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Abstract:

With advancing age, children increasingly turn to peers for emotional support, and the child's ability to provide sensitive emotional support to peers becomes an increasingly important predictor of social acceptance. Although individual differences in emotional support skills become evident in early childhood, little is known about the social experiences that lead some children to become more skillful providers of emotional support than others. The present study assessed the influence of two socialization agents, parents and peers, on individual differences in children's emotional support skills. Participants included 51 first- and third-grade children, their mothers, and their classmates. Assessments obtained from each child of three skills related to the provision of emotional support included: comforting skill, affective perspective-taking ability, and social perspective-taking ability. Measures of comforting skill were obtained from both the child's mother and three classmates with whom each child frequently interacted. Correlational and regression analyses indicate that the comforting skills of mothers and peers independently contribute to the child's capacity to produce sensitive comforting messages. In addition, peers' comforting skills were significant predictors of the child's affective perspective taking ability. The results indicate different theoretical mechanisms may link the behavior of parents and peers to the social competencies of the child.

Text of paper:

Running head: CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUPPORT SKILLS

Parental and Peer Contributions to the Emotional Support Skills of the Child:
From Whom Do Children Learn to Express Support?

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Considerable research indicates that the quantity and quality of emotional support children receive from parents are important predictors of the child's psychological and emotional adjustment (see reviews by Bretherton & Waters, 1985; Burleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1995; Burleson & Kunkel, 1996; Hart, Newell, & Olsen, in press).¹ However, researchers increasingly see the child as a provider, and not just a recipient, of emotional support. A growing number of studies demonstrate that children are important sources of emotional support for one another

(see Cauce, Reid, Landesman, & Gonzales, 1990; Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996), and that the child's ability to provide sensitive emotional support is an important predictor of peer popularity and social acceptance (Berndt, 1989; Farver & Branstetter, 1994).

Although recent research establishes the significance of children's emotional support skills, we currently know very little about how children acquire these skills or the social factors that may influence their development. Thus, the current paper reports a study exploring how behaviors of two important socialization agents, parents and peers, may contribute to the development of emotional support skills in children.

Literature Review

Emotional Support Processes in Childhood

Researchers define emotional support in numerous ways (see Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Cutrona, Suhr, & MacFarlane, 1990; House, 1981). Although some research conceptualizes emotional support as involving the management of positive emotional states, most research focuses on how emotional support functions to manage the negative or distressed states of others (e.g., sadness, fear, disappointment). Cutrona and Russell (1990, p. 322) provided a general definition of emotional support as the provision of aid and security during times of stress that leads a person to feel he or she is cared for by others. Closely related to the concept of emotional support is the activity of comforting. Burleson (1994a, p. 3) defined comforting as “message behavior having the intended function of alleviating or lessening the emotional distresses experienced by others” (p. 64). Burleson and Kunkel (1996) suggested that despite the different definitions, “practically, there is little difference in the phenomena actually being studied” under the rubric of emotional support, with virtually all research focusing “on support efforts directed at overcoming sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, and other negative emotions” (p. 111).

Theorists (e.g., Burleson & Kunkel, 1996; Eisenberg, 1992; Waters & Sroufe, 1983; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990) identify several skills the developing child must master if

he or she is to be a sensitive provider of emotional support. First, the child must be capable of acquiring knowledge about the feelings and psychological states of the recipient; as suggested by Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1990), sensitive support presupposes an awareness of the recipient's affective state. Social perception skills, including the abilities to recognize and interpret emotional cues, integrate social information, and take the other's perspective are the chief means through which people acquire knowledge about the affective states of others.

Second, a skilled provider of emotional support must possess knowledge of the nonverbal, linguistic, and rhetorical resources through which supportive intentions can be realized in specific message strategies. As Waters and Sroufe (1983) suggested, it is not enough merely to understand the other's psychological state and the general character of human emotional dynamics. Rather, support givers must also possess a repertoire of behavioral strategies and tactics through which knowledge of the listener and topic can be integrated and effectively applied.

