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Understanding of Emotions and Emotion Regulation in Adolescent Females with Conduct Problems: A Qualitative Analysis

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Understanding of Emotions and Emotion Regulation in Adolescent Females with Conduct Problems: A Qualitative Analysis

by

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Abstract

Adolescent girls with conduct problems were interviewed regarding their (a) understanding of positive and negative emotions, (b) parental context of experiencing emotions, (c) ways of regulating emotions, (d) success in emotion regulation, and (e) use of alternative strategies in dealing with emotions. It was found that the girls have relatively little understanding of their negative internal states and/or are unable to express them to others, especially to fathers. They have few successful strategies for regulating negative emotions in themselves and others and are unaware of alternative strategies. This dysregulatory pattern likely prevents them from learning more appropriate ways of expressing and constructively handling their negative emotions that are necessary for healthy adjustment.

Introduction

An examination of the literature on conduct problems reveals that the preponderance of research focuses upon males and their developmental pathways (e.g., Crick & Dodge, [1994](#); Eme & Kavanaugh, [1995](#); Hinshaw & Anderson, [1996](#)). This is, in part, due to the greater prevalence of male children and adolescents being diagnosed with conduct problems and conduct disorder (e.g., Hinshaw & Anderson, [1996](#); Nottelman & Jensen, [1995](#); Zoccolillo, [1993](#)) and the severity of their anti-social acts (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Shelden, [1992](#); McGee, Feehan, Williams, & Anderson, [1992](#); Robbins, [1991](#)). Recent research which examines the biological (e.g., temperament, genetic, neurobiological), social-cognitive (e.g., cognitive deficiencies, information processing distortions), and family factors (e.g., family structure, parent criminality) has continued to emphasize males (Belsky, [1999](#); Dabbs, Jurkovic, & Frady, [1991](#); Dunn, Lochman, & Colder, [1997](#); Gartland & Day, [1992](#); Wong & Cornell, [1999](#)). Recently, several researchers have called for a better understanding of adolescent females with conduct problems (e.g., Bjorkqvist & Niemela, [1992](#); Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt, & Silva, [1993](#); Crick, [1995](#); Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, [1996](#); Moffitt, Caspi, Belsky, & Silva, [1992](#); Russell, & Russell, [1996](#); Serbin, Moskowitz, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, [1991](#); Zoccolillo, [1993](#)). This is due to an increased awareness that (a) the research findings relating to males may not be generalizable to females (Eme & Kavanaugh, [1995](#)), and (b) the etiology of female conduct problems may be different from that of males, especially when emotional and relational factors are considered (e.g., Graham, Hudley, & Williams, [1992](#); Patterson, [1996](#); Rohde, Lewinsohn, & Seely, [1996](#); Russell & Russell, [1996](#)). The purpose of the present study was to add to the growing literature

by qualitatively examining the perceptions and uses of emotions in female adolescents experiencing conduct problems within the context of parent-child relationships.

Qualitative approach

Researchers examining conduct problems and disorder have overwhelmingly used quantitative methods. Although this approach is very useful, it may have limitations regarding our understanding of conduct problems in female adolescents. First, quantitative methods may reflect a male perspective that emphasizes biological, cognitive, and behavioral antecedents of conduct problems and disorder (Eme & Kavanaugh, [1995](#)). It may be that a qualitative approach can uncover the complex social-emotional issues within their gender socialization that contribute to girls' conduct problems. Second, the role of emotions has been largely ignored in the etiology of conduct problems (e.g., Graham, Hudley, & Williams, [1992](#); Patterson, [1996](#)), although intense emotions (e.g., anger, depression, resentment, anxiety) are prominent in girls with conduct problems and often influence their cognitions and behaviors (Fuendeling, [1998](#); Keenan, & Shaw, [1997](#); Zoccolillo, Pickles, Quinton, & Rutter, [1992](#); Zoccolillo & Rogers, [1991](#), [1992](#)). Qualitative research may be more appropriate in assessing how females with conduct problems experience their emotions and how this experience may influence their regulation of emotions and subsequent cognitions and behavior. Third, if the developmental pathways for conduct problems are different for males and females (e.g., Hussong, Curran, & Chassin, [1998](#); Rohde et al. [1996](#); Swaim, Oetting, Edwards, & Beauvais, [1989](#)), this would suggest different prevention and intervention strategies. The absence of research using a qualitative approach may obfuscate this possibility. Thus, a qualitative methodology was chosen to assess emotions and their regulation in adolescent females with conduct problems.

