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**The Impact of Child Gender on Parent Coping Suggestions and Suggestion Outcomes**

Lyndsey Lawrence

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Bachelor of Arts

in

Psychological Sciences

Thesis Committee:

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## **Abstract**

The way a parent socializes their child to cope with stress is an important factor that influences how their child adjusts to stress later in life. However, how a parent's coping suggestions may differ depending on their child's gender is not well understood. This project examined (a) how parent coping suggestions differed depending on the gender of their child, and (b) if gender moderated the association between parent coping suggestions and their child's internalizing and externalizing problems. I drew from two studies, one in middle childhood and one in emerging adulthood, which both contained measures of parent coping suggestions and youth adjustment. Results indicated that in the emerging adulthood study, parents were significantly more likely to offer secondary control and disengagement coping suggestions to daughters compared to sons, whereas in the middle childhood study, secondary control engagement coping suggestions were associated with less internalizing problems in boys but not girls. Thus, my results suggest that both gender differences and gender moderation of socialization of coping may occur, but in different age groups.

## **The Impact of Child Gender on Parent Coping Suggestions and Outcomes**

Socialization of coping (SOC) refers to parenting behaviors that communicate messages to youth about possible methods of coping with stress. Such messages may be conveyed through explicit instruction or coaching of youth (e.g., “try not to think about it,” “try to do something to calm yourself down”) or through modeling of parents’ own coping behavior (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010). The ways that parents socialize their child to deal with stress is related to the child’s subsequent stress responses, their likelihood of internalizing and externalizing problems, and their social adjustment (e.g., Abaied & Stanger, 2017; Abaied & Rudolph, 2010, 2011; Bradbury, 2016). However, how the type and impact of parent coping suggestions may differ depending on the gender of the child has not been a priority in prior socialization of coping research, and as a result, is not well understood. This study will attempt to address this significant gap in the literature by examining two central questions: 1) Do parents socialize their children to deal with stress differently based on the gender of their child? 2) Does gender moderate the association between socialization of coping and internalizing and externalizing problems in youth? I will examine these questions in two samples, one in middle childhood and one in emerging adulthood, allowing me to explore developmental differences in socialization of coping processes.

### **Socialization of Coping (SOC)**

There are two primary types of coping suggestions that have been examined in the literature: engagement and disengagement. Engagement coping suggestions refers to the parent encouraging voluntary responses directed toward the source of stress or stress-related cognitions and emotions, such as problem solving, reflection, or emotional expression. Engagement coping suggestions include two subtypes: *primary control engagement suggestions*, which encourage

youth to directly address the stressor or its resulting negative emotions (e.g., problem solving, purposefully expressing emotions), and *secondary control engagement suggestions*, which encourage children to adapt themselves to stressful conditions (e.g., cognitive restructuring, positive thinking; Abaied & Stanger, 2017). *Disengagement coping suggestions* refers to the parent encouraging voluntary responses directed away from the source of stress or stress-related cognitions and emotions, such as avoidance or denial (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010). This study will be focusing on the effect of these coping suggestions as they relate to coping with interpersonal peer stress in middle childhood and early adulthood.

Studies have shown that engagement coping suggestions tend to predict adaptive responses to stress and are typically associated with fewer symptoms of internalizing and externalizing symptoms, whereas disengagement coping suggestions tend to predict maladaptive responses to stress and are typically associated with heightened symptoms in middle childhood, adolescence and emerging adulthood (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010, 2011; Abaied et al., 2014, 2022; Abaied & Stanger, 2017; Anderson et al., 2021; Kliewer et al., 1996, 2006; Locke & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Peisch et al., 2020). Additionally, in middle childhood, primary control engagement suggestions have predicted fewer social problems and disengagement suggestions have predicted lower friendship quality (Abaied & Stanger, 2017, Kliewer et al., 1996). Monti et al. (2014) also revealed that SOC contributed to autonomic nervous system (ANS) activation reactivity; peer victimization predicted greater ANS reactivity when mothers made few engagement suggestions (orienting toward stress and associated emotions and cognitions) but not when mothers made many engagement suggestions. All these findings provide evidence that the messages parents communicate about coping have implications for children's psychological, emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses to stress, as well as their risk for

psychopathology, in a variety of age groups ranging from middle childhood to emerging adulthood.

