# Preschoolers emotional regulation in a clean-up task: An observational study

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Aggressive opposition w father

Whining with father

Controlling with father

### 1)Abstract

Emotional regulation consists of the «extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish one's goals» (Thompson, 1994). This study was designed to expand the litterature on early emotional regulation by examining children's and parents' strategies in a frustrating situation as a function of the child's sex, the parent's sex and the child's age. The sample consists of 85 preschoolers and both of their parents. Videotaped mother- and father-child interactions were coded and analysed. Our results show that boys use more aggressive opposition, whining and negotiation than girls. Younger children use more passive opposition, whining and less diversion than their older counterpart. There was no differences in parents' strategies in function of child's sex, child's age and parent's sex.

### 2) Introduction

Emotional regulation can be defined as the «extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish one's goals»

(Thompson, 1994). In this study, emotional regulation consists of preschoolers' reactions in a frustrating situation (toy clean-up).

Emotion regulation has been linked with the development of social competence (Halberstadt, Denham & Dunsmore, 2001) and with developmental psychopathology (Barnett, Ganiban & Cicchetti, 1999; Ganiban, Barnett & Cicchetti, 2000). Some studies suggest that some forms of noncompliance (e.g. negotiation, diversion) are more mature and that those behaviors increase with age in the preschool years (Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999; Power, McGrath, Hughes & Manire, 1994). Unskillful noncompliance (e.g. aggression) has been linked to later rating of behavior problem (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). Some authors found a positive longitudinal link between mother use of regulation strategies at 30 months of age and child emotional regulation at 5 years of age.

### 3) Objective

This presentation reports the findings of a study investigating child-parent interactions in a child-frustrating situation, the toy clean-up task. This study was designed to expand the litterature on early emotional regulation by examining children's and parents' strategies in a frustrating situation as a function of the child's sex, the parent's sex and the child's age.

### 4) Method

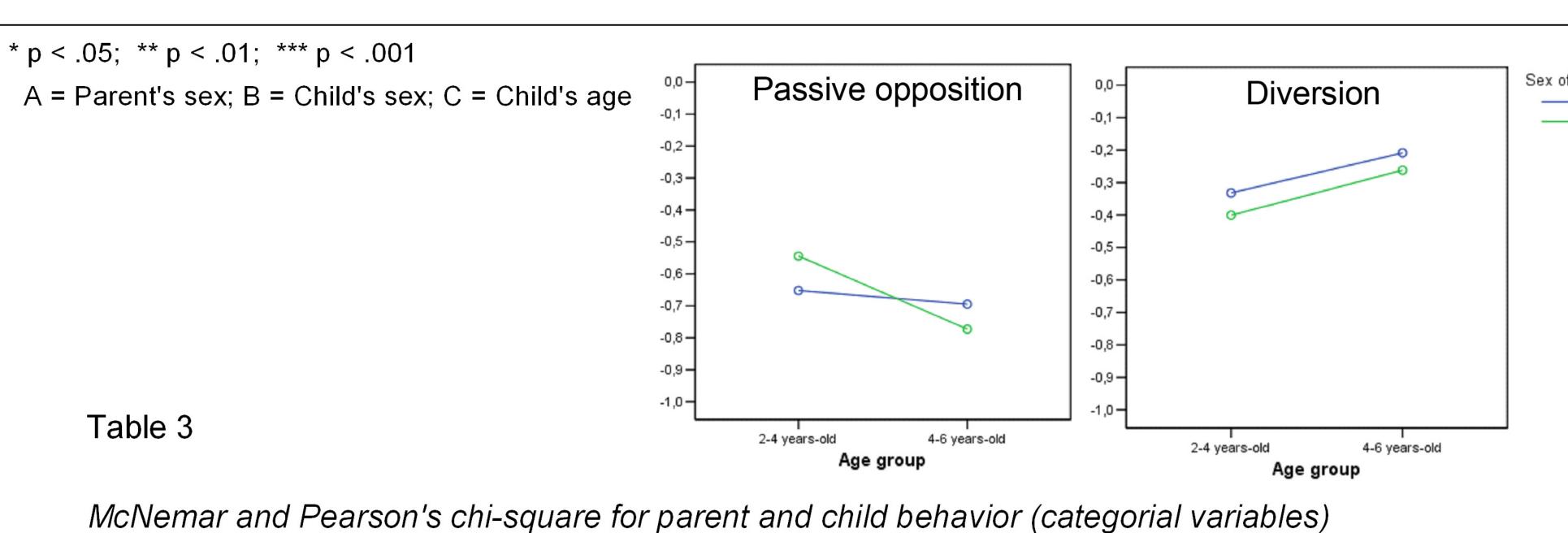
Subjects. The sample consists of 85 preschoolers (44 boys, 41 girls) of 26 to 71 months of age (M = 49.4 months, SD = 12.1)and both of their parents. Families were recruited in 20 child-care centers of Montreal and the surrounding area. Most families were intact (95%), mostly Euro-american (66 caucasian, 5 hispanic, 2 african american and 7 from diverse ethnic groups), the fathers (age M = 34.6, SD = 6.8) were more educated than the national standards (last year of education: 28% high school, 27% college, 30% bachelor, 9% master, 2% doctorate) indicating families of middle to upper socioeconomical class.