Third, a provider must be motivated to aid the distressed other. Having the competence to provide support does not, of course, ensure that this competence will be exercised. Thus, as Dunn and Munn (1986, p. 26) emphasized, "To behave in a prosocial manner depends not only on the capability of recognizing the needs and feelings of another person, but on the motivation to act practically upon that recognition." Although a complete analysis of emotional support would need to consider both competence and performance (i.e., motivational) factors, the present study is primarily interested in the child's competence to provide emotional support, rather than in factors influencing the child's performance of supportive acts. Consequently, we focus our efforts on the child's social-cognitive abilities and behavioral repertoire, and the socialization experiences potentially affecting these competencies.

The capacity to provide emotional support is a central component of the child's social competence (see Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). There is growing evidence that the ability to recognize and understand

the emotional states of others facilitates the development and maintenance of healthy peer relationships (see the review by Dunn, 1999). Several studies (Edwards, Manstead, & MacDonald, 1984; Field & Walden, 1982; Parke et al., 1989) indicate that children who are better able to recognize the emotional states of others are more popular among peers. Related research indicates that peer popularity among children is predicted by the abilities to appreciate what another is feeling and understand the causes for emotional states (Cassidy, Parke, Butkovsky, & Braungart, 1992; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994).

Children begin looking to peers as a source of emotional support from a very young age, and peers are often quite responsive. Observational studies indicate that by age two, many children make practical efforts to comfort distressed peers, expressing sympathy both verbally and nonverbally, bringing objects (such as teddy bears) to the other, and recruiting others (such as parents or teachers) to help provide aid (e.g., Dunn & Munn, 1986; Zahn-Waxler, Iannotti, & Chapman, 1982). Preschoolers intervene actively on behalf of crying peers (e.g., Farver & Branstetter, 1994) and will attempt to console a sad or upset peer on the playground (e.g., Eisenberg & Lennon, 1980). During the course of later childhood and adolescence, youngsters progressively develop broader and more sophisticated verbal repertoires for addressing the distressed emotional states of peers (Burleson, 1984; Clinton, & Hancock, 1991; Hoffner & Haefner, 1997). Especially from middle-childhood onward, children increasingly turn to peers as sources of emotional support (Buhrmester, 1996; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Moreover, school-aged children report that they value the emotional support skills of their peers (Berndt & Perry, 1986; Clark, 1994).

The ability to provide emotional support seems to be especially important in shaping the quality of children's peer relationships, and there appear to be important individual differences among children with respect to their emotional support skills. Several studies (Farver & Branstetter, 1994; Howes & Farver, 1987; Phinney, Feshbach, & Farver, 1986) find that children

who comfort and act prosocially toward crying peers are better liked than those children who show little concern for distressed peers. Further, among grade-school children, those capable of producing sophisticated comforting messages are better liked by peers (Burleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1992), whereas children who use insensitive messages when seeking to provide comfort may be actively rejected by peers (Burleson, Applegate, Burke, Clark, Delia, & Kline, 1986). Children's emotional support skills thus appear to play a key role in the development and maintenance of relationships with peers.

Contributions of Parent and Peers to Children's Development of Emotional Support Skills

Accumulating evidence suggests that individual differences children's emotional support skills begin to emerge early in life and remain relatively stable across middle childhood and, perhaps, into adolescence and beyond (see Buhrmester, 1996; Dunn, 1998; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). What is not yet well understood is the genesis of these skills. Very few studies have examined how children acquire emotional support skills, nor the social experiences that may lead them to develop a particular level of these skills.

