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STRATEGIES AND EXPECTATIONS IN PARENTS' SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN'S EMOTION EXPRESSION

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Abstract

The study analyzed parents' emotion socialization strategies when their children express negative emotions (sadness and anger) in situations in which the child's expression could hurt other individuals that are present. Influence of parent's and children's gender on socialization strategies, and of children's age were the independent variables considered. Subjects were 267 Italian adults, 141 mothers and 126 fathers, whose children - attending local schools - were 4/5 or 8/9 years-old (N = 107 and 160), both male and female (N= 131 and 136). Data were collected by means of a questionnaire that presented Ss with two hypothetical stimulus events, one assumed to elicit sadness, the other one anger in a child protagonist C - e.g., in the presence of C's mother/father, a friend of C unintentionally drops C's ice-cream; C feels angry. Subjects - asked to assume that C would be their child, and to identify themselves with the parent in the event - answered 2 open and 1 closed question related to their predictions about C's expressive behavior, and their reactions toward C's expression of negative emotions. Qualitative and quantitative data analyses showed that parents tend to adopt a variety of strategies - e.g., 'explaining' the event to C; suggesting a solution to the problem (e.g., getting another ice-cream); asking C to change attitude toward the event; soothing C; etc. Both parents' predictions, and their reactions, proved to be influenced by gender (both child's and parent's), and by the child's age. For instance, parents expected older children to express negative emotions less frequently than younger children, but also expected girls to show anger much less than boys; fathers (but not mothers) suggested a solution more often for anger than for sadness events. A comparison of these results with those obtained in a previous study (Cigala & Zammuner 1998) shows that some socialization process aspects are emotion-specific, i.e. due to the nature of the elicited emotion rather than to the stimulus-event kind. The results of the study are discussed in terms of their implications as regards emotion socialization practices, and their impact on a child's well-being.

KEY WORDS: emotion socialization strategies; mothers and fathers; sadness; anger; 4-5 and 8-9 year-olds children; emotion-expression regulation; well-being and quality of relationships.

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STRATEGIES AND EXPECTATIONS IN PARENTS' SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN'S EMOTION EXPRESSION

Introduction

The meaning of psychological well-being has been analyzed in recent studies, in order to try and define it better, that is, as a theoretically well-specified construct that can be subject to experimental measurement. Although the well-being indicators singled out in such studies are extremely variable, we might say that they can be ascribed into two broad model categories of psychological well-being. The first one, called "social well-being", defines models that focus on social-cultural indicators of well-being; the second one, called "subjective well-being", defines models that are centered on subjective meanings given to well-being by individuals (e.g., Burnstein, 1993; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). At the core of both model categories, are well-being indicators that are related to transactional processes, as evidenced by indicators such as "good relationships", "meaningful relationships", "relationships satisfaction". Finally, from a broader perspective it might be said that studies in this field have shown that quality of life is significantly related to quality of relationships --the latter as measured through this or that specific variable.

Well-being, emotions, and emotional competence. An assumption underlying the study to be presented in this paper --assumption that is relevant for quality of life studies-- is that an individual's relationships have an "emotional value", or, to state it better, an "emotional quality". This hypothesis can be articulated as follows. On the one hand, every relationship has subjective meaning and emotional significance; both its meaning and significance vary as a function of the beliefs and expectations a person holds. It is the relationship meaning that dictates whether the individual will maintain the relationship, or withdraw from it. On the other hand, the relevance of the "emotional quality" of a relationship is revealed by the fact that, in social transactions with others, emotional expressions tend typically to convey interpersonal information: a person's needs are expressed, as well as recognized by others, through emotional language in its different forms --e.g., gesture, tone of voice, facial expressiveness. This is a well-established finding in the field of developmental psychology, where several studies show that deep and meaningful emotional communicative transactions between infants and their mothers are established very early on in development (Sroufe, 1995). These emotional exchanges constitute essential features for the development of intention, shared meanings, and language (Tronick, 1989). Studies have shown, moreover, that if emotional quality in a relationship is absent or poor (e.g., as it happens in some forms of autism), and children are not able 'to read' emotional signs (their own, or others') and thus unable to ascribe them a meaning, then aspects of development due to socialization (e.g., inter-subjectivity, shared attention, empathic abilities, pro-social behavior) will not develop properly (i.e.: Hobson, 1986).

In conclusion, if we assume that well-being is crucially linked to the quality of interpersonal relationships, as suggested in the literature, then we have to hypothesize that well-being is causally related to a person's emotional competence, i.e., to her ability to deal with the emotional quality of relationships. Emotional competence is in fact defined as the ability to define, maintain, and modify emotional exchanges with efficacy, that is, to deal with them in a way that is adequate with respect to both personal needs, and one's own social and cultural environment (Gordon, 1989). It is therefore important that studies of psychological well-being consider a person's emotional competence both as regards individual needs (e.g., self-protection, other's-protection) and environmental demands (e.g., complying with social rules, norms pertaining to the family, the social community, the culture).