### **Child Gender Differences in Parenting and SOC**

In the limited research on socialization of coping, there is a range of differing findings related to gender differences, as well as studies that did not test for mean-level differences in coping suggestions between genders. Kliewer et al. (1996), Peisch et al. (2020), Phan et al. (2022), and Gaylord-Harden et al. (2013) tested for and did not find gender mean-level differences in SOC. Abaied and Rudolph (2011) and Locke and Zimmer-Gimbeck (2007) did not test for mean-level differences at all. Abaied and Stanger (2017) eliminated gender as a covariate after finding nonsignificant effects in their regression analyses but did not test for mean differences in coping suggestions; importantly, they analyzed one of the datasets I will be using for my study. However, Anderson et al. (2021) did find that girls received more secondary coping suggestions than boys. My study intends to highlight this variable of gender that has never been a *focus* of a socialization of coping study. These studies, and their differing analyses on how gender has been assessed, highlights a need to further explore the role of gender in SOC. It is important to note that some of these studies looked at other types of stress other than peer stress, which is the focus of my study, and studies such as the Phan and Gaylord-Harden study had more racially diverse samples than the studies I am using, which are predominantly white. Thus, their results may be less reliable as predictors for my own results, but their findings are important to consider nonetheless when forming my hypotheses.

Although findings in the SOC literature are limited and somewhat mixed, there is evidence of child gender differences in the broader parenting literature. In general, the differences between parenting of boys versus girls appears to be minimal for explicit strategies

such as levels of supporting autonomy and the amount of control exerted over the child by the parent (for a review, see Endendijk et al., 2016). However, evidence of child gender differences in parenting gets stronger when looking at more subtle parenting messages and behaviors and in specific contexts. This includes exposing children to different products (e.g., gifting boys trucks and girls dolls) and responding to children's behaviors differently depending on gender (e.g., encouragement of gender-typical chores and activities), as well as parents modeling certain gender roles themselves (e.g., father as breadwinner, mother as home-maker), and parents giving gendered evaluations of the behavior of others while in the presence of their child (e.g. “That isn’t very ladylike of her,” (for a review, see Groeneveld & Mesman, 2018). Applying this research to my study, I argue that SOC is also an explicit parenting behavior, since it is done very intentionally to help a child cope with a problem or stressor. We could then expect to find, based on the results of this review, similar levels of coping suggestions being offered to children regardless of their gender.

The findings related to gender in prior SOC studies, and research looking at gendered differences in the employment of parenting strategies, indicate that there has not been a clear consensus on whether parents are more likely to use one coping suggestion over another depending on whether they are helping their son or daughter. There are more indications from prior results that I may not be expected to find mean-level differences in SOC between boys and girls, but since this variable is often overlooked in many studies, I believe it is still important to examine.

### **Child Gender as a Moderator of the Effects of Parenting**

In addition to the levels of SOC potentially varying by child gender, it is also possible that the impact of SOC on children’s outcomes may vary by gender (i.e., gender moderation).

There is plentiful research looking at how child gender can moderate the effects of certain parenting styles and behaviors on child development, but relatively few looking at how child gender moderates the effects of socialization of coping on child outcomes. Child gender appears to moderate the effects of a variety of aspects of parenting on child development, including authoritative parenting (Baharudin & Keshavars, 2012), parental monitoring and warmth (for a review, see Kincaid et al., 2012), and maternal distress tolerance (Gorka et al., 2014). Baharudin and Keshavar's (2012) study demonstrated that boys tended to develop higher self-efficacy in comparison to girls when they perceived their fathers as highly authoritative. The findings of Kincaid's review (2012) suggested that parental monitoring may be more protective against sexually risky behaviors for boys than girls, whereas parental warmth and emotional connection may be an especially salient factor for girls. Gorka's study (2014) looked at maternal distress tolerance, which is defined as the ability to maintain goal directed behavior while experiencing physical or psychological distress and found that maternal distress tolerance predicted adolescent distress tolerance in daughters, but not sons.

