3% Hispanic, and 2.7% reporting 'other'. The children (39 boys and 35 girls) ranged in age from 9.9 to 11.8 years ($M = 11.0$). The mean education levels for mothers and fathers were 15.0 (range = 11–20 years) and 15.5 (range = 11–20 years) years, respectively.

The families in the current sample had previously participated in a parent–child relationship study two years earlier when the children were in 3rd grade, with the exception of two families who were not part of the original study but who volunteered to participate in the current study. We recruited the original sample by sending letters to parents through local schools. The original sample consisted of 104 3rd graders; however, 20% declined to participate, and 6% could not be located. Tests for selection

effects were done to determine if the returning participants differed from the non-returning participants on demographic information (i.e., child ethnicity and gender as well as parent education and employment). The only difference that emerged was that Caucasian families were more likely to return than families of other racial background (78 versus 46%, respectively).

Procedure

The data were collected during a single laboratory visit where children and their parent(s) completed questionnaires, and each parent–child dyad was videotaped while completing an interaction task. Children of two-parent families (both intact and step-families) made a single laboratory visit with both parents. Within the session, the child and parent first completed the videotaped segment then separately completed questionnaires. For children whose two parents participated, the second videotaped segment was done at the end of the session with the ordering of mothers and fathers randomized across participants. In addition, in these families, the mothers and fathers completed all questionnaire measures separately. The children and parents received $15 each for their participation.

Measures

Parents' Reports of Their Reactions to Their Child's Negative Emotions. The parents completed the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES; Fabes, Eisenberg & Bernzweig, 1990). The questionnaire included 11 scenarios that described specific situations where the child experiences negative emotions (e.g., angry, scared, upset, nervous), and parents were asked how they would respond to the child's reactions. The original scale included 12 scenarios; however, one situation that included positive emotions for the child was excluded. For each scenario, the parents rated how likely they would be able to respond to their child's negative emotions by reacting in each of the following six possible ways: problem focused (parents focus on ways to improve the situation), emotion focused (parents focus on ways to make the child feel better), expressive encouragement (parents encourage children to express their emotions), punitive (parents punish the child for expressing emotions), distress (parents become upset), and minimization (parents diminish the child's response or feelings). An example item is:

If my child is at a park and appears on the verge of tears because the other children are mean to him/her and won't let him/her play with them, I would: help my child think of something else to do [problem-focused]; comfort my child and try to get him/her to think about something happy [emotion-focused]; tell my child it's ok to cry when he/she feels bad [encourage emotional expression]; tell my child that if he/she starts crying then we'll have to go home right away [punitive]; not get upset myself [distress-reversed]; tell my child that he/she will feel better soon [minimize].

The parents rated their reactions on a 7-point scale (1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely).

Following the authors' recommendations (Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg & Madden-Derdich, 2002), the six scales of the CCNES were combined into four scales. Specifically, we averaged the scores on the problem-focused and emotion-focused reactions (correlated at $r = .62$ for mothers and fathers) to create a scale called *problem- and emotion-focused reactions* (α for mothers = .87; α for fathers = .85). We averaged the

Table 1. Descriptive Information for the Sample

	Mother		Father	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Parent Reactions to Child's Negative Emotions (Parent Report)				
Problem- and emotion-focused reactions	5.47	.73	5.44	.62
Expressive encouragement	4.87	.97	4.35	1.24
Unsupportive reactions	2.72	.71	3.06	.89
Distress reactions	2.89	.78	3.03	.76
Child Affective Sharing (Child Report)				
Affective sharing with parent	3.28	.62	3.08	.74
Parent–Child Interactions				
Parent acceptance and encouragement	5.54	1.89	5.20	1.82
Child emotional openness	2.84	.88	3.08	.85
Child Coping (Parent Report)				
Constructive coping				
Support-seeking	3.50	.71	3.42	.67
Problem-solving	3.27	.68	3.26	.64
Avoidant coping	3.02	.43	2.97	.45
Aggressive strategies	2.48	1.05	2.71	1.02

Note: For the subscales that make up the constructive coping scale, the unstandardized means and standard deviations are reported.
$N = 72$ for mother–child variables; $N = 48$ for father–child variables.