Emotional competence is a complex skill, constituted by different 'ingredients', or components, such as the ability to understand and recognize the emotions of others, and the ability to adjust one's own emotions depending on the situation at hand (Saarni, 1993). A main hypothesis is that the level reached by an individual in each component ability will influence his/her social behavior. Thus, the person's skill to respond emotionally in an adequate way to others is deeply related to his/her ability to recognize and understand his/her own emotions, in that recognition of expressive cues, together with knowledge of emotion-eliciting causes, allows him/her to account for, and predict, the behavior of others, thus enabling him/her to react in an adequate manner. There exists now a growing body of evidence, provided by experimental studies, about the relationship between emotional competence in children, measured through laboratory tasks, and various social abilities --such as, communication competence (Manstead & Edwards, 1992), ways of dealing with conflict with mothers and siblings (Slomokowski & Dunn, 1992), ways of playing with peers (Youngblade & Dunn, 1995), and the establishment and maintenance of peer relationships in the classroom (Denham & coll., 1994).

Emotion regulation. The study to be reported is concerned with a specific aspect of emotional competence, namely the *ability to regulate emotions*. This regulation skill operates either at the intrapsychic level, i.e., the inner control of emotions (e.g., what strategies an individual will adopt in order to modify his/her own emotional state), or at the interpersonal level, i.e., the control of emotional expression(s) --the adaptive functions of emotion expression regulation have been examined in a quite extensive developmental psychology literature (e.g., Cole, 1986; Harris, 1989; Saarni, 1989; 1993).

According to a functionalist approach, emotional expression is a communicative behavior that functions as a regulator of interpersonal relationships. In particular, the expression of a certain emotion always has a contextually-based social meaning: it might be interpreted as expressing a desire to preserve the relationship, interrupt it, or modify it (Barrett, 1994). Research in this field shows that, when children regulate emotional expressions, very early on they do so by applying flexible strategies that enable them to react in an adaptive fashion to different situations. This regulatory skill makes it more likely that interactions are successful, bringing about in turn a feeling of greater social self-effectiveness (Campos, Campos, e Barret, 1989). Vice versa, several studies have shown that psychopathological symptoms might be due to emotional dysregulation (see Garber & Dodge, 1991 for a review). In particular, children who exhibit aggressive behavior, or have problems of behavioral undercontrol (i.e., externalizing problems) have difficulties in regulating affect; similarly, patterns of behavioral overcontrol (i.e., internalizing problems) have been ascribed to disregulative emotion modulation (Rubin & Mills, 1991). Yet other studies have shown how emotional regulation influences the quality of social interactions; for instance, children who are less able to regulate their own emotions display a higher frequency of anxious behavior during free play (Rubin, Coplan, Fox & Calkins, 1995), have a lower peer sociometric status, and less frequently use coping strategies in the classroom (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995).

The development of emotional-expression regulation. Children's ability to regulate emotional expressions in their interactions with peers and parents appears very soon in development and has been shown to develop in phases. For example, 3-6 year-old children, observed in experimental settings, are able to regulate their own negative emotional expressions when they are given a disappointing present, if other people are present (Cole, 1986; Josephs, 1994; Saarni, 1984). However, data obtained from semi-structured interviews show that 3-6 years-old children are not yet fully aware that the emotion they feel might differ from the one they express, and cannot yet understand that emotional expression can be deliberately employed to deceive others. We might thus say that, until 3-4 years of age, regulation is an automatic, unintentional process, whereas around 5-6 years children actually start becoming aware of the existence of strategies and rules of emotional expression, and are able to understand that controlling their own emotional expression can help them protecting themselves from others' anger and derision, or protecting others from unpleasant situations (Harris, 1989). During elementary-school years, such awareness reveals itself in broader and interconnected ways, showing that the child has acquired the skill to "move" between the viewpoints of his/her own inner state, and that of his/her observer/interactant.

In sum, in order to master the skill of emotional expression regulation, the child must possess (and acquire) different kinds of awareness and knowledge: a) the awareness that the felt emotion can be different from the expressed one, b) the awareness that one's expressive behavior has always interpersonal consequences, c) the knowledge of *exhibition rules*, that is, knowledge of the combination of leading principles and standards which denote how and when a certain emotion has to be expressed (Ekman & Friesen, 1975); these rules are socially established and they can be defined within the culture or, at a more molecular level, within the family environment (Saarni, 1993).

Note, finally, that a fuller understanding of emotional-expression regulation needs to take into account the research observations of clinical subjects, especially as regards inhibition cases in early development, that show that a reduction of emotional expression is not always an adaptive and functional reaction with regard to the situational context (Garber, & Dodge, 1991). There is, in other words, the need to define more precisely how regulation differs from inhibition: whereas inhibition involves only restriction and reduction, regulation is concerned with different types of emotional adjustment and with flexible strategies. It is in the latter sense that Saarni (1989) and Zammuner (e.g., 1995) talk about "the strategic control" of emotional expression.