Gender Socialization

Research has shown that girls and boys receive different emotion socialization experiences (Denham, [1998](#); Garner, Robertson, & Smith, [1997](#)). For example, mothers exhibit more emotionally expressive patterns toward their daughters than sons (Malatesta-Magai, [1991](#)), and parents encourage greater emotional awareness and expressiveness in their daughters (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, [1986](#); Saarni, [1989](#)). Parents socialize their daughters to be more socially focused than sons by encouraging their daughters to adopt more familial and mediational roles, while they more readily endorse aggressive values, control of emotions, and separation in their sons (Eme & Kavanaugh, [1995](#); Saarni, [1989](#)). Parents are also more controlling rather than accepting of their sons' behavior (Saarni, [1989](#)) and facilitate greater emotional demonstrativeness and awareness in their daughters (Belenky et al., [1986](#); Saarni, [1989](#)). Through such socialization, females typically learn to value emotions, have the desire to create and maintain intimacy, and ultimately derive part of their identity from interpersonal relationships and their emotional connections with others more than do males (e.g., Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, [1990](#); Saarni, [1989](#); Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Barrett, [1991](#)).

These gender socialization differences may have important implications for the etiology of conduct problems in females. First, the role of emotional development has largely been neglected in studying female conduct problems despite the fact that emotions are a primary feature of their socialization. Thus, girls' involvement in misconduct may be more tied to distortions in their

emotional socialization than for boys. Second, research has found that individuals with low levels of socialization engage in more maladaptive and antisocial behaviors than those well socialized (e.g., Kosson, Steuerwald, Newman, & Widom, [1994](#)). This research, however, has not examined how problems in socialization influence the development of conduct problems in females and how they are manifested, e.g., girls lying, staying out late at night, and running away from home as opposed to being physically aggressive like boys (Mash & Wolfe, [1999](#); Zoccolillo, [1993](#)). In the present study, it was assumed that deficiencies in emotion socialization influence girls' understanding and experiencing of emotions, thus resulting in emotion dysregulation and conduct problems.

Emotion Regulation

One important aspect of emotional development is the ability to regulate one's emotions. Emotion regulation consists of both intrinsic and extrinsic processes that are responsible for learning to recognize, monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions (Thompson, [1994](#)). Emotional reactions include strategies to maintain, enhance, subdue, and/or inhibit emotions in attempting to accomplish goals (Denham, [1998](#)). Fox ([1994](#)) states that the regulation of emotion is the ability to respond to the ongoing demands of experience with a range of emotions in a manner that is socially tolerable and sufficiently flexible to permit spontaneous reactions, including the ability to delay spontaneous reactions as needed. Regulating emotions is crucial in maintaining a connection with ongoing perceptual processes, having access to a greater number of adaptive responses, and enhancing flexible and appropriate responses. Lacking the ability to regulate emotions can result in deleterious emotional arousal and the mis-identification and mis-direction of emotions, thereby hindering the ability to function adaptively and appropriately.