Some research suggests that the type and quality of emotional support received from parents, especially mothers, may influence the quality of the child's emotional support skills. Several studies (Applegate, Burleson, & Delia, 1992; Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Garner et al., 1994) indicate that a mother's comforting skills have a significant impact on the development of her child's social-cognitive skills. Other research (Applegate et al., 1992; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Eisenberg et al., 1993; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979) suggests that a mother's comforting behavior influences her child's skill at producing comforting messages (see the review by Burleson & Kunkel, 1996).

Recent findings thus imply a link between mothers' comforting behaviors and children's emotional support skills. Very little research, however, examines another plausible source of influence on the child's emotional support skills: peers. Buhrmester (1996) suggests two mechanisms through which interaction with peers might contribute to the child's development of

social skills. First, Buhrmester (1996) proposed that children need to be involved in peer relationships if they are to be exposed to the interpersonal demands that motivate the development of increasingly advanced social skills. In this sense, peers provide the opportunities needed to develop competencies. Second, Buhrmester maintains that peer interactions provide the child feedback about appropriateness and effectiveness of skill enactments. This feedback should help the child refine skilled behavior over continued uses.

We believe there is a third way in which peer interaction contributes to the child's social competencies, in particular skill at emotional support. Put simply, peer behavior serves as a model for the child's own behavior. With advancing age, children spend an increasing amount of time with peers and increasingly turn to peers for emotional support (Cauce et al., 1990; Smollar & Youniss, 1982). This suggests that peers may become an especially important source of information about how to provide emotional support. Just as children interacting with parents who are comparatively skilled at emotional support develop relatively sophisticated emotional support skills themselves, so children interacting with peers who are comparatively skilled at providing emotional support should develop relatively sophisticated skills in this domain. Although we are aware of no prior research directly examining the influence of peers' comforting abilities on the child's emotional support skills, it seems important to investigate this connection.

One group of theorists (e.g., Sroufe, 1995) argues that the child's development of sophisticated social skills is largely, and perhaps exclusively, a function of parental characteristics and the child's social interactions with parents. More recently, a second set of theorists, particularly Harris (1998, 2000), maintains that peers influence the child's social behaviors heavily (including social skills), perhaps to the point of over-riding any influence of parents. A third group of theorists (e.g., Buhrmester, 1996; Dunn, 1999), among which we count ourselves, believes that multiple socialization agents - parents, peers, siblings, teachers, mass media sources, and others - influence complex patterns of social behavior (such as the provision of emotional support). Given the complexities associated with providing sensitive

comfort and support to emotionally distressed others, it seems most likely that children learn from multiple sources (see Fogel, 1993; Fogel & Thelen, 1987), with parents and peers being the two most prominent. Thus, our expectation is that parents and peers will each contribute a distinct, measurable influence to children's emotional support skills.

In sum, the current study explores the contributions that two socializing agents, mothers and peers, may make to the development of emotional support skills in children. Specifically, we examined the influence of maternal and peer comforting behavior on three of the child's emotional support skills: comforting ability, affective perspective-taking ability, and social perspective-taking ability. The following three hypotheses were assessed:

H1: Mothers' comforting skills will be positively associated with the emotional support skills of their children.

H2: Peers' comforting skills will be positively associated with the emotional support skills of children.

H3: Maternal and peer comforting skills will contribute independently to the emotional support skills of children.

Method

Participants and General Procedures

Participants were 51 young, school-aged children (28 first graders, 12 males and 16 females; and 23 third graders, 10 males and 13 females), their mothers, and their classmates. Interviews were conducted with mothers in their homes while interviews with the children and their classmates were conducted at school. Data were collected in late spring to ensure that the children had adequate time to become fully acquainted with their classmates. During the course of the interview, each child indicated his or her current age and birthday. This information was used to calculate the child's age in months. Data were gathered in full compliance with regulations governing the informed consent and protection of human subjects, particularly minor

children. Children participated in the study only with their active oral consent, as well as the written consent of their parents and school authorities.