scores on the punitive and minimization subscales, which were correlated at $r = .55$ for mothers and $r = .62$ for fathers, and labeled this composite scale *unsupportive reactions* (α for mothers = .82; α for fathers = .90). *Expressive encouragement* (α for mothers = .87; α for fathers = .92), and *distress reactions* (α for mothers = .66; α for fathers = .66) were each analyzed as separate scales. The means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Child Report of Affective Sharing with Each Parent. To assess the degree to which children would talk regarding their negative feelings with each parent, the authors created a 5-item measure of *affective sharing*. Each item presents a different scenario that the children were told to imagine happening to them. The scenarios elicited one of five different emotions (upset, anxious and worried, angry, uneasy, sad). The children responded by indicating whether they would want to talk with or be around their parent and how true that response was for them (4-point scale). An example item is: 'You are at the doctor's office waiting to get a shot and feel anxious and worried about getting the shot. Some kids would not tell their moms how they are feeling, but other kids would tell their moms so that they would help them feel less worried. Which is most like you?' The children indicated whether they would want to talk to their mothers or not and whether their choice was 'sort of true' or 'really true'. The choices were presented in a format developed by Harter (1982) to minimize social desirability-

response biases. The children completed the scale separately for their mothers and fathers. These items were averaged with higher scores indicating greater desire to share feelings with the parent. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .70 and .80 for affective sharing with mother and with father, respectively.

Observational Task. After a five-minute warm-up period, the mother– and father–child pairs were instructed to have a five-minute conversation regarding an event that was upsetting to the child. The experimenter set a timer for five minutes and returned to the room once the time expired. The parent–child pairs were not given any guidelines regarding a specific event to discuss or how to choose the topic, because we expected that the manner in which they decided on a topic would be indicative of their emotional openness (e.g., if one person brings up an event, and the other dismisses its significance or refuses to talk about it). Thus, the entire five minutes are used to code the interactions. Most parent–child pairs discussed a single event during the task (e.g., a pet dying, the child not winning a contest); however, some dyads had difficulty choosing an event and thus mentioned multiple events within the interaction. Each conversation was videotaped and later coded using two different systems.

  Individual coding. Each parent–child interaction was coded on two dimensions. The parents were coded on *parent acceptance and encouragement of child emotions* using a 9-point scale. On this scale, 1 would include parents who actively discourage the child's expression of feelings by invalidating the child's feelings (e.g., telling the child it is wrong to feel that way), saying hurtful things to the child (e.g., teasing or criticizing the child), or making the child feel guilty by pointing out how the child's behavior or negative emotion impacts the parent. On this scale, a 9 would include parents who clearly accept and encourage children to express their emotions by validating, paraphrasing, and asking about the child's feelings. The children were coded on *child emotional openness,* assessing the degree to which they were able to talk about their feelings with their parent. The children were rated on a 5-point scale with a 1 describing children who are resistant to engaging in the conversation. To avoid discussing an event, they may dismiss the task entirely, whine, or become angry, and if the parent does get them to talk about an event, they do so very briefly and superficially. A 5 on this scale would include children who express their feelings spontaneously without visible signs of anxiety and do not minimize the significance of the event or their feelings. In Table 1, the means and standard deviations for each scale are provided.

  The parent–child interactions were coded by one of two research assistants who were kept blind to the participants' other data. A subset of the interactions (23 percent of mother–child interactions, 19 percent of father–child interactions) were viewed by both research assistants and coded independently to examine the reliability of the coding system. We computed the reliability using correlations and gamma statistics with gamma providing an index of reliability for continuous scales that control for chance agreement (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). For the mother–child interactions, the reliabilities among coders were parent acceptance and encouragement of the child's emotional expression ($\delta = .76$; $r = .87$) and openness ($\delta = 1.0$; $r = .77$). For the father–child interactions, the reliabilities among coders were parent acceptance and encouragement of the child's emotional expression ($\delta = .79$; $r = .85$) and openness ($\delta = 1.0$; $r = .83$).