Emotion regulation patterns have been studied in relation to problematic attachment styles and parenting behaviors that have subsequently been related to conduct difficulties. For example, anxious/ambivalent children often develop hyperactivation of negative affective expression, resulting in negative behaviors such as neediness demeanor (e.g., clinging), hostility, and withdrawal (Fuendeling, [1998](#); Magar & Hunziker, [1993](#)). Avoidant children experience negative emotions surrounding rejection; as a consequence, they learn to deactivate the expression of negative affect by avoiding close relationships; some eliminate and blunt all affective experience (Fuendeling, [1998](#)). In their interactions with children, parents model emotional expression (Garner, et al., [1997](#)) along with techniques of regulating/not regulating their emotions (Denham, [1998](#)). This modeling, in conjunction with various disciplining patterns, results in children internalizing the emotion regulation techniques of their parents. The combination of insecure attachment and parenting behaviors may lead children to dysregulate emotions and engage in disruptive behaviors that, in turn, instigate maladaptive parenting strategies, which then exacerbates the children's disruptive behaviors. This pattern has been investigated within coercive parent-child interchange theory (Hinshaw & Anderson, [1996](#)) and parent effectiveness strategies (Wahler, Castellani, Smith, & Keathley, [1996](#)).

Through their gender socialization, females are expected to perceive and have a greater emotional investment with their parents. This has, at least, three important implications. First, girls may be more susceptible to parental modeling and reinforcement of maladaptive emotion regulation techniques than boys. Second, when emotional connections are disturbed (e.g., having

insecure attachments, poor parenting skills), their emotional development may be impaired or delayed, resulting in emotion dysregulation. Thus, dysregulation is viewed as a failure to achieve the developmental task of being able to regulate one's emotions (e.g., inability to decrease negative or enhance/maintain positive emotions), thereby jeopardizing or impairing normal functioning (Cole, Michel, & Teti, [1994](#)). Third, it is assumed that dysregulatory actions interfere with other important cognitive, emotional, and social processes, e.g., attention, information processing, self esteem, understanding social relationships (Cole et al., [1994](#); Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, [1997](#)). Thus, emotion dysregulation results in being unable to make reasonable evaluations, having fewer regulatory strategies, and the inability to make decisions regarding appropriate conduct in a variety of contexts. This conceptualization is consistent with past research indicating relationships between dysfunctional parental behavior and child maladaptive behavior (e.g., Cummings & Davies, [1996](#); Kosson, et al., [1994](#)).

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to assess the role of emotions (positive and negative) and their regulation in girls with conduct problems. A qualitative approach was chosen to diverge from and complement conventional, quantitative approaches because the latter tend to objectify or externalise participants' experiences (Kazdin, [1998](#)), thus minimizing the ability to capture the internal, emotional processes related to conduct problems, which was the focus of this study. This resulted in devising a semi-structured interview to gather subjective, rich, experiential data. The content and ordering of the questions followed a logical sequence from ascertaining whether they understood and had experienced certain emotions to their success in regulating the emotions. This permitted identifying issues in emotional development and how these issues may relate to their conduct problems. The following aspects of their emotional development were examined: (a) understanding of emotions, (b) parental context of experiencing emotions, (c) ways of regulating emotions, (d) success in emotion regulation, and (e) use of alternative strategies in dealing with emotions.

Three emotion dimensions were used to assess the role and regulation of emotions in girls with conduct problems. The three dimensions were love - hate, happy - sad, and content/calm - anger/frustration. These particular emotion dimensions were chosen because (a) they are universally recognized as being core emotions, (b) their absence and/or dysregulation likely indicate unmet emotional and relational needs within the parent-child relationship, and (c) rage and sadness have been linked to misconduct, with elation and happiness being related to the inhibition of maladaptive behaviors (e.g., Denham, [1998](#); Ge, Best, Conger, & Simons, [1996](#); Susman, Inoff-Germain, Nottlemann, Loriaux, Cutler, & Chrousos, [1987](#)).

Method

Participants

Four adolescent girls (age range, 13-14 years) were recruited from the same residential treatment program to ensure that they had exposure to a similar environment, staff, and treatment model. Due to the reduced number of females who experience conduct problems, the challenge was in finding participants who were experiencing these problems and being treated within the same

program. Wood's Homes (Calgary, Alberta) was specifically chosen to obtain participants for this study because (a) they are a well-known organization in Southern Alberta providing services to troubled youth, and (b) they provide several treatment programs ranging from prevention to crisis intervention. These factors increased the likelihood that females who possess the required criteria could be found within a single program. At the time of this project's implementation, there were no other females who met the criteria attending this program.