Children in the early grades of elementary school were chosen for this study since a primary interest was with the social determinants of emotional support skills in the early school years. The early school years are an important period during which children increasingly look to peers for emotional support in times of distress (see Smollar & Youniss, 1982). Also, schoolaged children are an understudied group compared to preschoolers. Access to fathers was very limited, so data were collected only from children's mothers. Some research indicates that mothers and fathers exhibit intra-family consistency in the character of their disciplinary strategies with children (see Burleson et al., 1995, p. 60; Fogel, 1993), and this may suggest that there are similar consistencies in the character of parental comforting behaviors. Clearly, however, this is an empirical matter that must be addressed in future research.

Assessments of Children's Emotional Support Skills

Individual interviews were conducted with the children in a quiet room at the school. Each child responded to tasks assessing three emotional support skills: comforting skill, affective perspective-taking skill, and social perspective-taking skill. In addition, the children completed a sociometric questionnaire about classmates. The interviews with the children were tape recorded and typically lasted 40 to 60 minutes.

Comforting communication. Messages reflecting children's comforting abilities were elicited by having them respond to two peer-oriented hypothetical situations. In one situation a friend was depicted as being upset about not receiving an invitation to a classmate's party while in the other situation a friend was depicted as being upset about having failed an important test in school. Coding procedures developed by Ritter (1979) were used to evaluate children's comforting messages for the extent to which they acknowledged, articulated, and legitimized the feelings and perspective of the distressed peer. If the child was unable to respond to the situation or gave a completely inappropriate response, a score of zero was given. One point

was awarded for responses that offered a simple acknowledgment of the other's feelings while two points were given for responses that attempted to compensate the other for the distress or made efforts to repair the external situation. Three points were given for responses that sought to modify the other's interpretation of the situation through the provision of new information. Responses that explicitly elaborated and legitimized the other's feelings were awarded four points. The highest level response produced for each situation was retained for purposes of analysis. Inter-rater reliability, assessed by having two independent coders score the highest-level response to each situation for 15 cases, was .93. Internal consistency of the two-item measure of comforting skill was .77. Evidence supporting the validity of this approach to the assessment of comforting skill is summarized in several sources (e.g., Burleson, 1994a).

Affective perspective-taking skill. Affective perspective-taking skill, or the ability to recognize and understand the causes for another's emotional state, was assessed through a task developed by Rothenberg (1970). This task was chosen since it taps both the ability to recognize the emotions of others and the ability to understand the reasons for another's emotional state. Children listened to four brief taped vignettes of emotionally charged interactions. After hearing each vignette, the child was asked to: (a) identify the emotional state displayed by a target character, (b) explain why the target character was experiencing that emotion, and (c) specify the cues used to infer the emotional state of the target character. Responses to each of these questions were scored within an appropriate hierarchical system (details regarding the task and scoring procedures are available in several sources; see Burleson, 1982; and Rothenberg, 1970). Scores for each question were summed over the four situations. Scores for each of these three components were then standardized and summed to provide a single index of affective perspective-taking skill. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for responses over the four situations was .65. Several studies (e.g., Burleson, 1984; Garner et al., 1994; Strayer & Roberts, 1989) have found assessments of affective perspective-taking ability and emotion knowledge to predict peer-directed emotional support behaviors.

Social perspective-taking skill. Social perspective-taking skill was assessed through a version of Hale and Delia's (1976) Social Perspectives Task (SPT) modified for use with children (see Burleson, 1982). This measure was chosen since it assesses multiple facets of social perspective-taking ability. Specifically, the SPT is designed to assess the extent to which the child can recognize and coordinate multiple viewpoints in affectively charged situations and understand the recursive nature of social perspectives (i.e., that ego can think about an alter's thoughts about ego, etc.). Interviewers asked participants to think about two situations: an actual instance in which a liked person did something that hurt or disappointed the participant and a hypothetical instance in which a classmate of the participant didn't invite him or her to a party. For each situation, interviewers asked the child to explain why the offending party acted as he or she did and what the offending party was thinking and feeling about the situation. Researchers subsequently coded responses to these questions coded for the extent to which they exhibited the ability to distance the self from personal feelings and realistically represent the offending party's point of view (for detailed descriptions of coding procedures, see Burleson, 1982; Hale & Delia, 1976). Inter-rater reliability for codings of 15 protocols was .93. Research indicates that the child's ability to consider the conceptual perspective of others is related to varied indices of peer-directed emotional support (see Burleson, 1984; Iannotti, 1985; Stewart & Marvin, 1984).