Dyadic coding. Because an individual's behavior during a discussion is inherently interdependent on the other's responses, we also used a dyadic coding system to capture the quality of the parent–child conversations relating to emotional communication. The system was designed to capture openness and acceptance during dyadic communication regarding an upsetting event. Because the events and the degree to which children get upset while discussing the events vary across dyads, parental behaviors were judged by taking this variability into account. Each parent–child dyad was categorized into one of four categories: 1 = warm/open; 2 = warm/superficial; 3 = distancing/invalidating; 4 = conflictual/hostile. Parent–child dyads fitting the warm/open category would be those in which the parents are warm and accepting of the children's emotional expression, and the children willingly participate and elaborate on their thoughts and feelings about the event. A parent–child dyad fitting the warm/superficial category would include a parent–child pair that shows positive affect toward each other and discusses an event and the child's feelings, but the discussion is superficial, or the contribution of one partner is minimal. A parent–child dyad in the distancing/invalidating category would include those who do not discuss a meaningful event and the child's feelings (e.g., a parent and child who jump from one event to another without either person discussing one topic in depth or a parent and child who project a dismissing attitude or avoid any discussion of feelings). A parent–child dyad fitting the conflictual/hostile category would include openly hostile interactions during which parents dominate the conversation by being critical of the child rather than offering comfort or understanding, and the child appears defeated, uncomfortable or defiant. For mother– and father–child dyads (respectively), the relative frequencies of the categories were warm/open = 25 and 14.6%, warm/superficial = 30.6 and 31.3%, distancing/invalidating = 31.9 and 33.3%, and conflictual/hostile = 12.5 and 20.8%.

Two research assistants, who had not coded the interactions using the other system and who were also kept blind to the participants' other data, independently coded all of the parent–child discussions using the dyadic coding system. For the mother–child dyad discussions, the coders matched on 74.6% of the participants' assignments ($\kappa = .65$). For father–child dyad discussions, the coders matched on 85.7% of the participants' assignments to categories ($\kappa = .80$).

The two coding systems were compared to test for convergent validity. As shown in Table 2, one-way Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs) were performed using the dyadic coding groups on each of the two individual scales, with Newman-Keuls's post hoc tests. Both mother– and father–child coding systems showed good convergence.

Parent Report of Children's Coping Strategies. The mothers and fathers completed an adaptation of the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist (Eisenberg, *et al.*, 1996) that assessed the children's predominant coping strategies. The parents rated how often their child generally behaves in various ways when the child 'is upset or has a problem' (1 = never to 5 = very often). The coping strategies were divided into four types: avoidant coping (e.g., when my child is upset or has problems, he/she avoids thinking of or attempts to ignore the problem; 14 items); emotion-focused or problem-focused support seeking (e.g., tries to solve the problem by talking to others; 13 items); cognitive decision making/problem solving (e.g., thinks regarding which things are best to do to handle the problem; 14 items); and use of verbal and physical aggression (e.g., pushes or kicks children who have been mean to them; two items). One score was computed for each of the four types of coping strategies by averaging

Table 2. Tests of Convergence between Coding Systems: Analyses of Variance Using Dyadic Categories on Individual Scales

Mother–Child Interactions Dyad Coding	Warm/ Open (n = 18)	Warm/ Superficial (n = 22)	Distancing/ Invalidating (n = 23)	Conflictual/ Hostile (n = 9)	F (df = 3, 68)
Mother					
Acceptance and encouragement	6.81$_a$	6.14$_a$	4.74$_b$	3.56$_c$	11.91***
Child					
Emotional openness	3.47$_a$	2.77$_b$	2.48$_b$	2.67$_b$	5.48***
Father–Child Interactions Dyad Coding	(n = 7)	(n = 15)	(n = 16)	(n = 10)	(df = 3, 44)
Father					
Acceptance and encouragement	7.00$_a$	6.07$_a$	4.50$_b$	3.75$_b$	10.01***
Child					
Emotional openness	3.86$_a$	3.33$_{ab}$	2.69$_b$	2.80$_b$	4.91**

Note: Group means that do not share the same subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ using a studentized Newman-Keuls post hoc test.
**$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

responses across items, with higher scores indicating greater use. For the mothers' reports, the alpha coefficients ranged from .74 to .92. For the fathers' reports, the alpha coefficients ranged from .72 to .91.