Procedure. Families were visited by graduated research assistants. They were administered a series of questionnaires. Each parent (one at a time) was then asked to play with their child with novel toys brought by the assistant. The order of parents (mother-father / father-mother) was ramdomly assigned. After the play session, the assistant told the parent-child dyad to clean-up the toys. The frustrating task (toy clean-up task) was videotaped.

Measures. Parents were requiered to complete a questionaire about their marital status, the number of children living at home, the parent's age, their years of education, employement status, income and the age and gender of their children. Dyadics interactions during the toy clean-up session were assessed with the Observational scale of child's emotional regulation during a toy clean-up task (Dubé, Langlois-Cloutier & Paquette, 2004).

### Table 2

	A	В	С	AB	AC	ВС	ABC
Category (DVs)	F(1, 69)						
Passive opposition	n.s.	n.s.	4.78*	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Diversion	n.s.	n.s.	7.70**	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.



Category (DVs) Statistic Test McNemar Aggressive opposition Parent's sex

Child's sex (with mother) Pearson's chi-square Child's sex (with father) Pearson's chi-square Child's age (with mother) Pearson's chi-square n.s. Child's age (with father) Pearson's chi-square n.s. Whining McNemar Parent's sex Child's sex (with mother) Pearson's chi-square X<sup>2</sup>(1)= 7.23\*\* Pearson's chi-square n.s. Child's sex (with father)

Child's age (with mother) Pearson's chi-square n.s. Pearson's chi-square X<sup>2</sup>(1)= 4.55\* Child's age (with father) Controlling parent behavior Parent's sex McNemar Pearson's chi-square n.s. Child's sex (with mother) Child's sex (with father) Pearson's chi-square n.s Pearson's chi-square  $X^2(1) = 5.02^*$ Child's age (with mother) Child's age (with father) Pearson's chi-square  $X^2(1) = 3.80^*$ 

McNemar Negotiation Parent's sex  $X^{2}(1) = 5.49*$ Child's sex (with mother) Pearson's chi-square Child's sex (with father) Pearson's chi-square n.s. Child's age (with mother) Pearson's chi-square n.s. Child's age (with father) Pearson's chi-square n.s.

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

 The child emits intense opposition behaviors and directs his anger at an individual or environnement (ex. knocks the ground, throws toys, hits the parent, yells, tamper tantrum).

Passive opposition • The child emits denial behavior (ex. continues playing, ignores the parent).

### Whining

- The child expresses sadness or distress (ex. crying, sulking). Controlling parent behavior
- The child tries to exert a direct and intrusive control on the parent (ex. pulls the toys out of the parent's hands, tells the parent to stop).

### Active opposition

Children behaviors

Aggressive opposition

- The child emits moderate opposition to the demand. (ex. saying: «no», «I don't want to stop playing», «I want to play again», hides the toys, runs away, pulls the toys out of the bag). Diversion
- The child directs the attention of the parent on meaningfulness details regarding the clean-up task (ex. asking why, proposing strategies to clean, tries to establish a discussion, talks about toys).

### Negotiation

• The child tries to participate in the decision process (ex. asks for delay, asks to conserve some of the toys, negotiates conditions).

## Parents strategies

### Action strategies

• The parent gives clear indications and guides the child. (ex. asks for help, shares the task, tells the child where the toys must be placed, tells the child he's not done).

### Affect strategies

 The parent acts on the frustrating potential of the situation to help the child manage his emotions (ex. explaining the reason of the task, verbalizes child's emotion «you were enjoying playing with this toy, right ?»).

### Reinforcement strategies

• The parent encourages the child (ex. «ok», «let's go», «you're doing great», «continue, we're almost done», capitalizes on child's skills «I know you can do it, show me»).

### Play strategies

 The parent makes the task amusing and game-like (ex. competition «we're racing»).

### Authoritarian strategies

 The parent uses coercitive behaviors (ex. menacing, gives orders, tells the child he's not nice).

### Intrusive strategies

 The parent physically constrains the child to do the task (ex. takes the toys from the child hands).

### 5) Results

Globally, our results suggest that:

1) For the children, the strategies most frequently used are: diversion, active opposition and passive opposition.

2) For the parents, the strategies most frequently used are: action strategies and reinforcement strategies.

3) Boys use more aggressive opposition, whining and negotiation. For whining and negotiation, the differences are significant only with the

4)Older children use more diversion and less passive opposition and whining than younger children. For whining the difference was significant only with the father.

5) The use of intrusive control was higher with older children with their mother but higher with younger children with their father.

6) There was no differences in parents' strategies in function of child's sex, child's age and parent's sex.



 As expected, we found more aggressive opposition with boys than girls, but also more whining and negotiation strategies.

Negotiation with mother

Whining with mother

Controlling with mother

• We observed changes in children's strategies with age. Some mature strategies (diversion) increase with age and some of the immature strategies decrease (whining, passive oppostion) with age. The use of negotiation strategies didn't increase as in Klimes-Dougan & Kopp (1999), but it is possibly due to the fact that our sample is an older one.

• We found no evidence of differences in function of the parent's sex in child's or parent's strategies.

### Advantages:

- The presence of both parents
- The use of observational datas in natural setting.
- Limitations: The famillies in our sample are more educated than the norm.