For inclusion in the study, girls were not required to have a formal, clinical diagnosis of either conduct or oppositional defiant disorder (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Disorders IV*, [1994](#)). They were included if they exhibited many of the behaviors, attitudes, and emotions characteristic of CD and ODD and were sufficiently disruptive to warrant being taken from their homes and assigned to the residential facility. Hence, "conduct problems" was used to describe the girls. Other criteria were (a) each girl had to have had contact with her parent(s) within the past year, and (b) the parent(s)/guardian were willing to allow the adolescent to participate; both the adolescent and parent/guardian signed informed consent forms.

Each girl chose an alias. "Dana" (13 years) had an older sister; both had lived with their biological mother before "Dana" was removed from the home and took up residency in the treatment center. Her parents had divorced seven years prior to the interview. "Dana" had regular contact with her mother, but stated that it had been approximately seven months since last speaking with her father. "Cats" (13 years) had three half-brothers and one half-sister. Her siblings resided with different family members (2 half-brothers with her biological father, one half-brother with her step-dad, and her half-sister with her step-mom); she had lived with her biological dad. "Cats' biological parents were divorced approximately 11 years prior to being interviewed. She had more contact with her father than mother, who she described as not being involved in her life. "Shilo" (14 years) was an only child whose parents had divorced 14 years prior to the interview. She described having a closer relationship with her mother, who she talked to on a daily basis and visited on weekends. "Shilo" described her father as disengaged; she only saw him once a year and talk to him occasionally over the phone; during visits, he didn't spend much time with her. "Karen" (14 years) had a younger brother and a sister who still lived in the home with her biological parents (married, living together), as did she before moving to the treatment center. "Karen" visited home on weekends and was integrated in the family. She described her relationship with her mother as more comfortable; she believed her father was too dominating.

To gain access to these participants, a formal proposal was submitted for review by the organization's research and ethics committee. Upon approval of the proposal, the organization assigned a senior staff member to coordinate access to the residential program. Once inside the treatment facility, the researcher had the responsibility of introducing the project to the participants, collecting consents, and scheduling and conducting the interviews.

Interview Protocol and Procedure

The semi-structured interview protocol assessed five areas of emotional functioning. Each area was assessed by an open-ended question: (a) *Understanding of emotion*: "Can you tell me what (emotion) means to you?" (b) *Parental context of experiencing emotion*: "Have you experienced

(emotion) with your mom (dad) Can you tell me about the times that you have felt (emotion) with your mom (dad)?" (c) *Regulation of emotion*: "How did you show your (emotion)?" "What did you do while feeling (emotion)?" (d) *Success of emotion regulation*: "How did you feel after you _____?" "Do you think that what you did worked?" "Did it make things better/worse?" (e) *Alternative strategies*: "What other ways could you have handled the way you felt?" These five questions were asked for each of the six emotions within the three emotional dimensions (in the order listed): happy, sad, contented/calm, anger/frustration, love, and hate. The five questions were first asked in relation to their mothers, and then repeated in relation to their fathers.

Specific interview procedures were followed to control for possible sources of researcher bias: (a) a semi-structured interview format; (b) the same interviewer that offered a similar approach, tone, question probes, and level of emotional comfort; (c) consistent information (e.g., purpose, procedures, participation, confidentiality); (d) consistent ordering of interview phases (developing initial rapport, conducting interviews, and debriefing); (e) consistent interview environment (e.g., interview room, tape recorder); and (f) participant verification of their responses; i.e., responses were reflected back to the participant by the interviewer and intended meaning clarified.