Assessment of Peer Comforting Skills

Interviewers asked each child to name the three classmates with whom he or she most liked to play. Research indicates that this is a reasonably reliable method for determining the peers with whom the child frequently interacts (see Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Ladd & Asher, 1985). The comforting skills of each child's "most liked" peers had, of course, been assessed previously through the procedures discussed above during the course of collecting data from the children in each classroom. To create an index for each child of the comforting skills displayed by his or her peers, the skill levels of each child's three nominees for the "most liked"

role were averaged. This procedure, then, provides for each child an index representing the average level of comforting ability displayed by the peers with whom the child most likes to play.

Assessment of Maternal Comforting Skill

Tasks and procedures developed by Applegate, Burke, Burleson, Delia, and Kline (1985) were employed to assess the comforting communication skills of the children's mothers. Mothers responded to two hypothetical situations depicting their child in a context calling for comforting. In one situation the child was sad because he or she had not been invited to a party given by a classmate and in the other situation the child was disappointed because his or her father had forgotten to bring home a promised present. For each of these situations, mothers were instructed to state exactly what they would say to their children to make them feel better.

A coding system developed by Applegate et al. (1985) was used to assess the reflection enhancing character of the mothers' comforting messages. Mothers' messages were coded for the extent to which they granted legitimacy to the child's feelings and encouraged the child to reflect upon and seek an understanding of his or her feelings and the circumstances generating these feelings (for a detailed description of this coding system, see Applegate et al., 1985). Each message produced in response to the two situations was scored; in cases where more than one strategy was produced for a situation, the score for the highest level strategy was retained for purposes of analysis. Categorizing reliability was assessed by having two judges independently code 30% of the data (i.e., message sets for 15 subjects) for the highest level strategy used in response to each situation. Inter-rater reliability, estimated by intra-class correlation, was .90.

The validity of this approach to the study of maternal communication is supported by Kochanska, Kuczynski, and Radke-Yarrow (1989), who found that messages used by mothers when responding to hypothetical situations corresponded reasonably well with those mothers were observed to use when dealing with their children during a 90-minute interaction period.

Applegate (1980) and Kochanska (1990) report similar results. In addition, the results of an eight-year longitudinal study by McNally, Eisenberg, and Harris (1991) indicate that maternal affective styles tend to be very stable across childhood and early adolescence.

Results

Table 1 contains the zero-order intercorrelations among the variables included in the study. Table 1 also contains first-order partial correlations among the variables which control for the effect of the child's age. Since most of the children's social-cognitive and communication skills are significantly associated with age, assessments of the associations among these variables should focus on the age-partialled associations. As directional hypotheses had been presented, one-tailed tests were used in evaluating the significance of the statistical analyses.

The age-partialled associations indicate that both maternal and peer comforting skills are associated with the child's comforting skill ($r = .40, p < .01$, and $r = .30, p < .05$ for mothers and peers, respectively). Maternal comforting skill was not significantly associated with either form of her child's perspective-taking skills ($r = .12, p > .20$ for affective perspective-taking ability, and $r = .15, p > .15$ for social perspective-taking ability). However, peer comforting skills were significantly associated with the child's affective perspective-taking ability ($r = .25, p < .05$) and marginally associated with the child's social perspective-taking ability ($r = .19, p < .10$). Thus, the results of the correlational analyses provide partial support for the first two hypotheses.