The socialization of emotion regulation. The necessity to study the role played by socialization processes in the development of emotion regulatory skills - in addition to the study of cognitive processes - has been greatly emphasized in the last years. According to the *socialization hypothesis* (Saarni, 1993),

what emotions are felt in a given context, and the extent and manner in which they are expressed, are at least partially learned through relationships children have with people. A primary means of emotion socialization is hypothesized to be through parents who, in the course of joint activities with their children, teach them emotion regulation, that is, guide, shape, and instruct children concerning adult emotional standard and preferences. Through the establishment of a net of connections between internal emotional experiences and their external display, socializing agents enable the child to assimilate the expressive rules and standards that are typical of his/her culture, learn how to combine emotional experiences with social expectations, and finally learn how to provide emotional answers that are context-appropriate.

Aspects of how parents' socialization strategies (e.g., kind of emotional language they use, their level of emotional expressiveness) influence the development of children's emotional competence --intended both as the ability to recognize emotional expressions and situations, and as the skill to regulate such expressions -- have already been studied to some extent. For instance, available research results show that positive expressiveness in the mother is directly connected with her child's ability to control his/her negative emotions (Garner & Power, 1996), whereas frequent parental anger expressions are inversely correlated with children's ability to recognize emotional expressions and situations (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994). Likewise, when parents use a richer emotional language (in terms of frequency and variety of emotion words), children are better able to regulate the expression of negative emotions (Denham, Cook, & Zoller, 1992).

The study to be reported focussed on aspects of this relationship --between parents' socialization strategies and children's emotional competence-- that have not yet been studied, are still not well understood.

Aims of the study

Our study focussed on what expectations parents have about their children's emotion expression, and what socialization strategies they use to convey issues of emotion regulation to their children in contexts in which the child feels a subjectively unpleasant, negative emotion, and social interpersonal norms dictate that he/she does not express the felt dysphoric emotion because emotional expression would hurt other individuals that are present.

Interpersonal emotional socialization might occur in different ways. According to a theoretically interesting, and experimentally useful model --suggested by Halberstadt (1991), revised by Denham (1998) --emotional socialization might imply one of three mechanisms of social learning: *modeling*, i.e., children learn what an emotion is, and how it is expressed, through other people's emotional expressions; *coaching*, i.e., learning occurs through parents' explicit teaching about emotions; and *contingency*, i.e., learning occurs through other people's reactions to a child's emotional expression; such reactions can be mediated by the verbal, expressive, or behavioral channel. Our study aimed at investigating *the contingency* mechanism of emotional socialization.

As experimental emotion stimuli, we selected anger and sadness, because they have been already widely studied in children, Italian ones included (Zammuner, 1993). In other words, the study was designed so that the obtained results could be interpreted with reference also to the already existing knowledge about children's regulating behaviors, that is, using a method that allowed us to compare parents' expectations about children's emotional expression, and parents' socialization strategies --the topics of this study - to children's actual behavior as measured in previous studies.

The hypotheses underlying our study were formulated mostly on the basis of the relevant existing studies on children, especially those that discussed children's regulation competence, and their expectations of their parents' reactions (Fuchs & Thelen, 1988; Saarni, 1993), and the studies by Case and Fuller (1994), and Eisenberg et al. (1996) who focussed on parents' socialization strategies --the existing literature about parents' strategies of emotion socialization, especially in the Italian context, is little.

In the study, parent's gender, child's age (4-5; 8-9) and child's gender were between-subject independent variables; type of emotion (sadness or anger) was the within subjects variable.

The first hypothesis, focussing on changes in *parents' expectations* as a function of children's development of their regulation skills and cognitive abilities, was that parents would expect less emotional-expression regulation from 4-5 year-old children than from 8-9 year-olds. The literature shows that in these age periods children display both qualitative changes (i.e., an increase in children's awareness of the possible discrepancy between felt and shown emotion), and quantitative changes in

their emotional competence (i.e., 8-9 year-old children are better able to regulate their emotional expression than 4-5 year-olds).

As regards parents' reactions, i.e., their *socialization strategies*, we hypothesized that problem-centered strategies (aiming at offering a *solution*) would be adopted more often with 4-5 year-olds, whereas strategies that aim at providing the child elements for understanding the event, that is, strategies that attempt to lead the child to a different interpretation of the situation, would be more likely to be used with older children (8-9 year-olds). This hypothesis is primarily based on results (Harris, 1989) that show that preschool- and school-aged children differ in their coping strategies: the younger children tend to employ more often 'external' strategies, aimed at modifying the unpleasant situation in order to replace it with a pleasant one; the older children tend to use inner strategies, such as rationalization, that imply a "cognitive effort" which leads to look at the situation from a different point of view.

As regards the *parent's gender* variable, we expected that mothers, according to gender-congruent stereotypes, would expect, and would attempt to induce, a higher control of emotional expression than fathers (the data in the literature on gender are however rather incoherent on this point; see Cigala, & Zammuner, 1998; Fuchs, & Thelen, 1988).