All four coping scales were correlated with one another (r's ranging from .25 to .54 for mothers and from .34 to .64 for fathers). A principle components analysis with a varimax rotation was done to examine higher-order factor(s) for both mother and father reports. Consistent across reporters, one component emerged with all items loading on one factor (accounting for 53 per cent of the variance for mothers and 62 per cent of the variance for fathers). On this *constructive coping* factor for mother and father reports, higher scores indicate greater reliance on support-seeking and cognitive decision-making or problem-solving and less reliance on avoidant or aggressive strategies. The factor scores for mothers' and fathers' reports of child coping were highly correlated ($r[44] = .73$, $p < .001$). In a subsample of the current study's sample, children's use of constructive coping strategies (as reported by mothers) was positively correlated with the teacher's reports of children's peer competence (see Contreras *et al.*, 2000).

Results

Overview of Analyses

First, preliminary analyses are reported. Specifically, the variables were examined for relations to family status or the child's gender. Next, we assessed the associations among the three sets of emotional communication variables (parents' reports of their reactions to child's negative emotions, children's reports of their affective sharing with each parent, and the behavioral indices derived from the parent–child discussions). In the remaining section, associations between emotional communication and child coping were reported.

Tests for Family Status and Gender Differences

To examine whether differences exist for the main variables based on family status, ANOVAs, *t*-tests, or chi-square tests were performed. For mothers, comparisons were made among intact families ($n = 46$), stepfather families ($n = 8$), and single-mother families ($n = 17$). Family status was unrelated to any of the variables (mothers' reported reactions, child affective sharing with mother, mother–child discussions, mother reports of child coping). For fathers, comparisons were made between the intact families ($n = 41$) and stepfathers and single fathers combined ($n = 10$). Family status was unrelated to fathers' reported reactions to child's negative emotions, children's report of affective sharing with their father, or fathers' report of child's constructive coping. However, the father–child discussion task was related to family status. Using the individual coding system, fathers from intact families scored higher on parental acceptance and encouragement of child emotion ($M = 5.44$) than stepfathers and single fathers ($M = 3.79$), $t = 2.33$, $p < .05$. Children from intact families scored marginally higher on emotional openness ($M = 3.17$) than children from stepfather or single-father families ($M = 2.57$), $t = 2.57$, $p = .083$. Similar results were found when examining the relation of family status to the dyadic coding system for the father–child discussion task. The chi-square test showed that 46% of fathers from intact families were classified as distancing/invalidating or conflictual/hostile, whereas 100% of stepfathers or single fathers were classified as distancing/invalidating or conflictual/hostile, χ^2 (3, $n = 48$) = 9.17, $p < .05$.

Parent and child variables were also examined for relations to the gender of the child. Parent reactions did not differ depending on the gender of the child. The children's report of affective sharing with mothers and fathers was related to gender. For sharing with mothers, girls ($M = 3.62$) reported more affective sharing than boys ($M = 3.06$), $t(70) = -4.66$, $p < .001$. Similarly, girls ($M = 3.29$) reported more affective sharing with fathers than boys ($M = 2.88$), $t(46) = -2.18$, $p < .05$. For the parent–child discussion, analyses did not reveal any gender differences in parent or child behavior. For parents' reports of coping strategies, *t*-tests revealed that both mothers, $t(69) = -3.78$, $p < .001$, and fathers, $t(47) = -3.54$, $p < .001$, rated girls as using more constructive coping strategies than did boys.

Relations Among the Parent and Child Measures of Emotional Communication

Table 3 shows relations among scales within each measure (e.g., the two ratings from the parent–child discussions) as well as relations among each measure of emotional

Table 3. Correlations among Parent and Child Measures of Emotional Communication

	Parent Reactions to Child Negative Emotions					Child Emotional Openness	
	Problem and Emotion	Expressive Encouragement	Unsupportive	Distress	Acceptance and Encouragement	Affective Sharing	Emotional Openness
Parent Reactions							
Problem- and emotion-focused (SR)	—	.48***	−.27*	−.19	.12	.27*	.02
Expressive encouragement (SR)	.52***	—	−.29*	−.27*	.07	.08	.19
Unsupportive (SR)	.07	.17	—	.46***	−.15	−.13	−.15
Distress (SR)	−.01	.03	.56***	—	−.12	−.02	−.01
Acceptance and encouragement (OBS)	.21	.17	.15	−.01	—	.06	.19
Child Emotional Openness							
Affective sharing	−.00	−.03	.09	.22	.08	—	.18
Emotional openness (OBS)	−.04	−.15	.08	.05	.30*	.01	—