Data Analysis

Quality control. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Data were verified in two ways prior to analysis. First, the use of a tape recorder during the interviews allowed verification of verbatim transcriptions. Second, the researcher obtained second opinions from other researchers to clarify and explore possible alternative interpretations.

Organization of data. Since relevant responses within interviews may not always occur contiguously, each transcribed interview was initially re-organized according to the five areas of questioning in the interview protocol structure. This was done by (a) organizing each area into positive and negative emotions associated with each emotion dyad (happy-sad, content-frustrated/anger, love-hate); (b) where appropriate, separating data relevant to their mothers and fathers; and (c) keeping separate the data for each girl so that the answers could be compared for similarities and differences across the girls. The first area (understanding of emotion) explored the girls' understanding of each emotion (regardless of parent) and provided the context for subsequent questioning. Their answers were examined for responsiveness to the questions and the extent of their understanding of each emotion (e.g., internal feeling states, circumstances that precede the emotion). The second area (parental context of experiencing emotion) examined the frequency and variation of experiencing each emotion with each parent. The third area (regulation of emotion) examined the number and variety of methods that the girls used to handle their emotions in the context of each parent. The fourth area (success of emotion regulation) examined the girls' feelings and perceptions of success in regulating their emotions (e.g., escalated, maintained, alleviated) in the context of each parent. The fifth area (alternative strategies) examined whether the girls could provide alternative regulatory methods for each emotion in the context of each parent.

Results

Understanding of Emotion

For two of the positive emotions (happy, love), the girls described facial expressions and behaviors indicative of their understanding of the emotions (e.g., smiling, laughing, screaming happily, running around excitedly, kissing). However, all four girls could not describe the behaviors and/or internal states and circumstances associated with being "calm or contented." Two of the four girls showed an understanding of the behaviors and internal states associated with the three negative emotions (hate, sadness, anger/frustration). For example, "Karen" described her feelings of sadness as, "It makes me feel depressed and I don't feel like doing anything, just be alone, just think about why I am sad." The two other girls had difficulty describing their behaviors or internal states associated with negative emotions, but could describe the external circumstances (e.g., events, actions of others) that led to or resulted from these emotions. For example, "Dana" described her sadness as, "When people put me down and don't respect me or when something doesn't go right."

Reflections. The girls' unfamiliarity with "calmness" likely reflects the chaotic environments and inconsistent parenting to which they were exposed during their development. This kind of family life has been observed in homes of children exhibiting conduct problems (Dobkin, Charlebois, & Tremblay, [1997](#); Eme & Kavanaugh, [1995](#); Kosson et al., [1994](#)). The lack of understanding of calmness likely contributes to the girls' inability to calm themselves when experiencing negative emotions.

The two girls indicating little understanding of negative emotions had either little awareness of their internal states and/or were unable to express their emotions to others. These findings indicate a deficiency in typical gender socialization; i.e., most girls by this age are able to recognize emotions in others and themselves and to communicate how they feel (e.g., Feldman, Phillipot, & Custrini, [1991](#); Hall, [1990](#)). Without these abilities, the appropriate regulation of emotion in one's self and in others is seriously impaired (e.g., Fox, [1994](#); Goleman, [1995](#)).

Parental Context of Experiencing Emotion

All four girls described positive emotional experiences (calm, happy, love) with their mothers, but struggled to describe any positive emotion with their fathers. An example of this distinction is revealed in "Shilo's" description of experiencing joy. With her mother, "Birthdays...spending time together when we don't fight, watching TV, or just having a good talk;" compared to her father, "When I stayed with him for a few days, but I don't see him often enough I guess."

In contrast, the four girls reported many more negative emotional experiences (hate, sad, anger/frustration) with their fathers than mothers. For example, "Dana" described anger with her mother as occurring "sometimes, not very often." But in describing anger with her father, she mentioned numerous instances and in great detail; e.g., "When I was little, he always used to say that he was going to take me out somewhere and treat me like a princess and do everything that I wanted to do. Then the time would come and I'd be all ready waiting for the doorbell. He would just never come or never call or anything and I would just be so mad that I just hated it."