Finally, still on the basis of gender-congruent norms, we hypothesized that *parent's gender* (but possibly in interaction with child's gender) might influence socialization processes. More specifically, we expected that mothers more than fathers would expect from children, and employ strategies aimed at, a greater control of anger expression, while fathers more than mothers would expect, and attempt to obtain, greater control of sadness expression. In other words, according to this hypothesis, strategies focussed on behaviors and attitudes, that is, strategies that quite explicitly aim at controlling, or at least directing the child's behavior, would be employed by mothers more often than by fathers in anger situations, whereas they would be employed more frequently by fathers than by mothers in the sadness situation (Fuchs & Thelen, 1988). Furthermore, we expected that mothers would be more likely than fathers to adopt strategies that suggest a solution, that is, that offer instrumental help in order to change the situation (Eisenber, et al., 1996).

Subjects

Subjects were 141 Italian mothers and 126 fathers whose children --who attended local schools-- were either 4-5 or 8-9 year-old (107 had a 4-5 years-old child, 160 had a 8-9 year-old child; 131 had a son, 136 had a daughter). 164 subjects were "couples", that is, both the mother and the father of a child were in the sample, and 103 subjects were 'single', i.e., only the mother/father of a child was part of the sample.

Experimental Stimuli

In this study data were collected by means of a questionnaire, that presented subjects with two hypothetical stimulus events:

S) Sadness event: *a child invites a friend to play with him, but his/her little spiteful sister/brother, is there too;*

A) Anger event: *a child is going to eat an ice-cream, but his/her friend unintentionally hits him/her and the ice-cream falls on the ground.*

In order to avoid a distortion effect due to the emotions' sequence, the order of presentation of the two events was balanced, so that half of the subjects received a questionnaire with the order A-S (Anger first, Sadness second), whereas the other half of subjects received a questionnaire with the order S-A.

Despite the necessary content differences in the emotion situations judged by subjects, both stimulus events shared the following features:

a) the protagonist of the story is a child C who has the same age of the subject's child (4-5, or 8-9 years);

b) the emotion is elicited unintentionally by a friend of C ;

c) the event takes place inside C's house;

d) a parent (mother or father of C) is present when the event occurs;

e) at the end of the story the emotion felt by C is explicitly mentioned.

Subjects were asked to assume that the event's protagonist C would be their child, and to identify themselves with the parent in the event.

Subjects were then asked to answer *three questions*, about each event described in the questionnaire, that measured parents' expectations and reactions:

Q1) Parents' expectations about their child's expressive behavior: *If the child of the story were your child, do you think he\she would show his\her emotions of sadness\anger in front of you and his\her friend?* Subjects' answers to this closed question were coded as Yes = 1, No = 0;

Q2) Parents' immediate reactions towards the negative emotions expressed by the child: *If your child in a similar situation showed his\her emotion of sadness\anger, how would you immediately react?*

Q3) Parents' delayed reactions: *How would you react when your child's friend goes away?*

To the last two questions Q2 and Q3, subjects were free to give multiple answers (i.e., mention multiple regulation strategies) that were coded in categories illustrated below.

Data coding

Subjects' open answers to the immediate and delayed Reactions questions were coded in categories that were developed in a previous study (Cigala, Zammuner, 1998) using the schema reported below -- note however that the *distraction* and *indifference* strategies code immediate reactions only .

1. Explanation: Give elements to the child to understand the event --e.g., *«I would try to explain to my son that his friend didn't do it deliberately, it was an accident»*; *«I would explain to my daughter that also her little sister has the right to play»*, *«I would say: "Your friend was very sorry and he immediately apologized to you" »*.

2. Solution: instrumental help, suggesting strategies focused on the cause of the emotion in order to solve the situation --e.g., *«I would suggest a game where the spiteful sister can play a role too»*, *«I would offer to play with the little brother so that they can play alone»*, *«I would try to save the ice-cream as much as possible»*.

3. Distraction: taking the child's attention away from the event. --e.g., *«I would turn on the TV on a channel with cartoons»*.

4. Strategies focused on the child's attitude /behavior. (a) Request to change attitude/behavior -- e.g.,*«Try to calm down»*; *«It's not right to get angry with friends»*; (b) Suggestion of the right attitude/behavior --e.g., *«You must show yourself happy before your friend's sister»*.

5. Indifference --e.g., *«I look away»*, *«I act as if nothing had happened»*, *«I let the two girls solving the situation alone»*.

6. Other reactions. (a) Making recommendations to the friend, --e.g.,*«I would tell my child's friend to be more careful next time»*, (b) Ambiguous answers --e.g.,*«I would try to calm my child»*.

After a preliminary analysis of the frequencies of parents' answers to each of the two open questions (i.e., number of different reactions), we decided to take into account for further analysis, for each subject, a maximum of three reactions.

The agreement index between two independent observers (K coefficient), computed on 20 questionnaires for each reaction category, ranged from .83 to .96.

Data analysis

The data obtained from parents' answers to the questions were analyzed in various ways, as detailed in the Results section.