The results of the above studies suggest that sons and daughters do not always share the same outcomes of their parent's behaviors, suggesting that we could also expect to find differences in the ways that boys and girls react to the same coping suggestion. These findings also imply that gender-specific parenting strategies may be necessary to foster the same outcome in adolescents of different genders (e.g., reduction in sexually risky behavior), and the same could potentially be said for gender-specific coping suggestions in reducing internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

### **Child Gender as a Moderator of the Effects of SOC**



There is preliminary evidence suggesting that we might expect gender moderating effects to occur within socialization of coping. One study demonstrated that engagement coping suggestions predicted higher levels of externalizing symptoms for boys exposed to high levels of peer stress, but not girls (Abaied and Rudolph, 2010). The authors interpreted these gender effects as potentially due to girls being more socially competent than boys and thus, in the face of interpersonal stress, being more prepared to implement engagement coping suggestions that potentially require social skills (e.g. resolving an argument, confronting a bully). They also noted that when responding to peer conflict, boys are more likely than girls to have goals of gaining control or retaliating against peers (Chung & Asher, 1996; Rose & Asher, 1999). Thus, when parents encourage problem solving about interpersonal stressors, boys may be more likely than girls to view efforts to gain control or dominance as an appropriate strategy, placing them at risk for aggression and associated externalizing psychopathology (Abaied and Rudolph, 2010). It is important to note this was a primarily white sample and may not be generalizable to a more diverse sample. Additionally, Gaylord-Harden et al. (2013) found significant gender moderating effects on the association between maternal parenting behavior and child coping. Specifically, they found that maternal parenting behaviors were more important for girls' coping than for boys' coping strategies, suggesting once again that girls may be more socially competent than young boys and are better able to interpret and react to their mother's behaviors and cope more effectively as a result. It is important to note that Gaylord-Harden's study was primarily a black sample, and the data sets I am using are comprised of primarily white samples, meaning there is a potential for less generalizability from their results to my own.

Further examples of gender moderating effects found in the SOC literature include Anderson et al.'s (2021) study, which did exploratory analyses that suggested that specifically

*encouraging* females, and not males, to use secondary control coping strategies predicts less internalizing symptoms, indicating a potential gender moderation on the effect of coping suggestions. Kliewer et al. (1996) also found that maternal coping suggestions predicted avoidance and support coping in girls but did not predict any coping in boys. Additionally, Kelly et al. (2020) conducted a study that focused on the impact of fathers vs. mothers coping suggestions related to *academic distress*, which is outside the scope of this study, but their results do suggest child gender moderation effects on coping suggestion outcomes. They found that girls socialized by their fathers to use help-seeking (engagement) coping demonstrated more adaptive coping. Additionally, they found that fathers' encouragement of problem-solving (primary control engagement suggestions) was associated with boys' more adaptive academic coping over time. They hypothesized that girls may be more overwhelmed than boys with the academic changes and challenges accompanying the middle school transition (Giota & Gustafsson, 2017). Thus, whereas encouragement to face the problem head-on could add to girls' distress stemming from academic challenges, encouragement from fathers to seek help may facilitate more adaptive coping by helping girls to identify other avenues and additional resources or support to manage their academic challenges. Kelly et al. (2020) also found that fathers' disengagement suggestions were associated with more adaptive coping for girls coping with academic challenges over time. Their study, which primarily focused on coping with academic distress, provides evidence that gender may play a role in determining which coping suggestions are most effective. Further, child gender emerged as a moderator in Peisch et al.'s (2020) study in the longitudinal association between socialization of engagement coping and child adaptive emotion regulation: this association was small and marginally significant for girls, but it was large and statistically significant for boys. Although many of these studies are not exemplifying the same pattern of

moderation effects, they all suggest that it would be reasonable to expect moderation effects between certain coping suggestions and child gender.