Reflections. The girls' descriptions of positive emotional experiences suggest greater emotional closeness and psychological safety in experiencing and expressing these emotions with their mothers than fathers. This is consistent with past research in gender socialization which indicates that mothers foster emotional expression in their daughters (Belenky et al., [1986](#); Saarni, [1989](#)) more than fathers. The lack of paternal positive emotional experiences may also indicate an inability to regulate their negative emotions which then prevents the occurrence of positive emotions in the presence of their fathers, thus preventing the establishment of positive relationships with their fathers.

The pattern of dysregulation of negative emotions with fathers has several implications. First, the fathers may react more negatively towards their daughters, which in turn, may exacerbate their dysregulation, resulting in cyclic pattern of strained relations (Eme & Kavanaugh, [1995](#); Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, [1993](#)). This cyclic pattern may account for the low frequency of father-daughter contact and be historically a primary reason for the dysregulation. Second, the lack of positive paternal relations may further contribute to the girls' misconduct and place them at greater risk of becoming involved with social welfare and law enforcement agencies (Marsh, Clement, Stoughton, & Marckioni, [1986](#)). Third, the emotionally negative interactions with their fathers may generalize to interactions with other males and authority figures, which may then decrease their likelihood of receiving help.

Regulation of Emotion

For two of the positive emotions (happy, love), the four girls reported using actions aimed at continuing the positive internal states (e.g., conversation, hugging, kissing, making breakfast, giving gifts). The regulation of these two positive emotions occurred more often with their mothers than fathers. All four girls were unable to describe how they could achieve and/or maintain the emotion/state of calmness.

When asked about regulating the three negative emotions, all four girls reported numerous behaviors that not only maintained but also escalated negative internal states in themselves and others. Although behaviors such as screaming, kicking, throwing/breaking things, and running away were common reactions to their negative emotional states, they also reported some positive regulatory behaviors for their negative emotions that fell into two categories: (a) nurturance-seeking, e.g., talking to friends, attempting to discuss problems with a parent; and (b) distraction, e.g., listening to music, leaving the house, interacting with a pet.

Reflections. The girls indicated the ability to achieve and maintain positive emotions as well as repair negative emotional states with their mothers. This likely contributed to some minimal level of positive mother-child interaction, thereby maintaining their maternal relationships and perhaps keeping their maladaptive behaviors from escalating. This was not the case with their fathers. The girls' inability to understand, achieve or maintain a state of calmness likely reflects the lack of parental modeling and teaching of self-soothing, anger-management, and calming techniques. This likely restricts their range of strategies in controlling negative emotions, resulting in impulsive and maladaptive behavior, which tends to be a symptom of deficiencies in early emotional development (e.g., Guralnick, [1993](#)).

The many behaviors exhibited while experiencing negative emotions are considered dysregulatory because they maintain and increase these emotions. They also instigate negative reactions in others and interfere with and impact other facets of life (e.g., Cole et al., [1994](#)). The girls' overall reliance on predominantly dysregulatory methods likely results in the continuance of experiencing negative feelings without relief, which then prevents learning more positive regulatory methods necessary for healthy and flexible adjustment, e.g., alternative regulatory methods.

Success of Emotion Regulation

The four girls uniformly believed their regulation of positive and negative emotions were successful with both parents although, overall, the girls reported less regulatory success for negative than positive emotions. For positive emotions, they described how successful they were in maintaining or even prolonging their positive emotional experiences through humor, talking, and doing activities together. They claimed success in reducing negative states by throwing things, screaming obscenities at parents, which resulted in their parents' intimidation and withdrawal. For example, "Karen" reported that it made her feel much better when she "gets all my anger out." The girls focused upon the immediate consequences of their dysregulatory behaviors rather than the long-term maintenance (and possibly worsening) of difficult situations with their parents. This suggests that they were either selectively attending to immediate gratification and/or failing to attend to consequences.