RESULTS

Parents' Expectations about their child's expressive behavior

Frequencies of parents' *expectations* as regards whether the child will or will not control emotion expression are indicated in Table I, separately for mothers and fathers -- a score of 0 indicated that according to parents' opinions the child does not show the felt negative emotion; a score of 1 indicated that according to parents' opinions the child shows the felt negative emotion. An ANOVA carried out on parents' total expectation scores, computed on the scores obtained by summing the answers for each emotion, with the factors child's Age by child's Gender by Parent's gender, displayed two main effects. The child's Gender effect [$F(1,259)=4.26, p.<.05$] showed that parents expect girls more than the boys to

control their emotional expression (see fig. 1). The child's Age effect [$F(1,259)=13.92, p<.001$] showed that 4-5 years-old children are expected to control their emotional expression less often than 8-9 years-old children (see fig. 2).

Chi-Square analysis, computed separately on the scores obtained for each emotion, showed that the factor child's Age had a significant effect for both the Sadness situation [$\chi^2(1, N = 267) = 8.16, p<.01$] and the Anger situation, $\chi^2(1, N = 267) = 8.59, p<.01$, whereas the factor child's Gender had a significant effect only for the anger situation [$\chi^2(1, N=267)=4.48, p<.05$] (see tab. I).

Insert tab. I more or less here

Insert more or less here fig. 1 and fig. 2

Parents' Reactions towards the negative emotions expressed by the child

Parent' reactions' towards the negative emotions expressed by the child, as a function of parent's gender, and child's gender and age, are reported in Tables II and III in terms of mean scores and their standard Deviations.

Before computing quantitative analyses, nominal scores that coded parents' immediate and delayed reactions into the different categories were transformed in binomial scores, for each reaction category, indicating presence\absence of the reaction. Note, further, that for the *explanation, solution* and *focused on child's attitude\behavior* strategies, the immediate and delayed reaction scores were summed, thus achieving interval-scale scores. Such interval-scale scores thus measured the frequency with which each subject reported a reactions' category (e.g.: if a parent mentioned one immediate reaction that we coded as explanation, and one delayed reaction that we coded as explanation, his/her final score was 2). A MANOVA analysis, with Emotion type as a within-subjects factor, and the child's Gender, child's Age, and parent's gender as between-subjects factors, was then carried out.

The results indicated two significant main effects of child's Age: the *solution* strategy [$F(1,214)=16.67, P<.001$] was used with 4-5 year-old children more than with older ones (8-9 year-old); instead the *focused on the child's attitude\behavior* strategy [$F(1,214)=10.09, p<.01$] was adopted more with 8-9 year-old children than with younger ones (4-5 year-old).

A significant main effects of parent's gender showed that the *solution* strategy [$F(1,214)=4.58, P<.05$] was adopted by mothers more than by fathers, in particular, in the sadness situation (see fig. 3).

The MANOVA indicated also a main effect of Emotion type: the *explanation* strategy [$F(1,214)=4.98, p<.05$] was more frequently used in situations of anger than in those of sadness.

Finally, the results showed two significant interaction effects. The Emotion type by Parent's gender interaction effect showed that the *focused on the child's attitude\behavior* strategy [$F(1,214)=4.45, p<.05$] was more frequently used by mothers in the anger situation, and by fathers in the sadness situation (see fig. 4). The child's Gender by child's Age interaction effect indicated that with 8-9 year-old children the *explanation* strategy [$F(1,214)=4.13, p<.05$] was used more with boys than girls, whereas with 4-5 year-old children the observed tendency was the opposite.

Insert tab. II and tab. III more or less here

Insert fig. 3 and fig. 4 more or less here

Discussion and Conclusion

A general overview of the results obtained in our research show that parents' emotion-socialization strategies represent an extremely complex process, as regards both the variety of strategies that parents adopt when facing sadness or anger expression in their children, and the changes that such strategies undergo as a function of changes in the child's developmental phase, in parents' gender, and, most importantly, as a function of emotion type.

More specifically, the results showed that parents tend to adopt with their children a relatively large number of different socialization strategies: some of the employed strategies are directive, and aim at controlling emotional expression (i.e., *focussed on the child's attitude\behavior* strategy); others aim at giving support to the child, as well as elements that help him/her understand the event (i.e., the *solution* strategy and the *explanation* strategy); finally, parents employ strategies that tend to take the child's attention away from the event (i.e., *distraction* strategy).

The obtained results showed moreover that, as we expected, parents' expectations, as well as their reactions, are influenced by child's gender and age, a finding that is congruent with differences in children's behaviors that were observed in studies carried out with children rather than with their parents (Cole, 1986; Josephs, 1994; Saarni, 1984, Zammuner, 1993). This convergence of the results obtained for parents and children might be interpreted as implying two different processes. Firstly, the data we obtained show that parents have an adequate knowledge and representation of children's emotional competence, in particular of their ability to regulate emotional expression, a knowledge that probably arises out of daily interactions between children and adults, and from their mutual sharing of emotional experiences. Secondly, the congruency in the results obtained for children and adults, reported by Casey and Fuller in their study too (1994), could be taken as evidence of the influence that parents' expectations have on children's actual expressive behavior. We believe that these two interpretations of the data do not exclude each other: Since the parent-child relationship is a dynamic system, characterized by mutual influences, it might be expected that parents' expectations represent both a product of a child's emotional behavior, and a factor that affects that behavior. We might therefore conclude that parents' expectations and, more generally, their beliefs about emotion regulation are of central importance vis-à-vis their children's emotional expressions, and, in 'happy' circumstances, might help (rather than hinder) the child's ability to adjust his/her emotions to the context's requirements.