### **The Current Study**

There is unique potential in this study to examine parent coping suggestions in a way that is novel to the field and offer valuable contributions since socialization of coping research, which has largely failed to place gender front and center. By exploring gender differences in the types and outcomes of socialization of coping, I am bringing the field in a new direction and seeking to fill a gap in knowledge. This research may be beneficial to parents in terms of which socialization of coping methods would be the most beneficial for their child depending on their gender. I am focusing on the age groups of middle childhood and emerging adulthood because most of the research on socialization of coping thus far has occurred in the middle childhood/adolescent age group, and results thus far have been relatively consistent in terms of the outcomes suggestions tend to have on youth. Examining emerging adulthood as well will allow me to discover whether these typical suggestion outcomes, and potential gender moderation effects, carry over later into the lifespan. This age group of emerging adulthood is overlooked in the prior SOC literature, but I argue is equally important to examine. In recent decades, parents and their young adult children have had more of a “revolving door” dynamic; where the child leaves home for the first time and typically returns for a little while, as opposed to the “leaving the nest” dynamic of older generations. The share of young adults living with their parents, as of 2020 (52%), is higher than in any previous measurement, with the second highest measurement being in 1940 after the Great Depression (48%) (Fry et al., 2020). Thus, I believe parent-child interactions could be just as meaningful and impactful for this age group, in terms of their ability to cope with stress, and how likely they are to listen to their parent’s

suggestions. The emerging adult age group is a time full of transition and social stressors associated with adjusting to college, preparing for the workforce, etc., and looking at how emerging adults' mental health relates to their parent's suggestions could offer insight into more effective ways of parent's being able to support their children during such a major shift in their lives.

I predict that parents will be more likely to socialize their children to use engagement coping compared to disengagement suggestions regardless of the child's gender. This is because results of prior studies on socialization of coping with peer stress have indicated a higher usage of engagement suggestions with children in their descriptive statistics (Abaied & Rudolph 2010, 2011; Abaied & Stanger, 2017, Anderson et al., 2021, Phan et al., 2022). I also predict that for social stressors, boys and girls will receive roughly the same amount of engagement and disengagement suggestions. I am hypothesizing this due to the lack of significant differences in mean-levels between genders from prior socialization of coping studies (Peisch et al., 2020, Phan et al., 2022, Gaylord-Harden et al., 2013; Kliewer et al., 1996). Additionally, there is evidence that parents treat their children differently based on these pre-existing gender norms when using subtle parenting behaviors, but not explicit (Endendijk et al., 2016, Groenveld & Mesman, 2018). In terms of gender moderation hypotheses, I expect to find that girls and boys will both benefit from engagement coping suggestions in terms of less internalizing symptoms (Peisch et al., 2020), but boys will exhibit more externalizing symptoms when socialized with engagement coping suggestions. Results from Abaied and Rudolph's study (2010) support these hypotheses. I also expect to find that boys will exhibit fewer externalizing and internalizing symptoms when socialized with disengagement coping compared to girls, as evidenced by Anderson et al.'s (2021) study which found that encouraging females, and not males, to use secondary control

coping strategies led to more adaptive coping, whereas Abaied and Rudolph's (2010) study found that girls showed more symptoms of depression after being socialized with disengagement methods.

In terms of differences between the age groups of middle childhood and emerging adulthood, I expect to see consistencies between the type and effect of certain coping suggestions on the genders over time. The results of Abaied et al. (2014) and (2022) support my hypotheses, as they found results consistent with the middle childhood socialization of coping studies in terms of engagement suggestions being offered more than disengagement suggestions. These studies also did not test for mean-level gender differences for coping suggestions, further indicating a need to examine this topic among emerging adults.