Reflections. The girls had distorted perceptions of regulatory success and this appeared to be the result of their focus on immediate consequences. They realized that dysregulatory methods maintained or escalated the negative feelings in themselves and others. However, they were at a loss as to how to get out of the dysregulatory pattern, a concern that was the focus of the next question. Since girls may not spontaneously report other emotion regulation strategies, direct questioning was used to reveal possible constructive regulatory behaviors in their repertoires.

Alternative Strategies

The four girls reported more alternative emotion regulation strategies for positive than negative emotions. For example, the girls described six additional strategies that they used for regulating positive emotions, but only three additional ones were given for regulating negative emotions. Examples of positive alternatives included engaging in more activities with their parents, creating and making gifts (e.g., art) for their parents, and finding ways to express their feelings to parents. Constructive alternative ways for regulating negative emotions included seeking out parents to discuss incidents and related feelings and apologising for previous behaviors.

Reflections. The girls' responses suggest greater experience and flexibility in maintaining and enhancing positive emotions, but having fewer skills and perhaps being more rigid in decreasing and/or repairing negative emotions. The latter likely contributes to their dysregulation of negative emotions, thereby likely (a) interfering with the cognitive processes necessary for more adaptive responding (e.g., problem identification and solving) to external environmental stimuli (Derryberry & Reed, [1994](#), [1996](#)), and (b) preventing the learning of a more effective repertoire

of techniques. Their reliance on a few ineffective methods for regulating negative emotions likely contributes further to dysregulation and maintains maladaptive behavior patterns.

Summary and Implications

The girls with conduct problems in this study appeared to have little difficulty in understanding and experiencing the positive emotions of happiness and love, especially with their mothers. They also had a variety of emotion regulation techniques to maintain and enhance these positive emotions and felt successful in doing so. They were unaware of the state of calmness and appeared to have no means to achieve it. In terms of negative emotions, they had little understanding and/or were unable to express them to others, especially to fathers. They had few successful strategies for regulating negative emotions in themselves and others, and were relatively unaware of alternative regulatory strategies. Although they believed they were successful in dealing with negative emotions, they continued to experience them without relief, which likely further instigated negative reactions by others. These dysregulatory patterns likely prevented them from learning more appropriate ways of expressing and constructively handling their negative emotions, which are necessary for healthy adjustment.

There are, at least, three implications of this study. First, these results indicate the important role emotions play for the girls with conduct problems. This suggests that emotional development and the associated regulatory processes are crucial in understanding the etiology of misconduct. Therefore, prevention and intervention approaches should target the developing child and parent-child relationships where emotion regulation patterns are being learned. Second, the girls had considerable difficulty in their relationships with their fathers, which were characterised by the absence of positive emotions and/or presence of dysregulated negative emotions. Therefore, prevention and intervention strategies are necessary to promote positive parenting by and healthy relationships with fathers (or father surrogates) so that girls can have multiple role models and teachers of emotion regulation strategies. Third, research is needed that focuses on how to help these girls learn constructive emotion regulation techniques at this late stage of development. For example, they had already learned that emotion dysregulation and poor conduct gained them attention and power over others. It would appear that the identification of difficulties in emotional development (e.g., lack of awareness of emotions, inability to appropriately express emotion) and specifically in emotion regulation (e.g., inability to modify emotional reactions, not having problem-solving strategies) is necessary as a first step in developing successful prevention and intervention programs for girls with conduct problems.

Limitations. A major limitation of this study was the number of participants ($n = 4$). This was due to the difficulties in finding and recruiting more girls who met the inclusion requirements. Since the girls were similar in age, comparison of emotion regulation abilities at different developmental stages was not possible. This study was limited to girls experiencing "conduct problems" rather than those diagnosed with a conduct disorder. Additional research is needed to expand our understanding of emotions and emotion regulation in girls who experience conduct problems of various severity levels and who reside or receive treatment from different treatment programs.

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