Another general result that emerged from the study is that the socialization strategy-types adopted by mothers and fathers tend to differ as a function of the nature of the expressed emotion --i.e., sadness vs. anger-- and parents' gender. As the data showed, mothers adopted the *solution* strategy more than fathers if the child would express sadness, whereas they relied on a more directive strategy (*focused on child's attitude\behavior*) than fathers if the child expressed anger. Fathers behaved instead in a complementary way, that is, if the child expressed sadness they employed more often than mothers directive strategies aiming at emotion-expression control.

Considering the data available in the literature as regards the influence of sexual stereotypes on adult emotional expressive behavior, the obtained results might be interpreted as suggesting that adults' expressive models of sadness and anger (men need to control the expression of sadness more than women; women need to control the expression of anger more than men; e.g., Zammuner 2000) get 'translated' in the socialization process through the *contingency* mechanism (Denham, 1998). That is, vis-à-vis children's emotional expressions, mothers are more likely than fathers to accept their children's expression of sadness, whereas they tend to control more than fathers do their children's expression of anger.

Results that showed that different processes occur in different emotional situations, i.e., very similar to those here reported, were obtained in a previous study (Cigala, & Zammuner, 1998) in which we used an identical experimental procedure, but different emotional events as stimuli; namely, the sadness event was about a *disappointing present*, whereas the anger event was about a child's friend *breaking the child's toy*. In that study we obtained an effect identical to the one reported for the present study, namely that the *focused on the child's attitude\behavior* strategy was more frequently used by mothers in the anger situation, and by fathers in the sadness situation. The evidence provided by the agreement in the results obtained in both studies allows us to conclude that the observed differences between mothers and fathers are not due to the specific kind of event they judged in each study, but rather to gendered norms about the type of emotion elicited by the specific event.

Finally, the obtained results showed that parents' reactions vary also as a function of child's age, and probably even as a function of a child's level of cognitive competence. The data showed that, as hypothesized, parents adopted the *solution* strategy more often with 4-5 year-old children than with 8-9 year-old children. The results did not instead confirm our hypothesis that the *explanation* strategy is employed more with 8-9 year-old children than with 4-5 year-old children. This unexpected result is probably due to the fact that the actual content of the explanations that parents said they would give to the child focussed on aspects of the emotional stimulus event that we can expect to be easily understood by young children too --e.g., "I would explain to my son that his friend did not mean to make him sad".

As regards the concept of well-being (as we referred to it in the introduction section of our paper), the results obtained in our study raise several important questions and considerations. First of all, we might say that parents, through their expectations and reactions towards negative emotions expressed by the child, provide children with "emotional knowledge", that is, in the sense of helping them acquire both an understanding of the stimulus event that elicits the emotion, and a set of adequate strategies they can use in coping with emotion-eliciting situations. In other words, through these emotional socialization processes the child learns not only to understand the meaning of the events and of his emotions, but also

to regulate his emotions by adopting strategies that are adequate to his/her own needs, and to the social-cultural context. Thus our data help specify how parents' expectations and reactions contribute to "shape" the child's relationship with other people, affecting the very quality of these relationships.

The results obtained in our study do however also point to open questions about which parents' strategies concur to help the child develop meaningful relationships, and a feeling of relationship satisfaction. Further studies are therefore necessary in order to specify what causal associations exist between parents' socialization processes, and social and subjective well-being indicators --e.g., the necessity to better define what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' socializing strategies of emotion regulation.

Moreover, although the present results are quite unambiguous as regards their implications, further research is necessary to better understand the extent to which, and how, socialization practices vary as a function of the nature and type of elicited emotion. Our decision to employ specific stimulus situations presumably facilitated subjects' understanding of contextual aspects, and of the interaction dynamics implied by that context, thus facilitating their identification with the described situation. However the very use of such specific stimulus events makes a generalization of the results very difficult. In other words, we feel that the obtained results constitute a beginning attempt in the right direction, but we think it would be useful to pursue the study aims further by studying how parents react to other stimulus events, and what expectations they have about emotion regulation in those contexts. For instance, it could be interesting to analyze how parents judge a large variety of events eliciting sadness, and anger, thus limiting the effects due to the stimulus event-kind. Future researches might also need to consider another variable that seems to be determinant for socialization processes, namely the child's temperament, a variable that affects the child's expressiveness and is likely to affect, indirectly, parents' strategies. Finally, we think that it would be desirable to carry out observational studies in which different socialization styles, both mother's and father's, could be observed during actual parent-child interactions in order to measure such variables as the specific strategies adopted by parents, their expressive behavior, and their emotional language.

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Fig.1- Mean frequencies of parents' expectations about children's emotion-expression behavior, as a function of child's gender. (Binomial scores: 0=the child does not show the emotion; 1=the child shows the emotion).