The study's third hypothesis, that parental and peer comforting would independently contribute to the child's emotional support skills, was assessed initially through hierarchical multivariate multiple regression. Multivariate multiple regression allows researchers to assess the influences of sets of predictors on several dependent variables simultaneously. In the current analyses, the dependent variables were the child's comforting skills, affective perspective-taking skills, and social perspective-taking skills. The predictors were the child's age, maternal comforting skill, and peer comforting skill.

Age was entered at the first step of the multivariate regression to control for its potentially confounding effects. Age accounted for a substantial amount of variance in the three dependent variables, $R^2 = .37$, Wilks' lambda = .63, $F(3, 47) = 9.33$, $p < .001$. Parental and peer comforting skills were entered simultaneously at a second step of the multivariate regression analysis. The total regression continued to account for a highly significant amount of variation among the three dependent variables, $R^2 = .72$, Wilks' lambda = .28, $F(9, 109) = 8.43$, $p < .001$. More important, a significant multivariate effect was observed for the increment in explained variance due to parental and peer comforting skills, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .35$, $F(6, 109) = 10.35$, $p < .001$. The latter result indicates that maternal and peer comforting skills collectively account for a significant amount of variability in the three dependent variables beyond that explained by age.

Given the significant results obtained with the multivariate multiple regression procedure, separate hierarchical regressions were carried out for each of the three dependent variables. In each of these analyses, age was entered at the first step of the regression and parental and peer comforting skill were entered hierarchically at a second, subsequent step. The results of these three regression analyses appear in Table 2.

Age explained a significant amount of variability in the child's comforting ability, $r^2 = .24$, $F(1, 49) = 15.23$, $p < .001$. When maternal and peer comforting skill were added at the second step, the total equation remained significant, $R^2 = .39$, $F(3, 47) = 10.19$, $p < .001$. Parental and peer comforting accounted for a significant increment in explained variance, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .16$, $F(2, 47) = 6.09$, $p < .01$. Maternal comforting skill was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$); however, peer comforting skill also contributed significantly to the prediction of the child's comforting ability ($\beta = .26$, $p < .05$).

The analysis on the child's affective perspective-taking ability found age to be a significant predictor at the first step of the analysis, $r^2 = .35$, $F(1, 49) = 26.85$, $p < .001$. With the addition of parental and peer comforting skills at the second step of the analysis, the total

equation continued to explain significant variation in the child's affective perspective taking, $R^2 = .40$, $F(3, 47) = 10.37$, $p < .001$. However, the inclusion of parental and peer comforting skills resulted only in a marginally significant increase in explained variance, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .05$, $F(2, 47) = 2.73$, $p < .10$. Peer comforting skill aided the prediction of the child's affective perspective-taking skill ($\beta = .25$, $p = .054$), but maternal comforting skill did not ($\beta = .06$, $p > .30$).

The final analysis, on the child's social perspective-taking ability, found age to account for significant variability at the first step of the analysis, $r^2 = .18$, $F(1, 49) = 10.02$, $p < .002$. Although the total regression equation remained significant when parental and peer comforting skills were added at the second step [$R^2 = .22$, $F(3, 47) = 4.51$, $p < .01$], the inclusion of these two variables did not account for a significant increment in explained variance, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .04$, $F(2, 47) = 2.24$, $p > .15$.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the comforting abilities of parents and peers may be important influences on the emotional support skills of children. The comforting skills of both mothers and liked peers were significantly associated with the child's capacity to produce sensitive comforting messages. Moreover, the regression analyses indicated that the skills of mothers and peers each made a significant, independent contribution to the prediction of the child's comforting ability. Peers' comforting skills were further found significantly associated with the child's affective perspective-taking ability.