Note: Correlations among mother–child variables are above the diagonal. Correlations among father–child variables are below the diagonal. SR, self-reported; OBS, observational.
In all analyses, gender is controlled; in analyses with father–child discussions, family status is also controlled.
$N = 72$ for mother–child correlations; $N = 48$ for father–child correlations.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

communication. We controlled for child gender in all analyses and for family status in father–child analyses. First, regarding the intercorrelations within each measure, for the mother's self-reported reactions to the child's negative affect, the mothers' problem- and emotion-focused reactions were positively correlated with expressive encouragement and negatively correlated with unsupportive reactions. Also, mothers' expressive encouragements correlated negatively with unsupportive and distress reactions, and mothers' unsupportive and distress reactions were positively correlated. With father reactions, fathers' problem- and emotion-focused reactions were positively correlated with expressive encouragement, and fathers' unsupportive reactions were positively correlated with distress reactions. For the father–child discussions (but not mother–child discussions), parental acceptance and encouragement were positively related to the child's emotional openness.

Regarding relations among measures, the results showed one significant association: the more problem- and emotion-focused reactions that mothers report, the more children report sharing their negative feelings with their mother. However, given that we performed 20 correlation analyses, the one significant result that emerged is not greater than the number expected by chance. ANOVAs were also performed to examine whether the dyadic coding of the discussion task related to other emotional communication indices (i.e., parent reactions and child-affective sharing), and no significant relations were found. Thus, the emotional communication measures appear to tap different aspects of emotional communication.

To test whether child or parent gender affects any of these relations among emotional communication, we also performed mother–child correlations (n for mother–boys = 38; n for mother–girls = 34) and father–child correlations (n for father–boys = 25; n for father–girls = 23) separately for boys and girls and examined whether correlations for mother–child variables ($N = 72$) differ from those for father–child variables ($N = 48$). Only one gender difference emerged. But because of the number of comparisons ($N = 63$), we conclude that associations among emotional communication variables do not vary by child or parent gender.

Associations between Parent–Child Emotional Communication and Child Coping

Correlations between Emotion Communication and Child Coping. Zero-order correlations were performed between each of the emotional communication variables and parents' reports of child coping (mother reports of child coping used with mother–child analyses; father reports of child coping used with father–child analyses). For mother–child communication, all correlations were significant (see the first column in Table 4). Consistent with previous findings, mothers' reactions were related to child coping in that the use of more problem- and emotion-focused reactions, more expressive encouragement, and less unsupportive and distress reactions was related to children's greater use of constructive coping strategies. In the observation task, parents' acceptance and encouragement of children's discussion of negative emotions was linked to children's constructive coping. Also, children's reports of more affective sharing with their mothers and children's emotional openness during the discussion related to children's use of more constructive coping strategies.

The zero-order correlations for father–child variables with child coping also showed significant associations. Fathers who reported more problem- and emotion-focused reactions and less unsupportive reactions rated their children higher on constructive coping. Also, fathers' acceptance and encouragement of their child's negative

Table 4. Regression Analyses Predicting Child Constructive Coping (Parent Predictors on Step 1; Child Predictors on Step 3)

	Mother ($N = 72$)				Father ($N = 48$)			
	r	β_{in}	ΔR^2	β_{final}	r	β_{in}	ΔR^2	β_{final}
Step 1			.17***				.24**	
Gender	.41**	.41***		.20+	.45***	.46***		.31*
Family status (father equations only)					−.16	−.19		−.06
Step 2			.17**				.16+	
Parent problem- and emotion-focused reactions (SR)	.31**	.16		.08	.24*	.21		.22
Parent expressive encouragement (SR)	.22*	.11		.09	−.13	−.28+		−.29*
Parent unsupportive reaction (SR)	−.30**	−.01		.06	−.26*	−.19		−.17
Parent distress reaction (SR)	−.30**	−.19		−.24*	−.18	−.08		−.14
Parent acceptance and encouragement (OB)	.26*	.18+		.14	.23+	.20		.20
Step 3			.17***				.07+	
Child affective share with parent (SR)	.57***	.41***		.41***	.42**	.29*		.29*
Child emotional openness (OB)	.30**	.18+		.18+	.07	−.10		−.10

Note: SR, self-report; OB, observational.
For mother–child equations, R^2 total = .51***; For father–child equations, R^2 total = .47**.
+$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

emotions during the discussion task was marginally related to child coping. Finally, children who reported more affective sharing with their fathers were rated higher on constructive coping by their fathers.