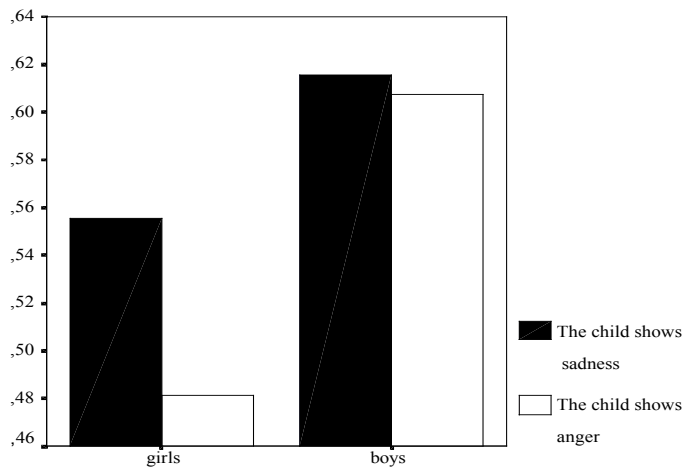


Fig. 2 - Mean frequencies of parents' expectations about children's emotion-expression behavior, as a function of child's age. (Binomial scores: 0=the child does not show the emotion; 1=the child shows the emotion).

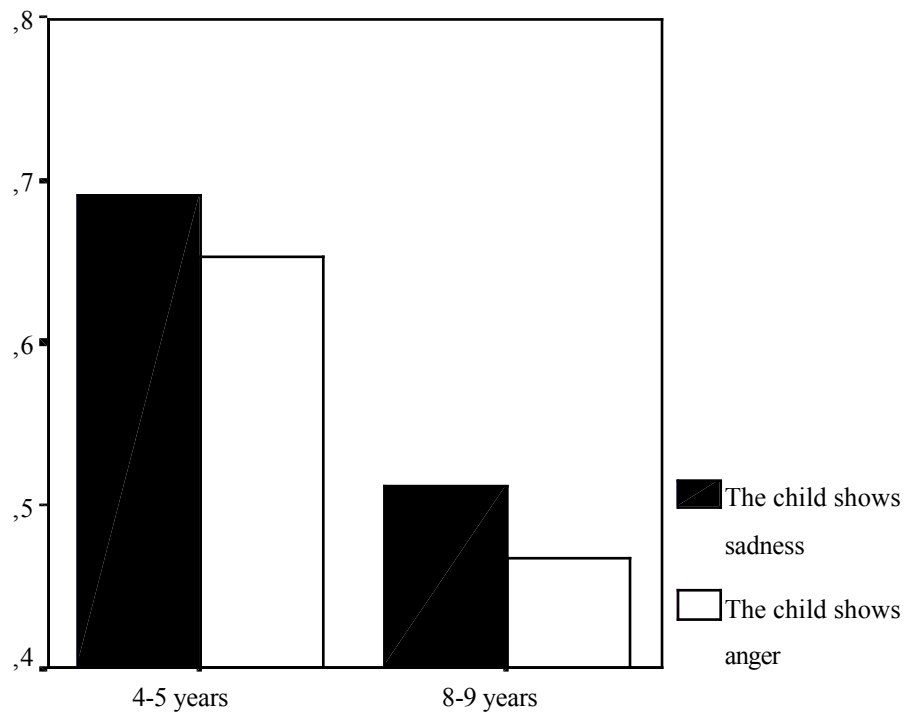


Fig. 3- Mean frequencies of parents' adoption of a *Solution* strategy, as a function of Emotion type (Sadness vs. Anger) and parent's gender.