The current research is among a very small number of studies to look for and find associations between the social skills of children and the peers with whom they interact (see also Buhrmester, 1996; Burleson, 1994b; Kurdek & Krile, 1982). The correlational nature of the current data does not, of course, permit statements about the direction of causality between peers' skills and those of the child. For example, the child-peer correlations reported here could

be due to children seeking out as playmates those peers having social skill levels similar to their own (see Burleson & Samter, 1994).

However, the current data are also consistent with the hypothesis that the comforting behaviors of peers are one factor influencing the child's development of emotional support skills. Research examining children's conceptions of and expectations for friendship (see reviews by Newcomb, Bukowski, & Bagwell, 1999; Samter, in press) suggests that, with advancing age, children come to view peers as increasingly important sources of emotional support. Moreover, observational research of peer interaction (e.g. Farver & Branstetter, 1994; Strayer, 1980) indicates that children regularly seek support from and provide it to peers. Thus, there is good reason to believe that children are exposed to the comforting efforts of the peers with whom they regularly interact.

Peers' support efforts may model various comforting strategies to children, and thereby enhance - or diminish - the developing child's repertoire of behavioral options for providing help to others. Further, as suggested by the significant association between peer comforting skills and the child's affective perspective-taking ability, exposure to peer comforting efforts may influence the child's focus on the emotional states of others. Consistent with this idea, Dunn and her colleagues (e.g., Dunn, 1998, 1999; Dunn et al., 1991; Dunn & Munn, 1986) have found that the child's exposure to talk about feelings by parents and siblings is associated with individual differences in the child's affective perspective-taking skills. Thus, it seems quite possible that exposure to peer talk about feelings, especially in the context of supportive interactions, will also influence the child's developing social skills. Although these hypotheses are intriguing, determining the direction of causal influence between peer comforting and the child's emotional support skills will require longitudinal research.

The results of the current study join with the findings of several other research efforts (e.g., Applegate et al., 1992; Eisenberg et al., 1993; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979) in underscoring the significance of parental nurturance and comforting with regard to the child's emotional

support skills. Most of the research on parental nurturance has stressed the impact of parental behavior on the child's security, attachment, emotional health, and social adjustment (see the reviews in Bretherton & Waters, 1985). The current research, however, suggests that in addition to facilitating the healthy psychological and emotional development of the child, parental comfort and support also may serve to teach the child how to provide support to others, especially peers (see Burleson & Kunkel, 1996). Again, the correlational nature of the current data do not permit an unambiguous determination of the direction of causal effect. Clearly, however, the behavior of parents powerfully influences children in a great many ways (Stafford & Dainton, 1995). It seems likely, then, that the manner in which parents express comfort to their children has some influence on how children come to provide comfort and emotional support to their peers.

Our finding that parents and peers each made an independent contribution to the child's comforting skill is important, and suggests that each of these socialization agents adds distinctively to the child's developing social competence. Some theorists have suggested that the child's socio-emotional development is influenced primarily through attachment processes grounded in the parental relationship, while others have suggested that peers have much more influence on the child's behavior than do parents. However, our results suggest that parents and peers make a roughly equal contribution to the child's comforting skill. The current results join with other recent findings (e.g., Buhrmester, 1996; Dunn, 1998) in underscoring that multiple socialization agents influence key aspects of the child's social competencies.

Although the current study suggests that the child's emotional support skills may be influenced by the comforting skills of parents and peers, our data contain few clues about the character of the theoretical mechanism through which this influence may be exerted. Scholars of socialization processes (e.g., Burleson et al., 1995; Grusec, 1982; Rollins & Thomas, 1979) have identified several different mechanisms through which the behavioral practices of socializing agents (such as parents and peers) may influence children, including modeling, reinforcement, semiotic mediation (i.e., providing the linguistic and conceptual structures used in

interpreting events), and cognitive accommodation (i.e., promoting the elaboration of the child's cognitive structures).