We also examined whether relations between emotional communication variables and child coping differed by child or parent gender (28 comparisons). No significant differences were found by comparing correlations for boys and girls or by comparing mother– and father–child correlations.

Regression Equations Predicting Child Coping. To further test our second hypothesis that parent–child emotional communication would be linked to child coping, we conducted a parallel set of hierarchical regression equations for mother and father variables (see Table 4). These analyses allowed us to examine how the emotional communication variables, as a set, were related to child coping. On Step 1, we entered control variables: gender for mother–child equations and child gender and family status for father–child equations. On Step 2, we entered parental reactions to children's negative emotions. On Step 3, we entered the child's emotional-openness variables. We chose to enter child variables after parent variables, because most prior research has been focused on parenting behaviors; thus, we sought to investigate how child behaviors can predict child coping above and beyond any associations with parents' behaviors.[1]

With the mother–child regression equations, we found that gender related to mothers' reports of child coping (reflecting that girls scored higher on constructive coping than boys), accounting for 17% of the variance. On Step 2, the four mother variables were entered, and as a group accounted for an additional 17% of the variance in mothers' reports of child constructive coping. On Step 3, the child variables accounted for another 17% of the variance in child coping. Overall, the parent and child communication factors accounted for 34% of the variance in child coping (after controlling for gender). The final beta values indicate that less maternal distress responses and greater child emotional openness, particularly when measured by children's own reports, account for unique variance in children's use of more constructive coping strategies.

Using fathers' reports of child coping and father–child emotional communication measures, both child gender and family status were entered on Step 1 and accounted for 24% of the variance. (Similar to mothers' reports of child coping, girls scored higher than boys using fathers' reports of constructive coping.) On Step 2, fathers' reactions to children's negative emotions were entered and accounted for an additional 16% of the variance in child coping. On Step 3, child variables were entered and accounted for another 7% of the variance. The total variance accounted for in child coping was 23% (after controlling for child gender and family status). The final beta values indicate that fathers' use of less expressive encouragement and children's greater affective sharing with fathers each uniquely predicted children's use of more constructive coping strategies.[2]

ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCES (ANCOVAs) Examining Associations between the Dyadic Coding of Parent–Child Discussions and Child Coping. Table 5 shows the results of the ANCOVAs using the dyadic coding system while controlling for child gender and also for family status in the father–child ANCOVA. Mother–child pair groups differed on mothers' reports of children's constructive coping. Specifically, children in the warm/open group were significantly higher on constructive coping than

Table 5. Analyses of Covariance Using Dyadic Coding of Interactions on Child Coping Scales (Controlling for Child Gender in all Analyses and Family Status in Father–Child Analyses)

Mother–Child Interactions Dyad Coding:	Warm/ Open ($n = 18$)	Warm/ Superficial ($n = 22$)	Distancing/ Invalidating ($n = 23$)	Conflictual/ Hostile ($n = 9$)	F (df = 4, 67)
Child Constructive Coping (Mother Report)					
M	$.48_a$	$.10_{ab}$	$-.38_b$	$-.46_b$	3.47*
SD	.62	1.00	1.07	1.16	
Father–Child Interactions Dyad Coding	($n = 7$)	($n = 15$)	($n = 16$)	($n = 10$)	(df = 5, 42)
Child Constructive Coping (Father Report)					
M	.56	.04	.11	−.52	1.14
SD	.60	.94	1.09	1.10	

Note: Group means that do not share the same subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ using a studentized Newman-Keuls post hoc test.
*$p < .05$.

those in the distancing/invalidating and conflictual/hostile groups; the warm/superficial group did not differ from other groups. For father–child interactions, groups did not differ on children's use of constructive coping strategies. However, one issue relating to the lack of significant findings is low power resulting from the small group sizes.