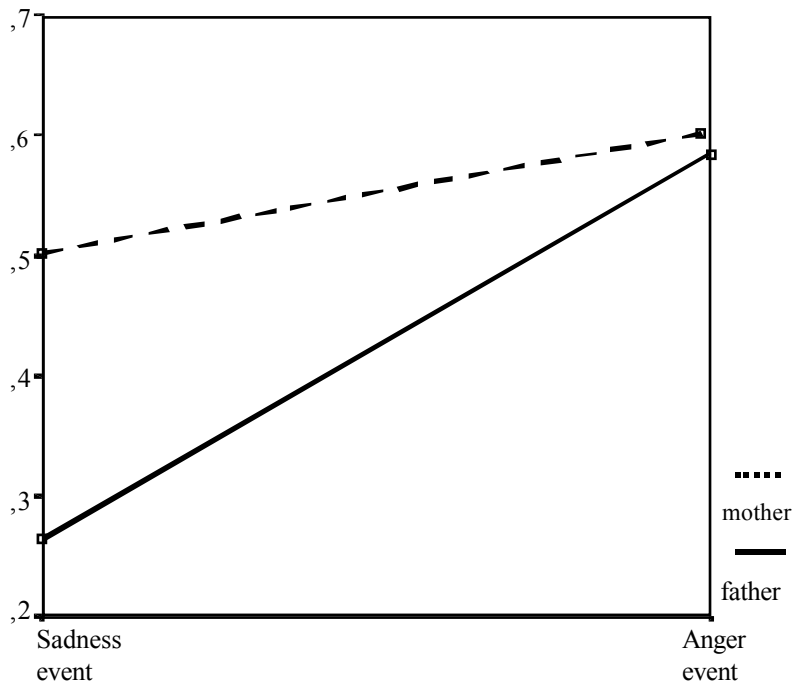
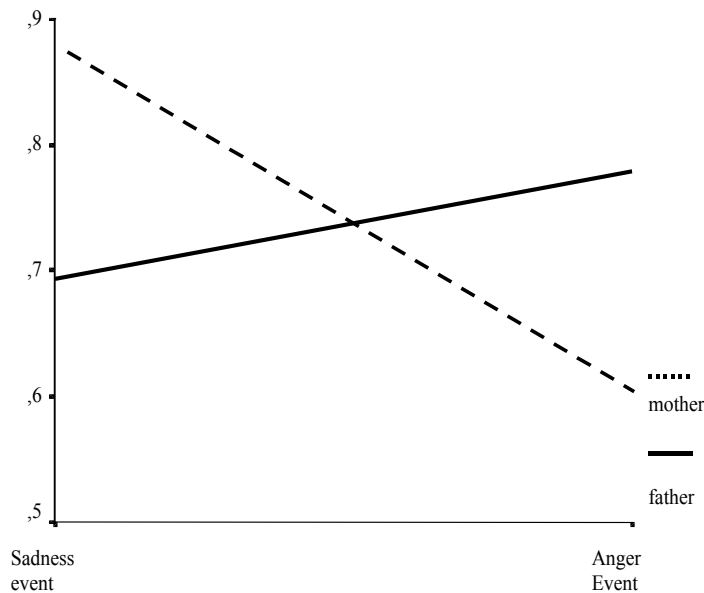


fig. 4 - Mean frequencies of parents' adoption of the *focused on attitude/behavior* strategy (for both immediate and delayed reactions), as a function of parent's gender and Emotion type (Sadness vs. Anger) .



Tab. I- Frequencies of mothers' and fathers' expectations about children's behavior as a function of child's age, child's gender and emotion type (N=267: 141 Mothers; 126 Fathers).

Parents' expectation	Mothers				Fathers			
	Child's Age		Child's gender		Child's Age		Child's gender	
	4-5 yrs	8-9 yrs	Boys	Girls	4-5 yrs	8-9 yrs	Boys	Girls
<i>The child shows sadness</i>	40	47	44	43	34	35	36	33
<i>The child shows anger</i>	40	38	43	35	30	37	37	30

Tab. II- Mothers' reactions (immediate and delayed) towards the child's emotional expressions as a function of child's age, child's gender and emotion type (Mean scores and Standard Deviations).

Parents' reactions	Sadness Event								Anger Event							
	Child's Age				Child's Gender				Child's Age				Child's Gender			
	4-5 yrs		8-9 yrs		Boys		Girls		4-5 yrs		8-9 yrs		Boys		Girls	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
<i>Explanation</i>	.74	.66	.54	.68	.65	.72	.62	.64	.79	.67	.79	.58	.80	.59	.78	.65
<i>Solution</i>	.48	.54	.52	.61	.51	.56	.50	.60	.67	.60	.55	.58	.55	.56	.66	.62
<i>Reaction focused on attitude/behavior</i>	.57	.62	.78	.67	.72	.65	.63	.66	.69	.71	.85	.70	.88	.75	.68	.64
<i>Distraction</i>	.03	.19	.05	.21	.06	.25	.02	.13	.03	.19	.01	.12	.02	.12	.03	.17
<i>Indifference</i>	.02	.13	.02	.12	.00	.00	.03	.18	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
<i>Others reactions</i>	.10	.36	.09	.29	.09	.34	.01	.30	.12	.33	.08	.28	.09	.29	.11	.31

Tab. III- Fathers' reactions (immediate and delayed) towards the child's emotional expressions as a function of child's age, child's gender and emotion type (Mean scores and Standard Deviations).

Parents' reactions	Sadness Event								Anger Event							
	Child's Age				Child's Gender				Child's Age				Child's Gender			
	4-5 yrs		8-9 yrs		Boys		Girls		4-5 yrs		8-9 yrs		Boys		Girls	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
<i>Explanation</i>	.77	.70	.51	.75	.67	.80	.56	.69	.83	.70	.61	.73	.85	.70	.54	.71
<i>Solution</i>	.30	.51	.23	.42	.24	.43	.27	.49	.67	.57	.47	.53	.51	.54	.58	.57
<i>Reaction focused on attitude/behavior</i>	.84	.81	.92	.69	1.0	.73	.78	.74	.52	.55	.64	.66	.58	.63	.61	.62
<i>Distraction</i>	.00	.00	.03	.18	.04	.20	.00	.00	.02	.16	.03	.17	.02	.14	.04	.18
<i>Indifference</i>	.02	.15	.08	.27	.02	.14	.09	.29	.00	.00	.01	.12	.00	.00	.02	.13
<i>Others reactions</i>	.07	.25	.17	.38	.13	.34	.13	.34	.09	.30	.17	.42	.11	.31	.18	.43