There is a hint in our data that the comforting efforts of parents and peers chiefly served to model different comforting strategies to the child. The comforting skills of mothers and peers were stronger and more reliable predictors of the child's comforting behavior than of the child's perspective-taking abilities. This is precisely the pattern one would expect if the behavior of socializing agents fostered observational learning and thus influenced children through the mechanism of modeling. In contrast, if the behavior of socializing agents influenced children primarily through mechanisms such as semiotic mediation or cognitive accommodation, one would have anticipated larger associations between agent behavior and indices of the child's cognitive capacities (such as perspective-taking skills).

The findings of the current study are admittedly preliminary and permit few definitive conclusions. They do, however, suggest some interesting and important directions for future research. Obviously, longitudinal research investigating relationships among the variables examined here is needed to establish the nature and direction of the causal path between the comforting skills of socializing agents and the child's emotional support capacities. There are, additionally, several other worthy questions that should be pursued in future research. For example, research indicating that peers become increasingly important sources of emotional support as the child grows older suggests that children may learn most about how to provide emotional support from parents early in life, but later learn more from members of the peer group.

Research also needs to examine the extent to which the socializing effects of parents and peers on the child's emotional support skills are moderated by the child's gender. In our culture, as well as many other cultures, the provision of emotional support is a heavily gendered activity (see Wood, 1994). Thus, it is possible that the emotional support skills of parents and peers may impact differentially on the child as a function of the child's sex.

Further, research needs to examine the influences of other socializing agents and assess their relative effects qua mothers and peers with regard to the child's emotional support skills. In particular, the contributions of fathers and siblings need to be examined. In addition, the child may acquire information about emotional support from several additional sources, including teachers in school, religious educators, and the mass media. A full understanding of the socialization of emotional support must incorporate these other potential sources of influence.

The child's emotional support skills are important and research on their genesis is a significant area of inquiry. Empirical study of the questions raised here should not only teach us about how children learn emotional support skills, but should also provide broader lessons about how children become functioning members of the social world.

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Footnote

1. The notion that parents significantly influence the social and emotional development of their children has been challenged in recent years (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2000; Harris, 2000).

However, we believe that a careful sifting of the relevant evidence (as in Hart et al., in press) indicates that despite the very real effects of both biology and peers on children, parents still are quite influential on their children's social and emotional development.

Table 1

Zero-Order and Age-Partialled Correlations Among the Variables Included in the Study

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Variables	Maternal Comfort	Peer Comfort	Child Comfort	Child APT	Child SPT

Maternal Comforting	--	.21	.40**	.12	.15
Peer Comforting	.07	--	.30*	.25*	.19
Child's Comforting	.28*	.52**	--	.50**	.60**
Affective Perspective Taking (APT)	.02	.55**	.64**	--	.54**
Social Perspective Taking (SPT)	.08	.41**	.68**	.65**	--
Age In Months	-.13	.66**	.49**	.60**	.43**

=====

Note: Correlations below the diagonal are zero-order while those above the diagonal are with the effect of the child's age partialled out. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. In most cases, $N = 51$, though exact sample sizes for each coefficient vary slightly due to missing data.

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses on Children's Emotional Support Skills

Comforting Skill					Total Equation	
<u>Predictor</u>	<u>Step</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>R²Change</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Age	1	.49*	.24*	.24	15.23	.001
Mother Comfort	2	.31*				
Peer Comfort	2	.26*	.16*	.39	10.19	.001
Affective Perspective-Taking Skill					Total Equation	
<u>Predictor</u>	<u>Step</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>R²Change</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Age	1	.60*	.35*	.35	26.85	.001
Mother Comfort	2	.06				
Peer Comfort	2	.25+	.05+	.40	10.37	.001
Social Perspective-Taking Skill					Total Equation	
<u>Predictor</u>	<u>Step</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>R²Change</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
Age	1	.43*	.18*	.18	10.93	.002
Mother Comfort	2	.11				
Peer Comfort	2	.20	.04	.22	4.51	.007

Note: +p < .10; *p < .05