Discussion

Our goals for the study were to examine ways to measure mother– and father–child emotional communication and to test their associations with parental reports of children's general coping styles. We used self-report and observational measures to capture both parents' and children's contributions to emotional communication. By using a discussion task to assess parent–child communication, our study complements most existing research that has relied solely on questionnaires to assess parenting factors relating to children's coping during middle childhood. We found support for our hypothesis that emotionally open parent–child communication would relate to children's coping. Specifically, aspects of both parents' and children's communication style emerged as important predictors of children's constructive coping, with the emotional communication variables accounting for 23 to 34% of the variance in children's coping.

Emotional Communication Measures

We assessed several aspects of emotionally open communication between parent and child, and our results indicated that these measures were, in most cases, unrelated to

each other. This lack of convergence among indices suggests that the different perspectives and methodologies are tapping into distinct aspects of parent–child emotional communication. For example, discussions of a past event may include greater reflection by both the parent and child and may be less emotionally charged than a parent's initial reaction. Despite their low correlations with one another, all of the mother–child and most of the father–child emotional communication variables were individually related to child coping and collectively accounted for greater variance in child coping than any individual measure. Thus, the pattern of findings underscores the importance of assessing both parent and child perspectives as well as using multiple methods to assess emotional communication.

In future studies, the current measures could be integrated with other aspects of emotional communication that are likely to affect children's development of coping skills. We focused on how parents and children communicate regarding experiences that were upsetting for the child. However, because children can also learn through observation, studying how parents express and cope with their own negative emotions could be an important and complementary way that children can receive messages regarding coping (Kliewer *et al.*, 1996; Valiente *et al.*, 2004). Also, in our discussion task, most dyads talked regarding a single event; however, future research could also examine how parent–child emotional communication varies by the types of events being discussed. Additionally, different methodologies such as diary reports could be used to obtain specific records of naturalistic conversations regarding children's upsetting experiences and to tap into other aspects of emotional communication (e.g., who initiated the conversation).

Parental Reactions to Children's Emotional Upsets, Children's Emotional Openness, and Child Coping

The present study provides strong evidence for the hypothesis that emotionally open parent–child communication is associated with more constructive child coping. Parent reactions to children's emotions and emotional openness were both related to children's coping. These effects were found for both self-report and observational measures and for both mother– and father–child communication. The results of the regression analyses indicated that, examined as a group, the parent variables accounted for similar amounts of variance in the mother– and the father–child analyses (17 versus 16% of the variance in coping). There was, however, a larger difference in the contribution of the group of child variables across the mother–and father–child analyses. Whereas the child variables accounted for 17% of the variance in the mother–child analysis, they only accounted for 7% of the variance in the father–child analysis. We assessed children's likelihood to be open regarding their emotions with their parents, but perhaps additional variance could be accounted for if we asked regarding children's willingness to talk to their fathers for other reasons (e.g., to get advice on problem-solving strategies) that may also provide fathers with an opportunity for coping socialization. However, given that power was particularly low for father–child analyses because of the sample size and number of predictors in the regression analyses, our ability to make firm conclusions is limited, and thus future studies should further examine relative contributions of mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, the different emotional communication measures contributed in an additive way to predict coping such that children who showed the most constructive coping were those who freely communicated their feelings to their parents and whose parents were supportive

and helpful in emotionally laden situations. Future research could investigate why these aspects of emotional communication were linked to child coping by examining potential mediators of the associations (e.g., child-coping efficacy, emotional understanding).

Overall, the results of the study suggest the need for theories of the socialization of child coping to take into account the role of the child, as well as parents, to explain the development of coping skills. Middle childhood may be an especially important time to foster emotionally open communication between parents and children, because as children reach this age, they may spend more time away from their parents than do younger children. As a result, parents would be less likely to be aware of children's negative experiences unless children chose to discuss them. Children who share their negative experiences and feelings with parents would give the parents the opportunity to comfort them and talk with them regarding appropriate coping strategies. The discussion of emotions could also help children label and understand their negative emotions better. Although children become even more autonomous from parents in adolescence, it is nonetheless important for adolescents to still maintain close relationships with their parents (Steinberg, 1990). Thus, children who report a greater willingness to talk with parents in middle childhood may be more likely to continue to be open with parents during adolescence, which could be beneficial as teens cope with increased demands during adolescence.

Although one conclusion from our study is that the way in which parents and children talk regarding children's negative emotions and experiences could influence children's coping skills, the opposite may also occur. For example, Eisenberg *et al.* (1999) found that children's externalization of emotions at 6 to 8 years of age showed some predictability for parental punitive reactions two years later, suggesting that parents become more punitive in response to children's inability to regulate their emotions. Most likely, there is mutual influence across time. Also, although each person's contribution (e.g., fathers' reactions to their child's negative emotions) could independently help the child to gain regulatory skills, they are likely to interact in their effects. For example, parents who communicate acceptance and encourage discussion of negative emotions could directly facilitate children's regulatory capacity, but it is also likely that children who are open with their parents are more receptive to the parents' suggestions of coping strategies. Thus, as posited earlier by researchers (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1998; Kliewer *et al.*, 1994), the quality of the parent–child relationship may moderate the effects of coping suggestions.

A key feature of this study is that we employed observational measures of parent–child emotional communication. Although some researchers have made use of observational measures of parent–child emotional communication using samples of preschool children (e.g., Garner, Jones, Gaddy & Rennie, 1997; Roberts & Strayer, 1987), few have utilized observations of parent–child interactions during middle childhood to examine relations to children's coping (see Gottman *et al.*, 1997 and McDowell *et al.*, 2002, for exceptions). In our study, family-status differences emerged in the father–child discussion task, in that stepfathers and single fathers showed less acceptance and encouragement of their child's negative emotions, and their children were less emotionally open than were children of intact households. It is noteworthy that these differences emerged in the observational measures during the father–child discussion, but not in the self-reported questionnaire data (either from the child's or parent's viewpoints). One interpretation is that observational measures may be more sensitive to detecting subtle differences on emotional communication that might be

underestimated on self-reported data because of self-presentation effects or lack of self-awareness. Future studies on parental socialization of children's coping should include observational tasks to further investigate the specific interaction processes that may account for differences in child coping.

In future research, effort also needs to be directed toward obtaining larger and more ethnically diverse samples to study parent socialization of children's coping. The present study, as well as the majority of earlier studies, included mostly white people and middle- to upper-class families. Very little is known regarding whether parents of different ethnicities or lower socioeconomic status backgrounds vary in how they influence how their children cope or in the coping strategies that they consider appropriate for dealing with specific affectively laden situations. Additionally, the small sample size in the current study limited our power for testing how relations varied for boys compared with girls. In our sample, we found that girls scored higher than boys on affective sharing with mothers and fathers and on constructive coping but found no evidence that associations between emotional communication and coping varied by child gender. However, prior research done with parents and young children has found that parents talk with boys and girls differently (see Eisenberg *et al.*, 1998 for a review). For example, with samples of toddlers or preschoolers, parents have been found to discuss negative emotions more frequently and to elaborate more with daughters than with sons (Dunn, Bretherton & Munn, 1987; Garner *et al.*, 1997; Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995), although the opposite pattern was found for conversations regarding anger between mothers and sons (Fivush, 1991). Thus, with larger samples, future research can further investigate whether these gender differences in parent–child emotional communication persist as children get older and also whether relations between parent–child communication and children's coping vary by child gender or ethnicity.

Implications

The results indicated that multiple aspects of emotional communication related to child coping, which suggests that several avenues are available to target. For example, school-based programs could emphasize to children the potential benefits of sharing their negative feelings with their parents. The findings also underscore the need to include the socialization of coping strategies as a component of parenting interventions targeted to parents of preadolescents. Additionally, the present study highlights the important roles that fathers, as well as mothers, could have in the development of their children's ability to cope with negative events and emotions. Including blended families in preventive or intervention programs may be especially important, given that our results further suggest that establishing open emotional communication might be particularly challenging for children and stepfathers.

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Notes

1. We also tested whether child gender moderates the associations found in the regression equations. The interaction terms were added on Step 4 of the analyses. However, as suggested by the lack of child gender differences in the correlational analyses, we found no evidence that child gender significantly moderated the results of the regression analyses.

2. Because of the conceptual overlap between children's reports of affective sharing with parents and parents' reports of children's support-seeking (one type of coping strategy included in the constructive-coping factor), we repeated the regression equations with the support-seeking component removed from the coping composite. For both mother– and father–child analyses, the variance accounted for by emotional communication variables after controlling for demographic factors was similar to results with the support-seeking scale in the factor.