## **Method**

### **Study 1 Participants & Procedure**

This study draws from the Parents and Peers Project, which received IRB approval and has completed data collection in the Family Development Lab at the University of Vermont. Data was obtained from a sample of 65 children-parent pairs with children ages 8-10 years old (29 girls,  $M$  age = 9.06,  $SD$  = .81; 93.8% White) and parents ages 28-53 (90.8% White; 1.5% Latino or Hispanic; 1.5% Asian American; 1.5% Other). Participants were sampled locally from areas near Chittenden County, Vermont, and most parent participants were the biological mothers of the child participants (93.8%), 3.1% were adoptive mothers, and 3.1% were adoptive fathers. Gross family income was overall high (\$0-14,000 = 3.1%, \$15-29,000 = 11%, \$30-44,999 = 7.7%, \$45-59,999 = 15%, \$60-74,999 = 6.2%, \$75-89,999 = 12.3%, \$90,000+ = 41.5%), and so was parent education level (Some college = 6.2%, Associate's degree = 3.1%, Bachelor's degree = 29.2%, Some graduate school = 6.2%, Master's degree = 46.2%, Doctoral

or Professional degree = 7.7%). One parent and their child came to the Family Development lab. After completing a series of parent-child interaction tasks, not examined in the current study, both parents and children responded to a series of questionnaires in separate rooms; a research assistant read the questions aloud to the children and answered questions they did not understand.

## **Study 1 Measures**

### ***Socialization of Coping***

Parents completed the Socialization of Coping Questionnaire, a 24-item self-report measure that assesses three types of coping suggestions: primary control engagement (e.g., “Deal with the situation head on rather than ignoring it” , “Do something to try and fix the problem or take actions to change things.”), secondary control engagement (e.g., “Look for something good in what is happening” , “Find something positive that came from the experience.”), and disengagement (e.g., “Keep away from bad things that make her/him feel bad.”) Parents were first asked to rate how often their child discusses problems with them and then rated the frequency that they encourage different coping strategies to their child when their child has problems with other people with a 5-point scale from “*Not at all*” (1) to “*Very Much*” (5). Scores for each type of coping suggestion were calculated as a mean of the items. Internal consistency ranged from acceptable for primary control engagement suggestions ( $\alpha = .66$ ) and secondary control engagement suggestions ( $\alpha = .74$ ) to excellent for disengagement coping suggestions ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

### ***Internalizing and Externalizing Problems.***

Parents completed the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), a widely used measure of child adjustment. The internalizing (depression, anxiety) and externalizing (aggression, rule-breaking) scales were used as indicators of children's adjustment.

## **Study 2 Participants & Procedure**

Study 2 draws from the Stress, Emotion, and Relationships Study (SERS), which has received IRB approval and has completed data collection. The study included a sample of 191 college students recruited from psychology courses at the University of Vermont in 2015-2016. Participants had to be between 18-25 years old and communicate with their parents at minimum twice a month (87% of participants communicated at least weekly with a parent). Most of the sample was White (80.6% White, 4.7% Hispanic/Latinx, 10.5% Asian, 0.5% Black, 2.6% Biracial), female (67% female, 33% male), and indicated they receive financial aid (84%). Participants completed a 2.5-hour laboratory assessment, during which they completed the questionnaires included in the current study.

## **Study 2 Measures**

### ***Socialization of Coping***

Youth reported on parental coping suggestions via an adapted version of the questionnaire used in Study 1 in which youth reported how often their parents made each type of coping suggestion. Types of coping suggestions assessed primary control engagement suggestions ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ; "My parent encourages me to deal with the problem head on"), secondary control engagement suggestions ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ; "My parent encourages me to find something positive in the experience"), and disengagement suggestions ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ; "My parent encourages me to keep away from things that make me feel bad"). Internal consistency was excellent for all three.

### ***Adult Self Report***

The Adult Self Report (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003) is an adapted version of the CBCL (used in Study 1) for ages 18-59. The internalizing and externalizing scales, which are analogous to the scales used on the CBCL, were used as indicators of college students' adjustment problems.

## **Results**

### **Analytic Approach**

Identical analyses were run for Study 1 and Study 2. First, I conducted independent samples *t*-tests to compare mean levels of each type of coping suggestion among parents with boys versus girls. Second, I conducted linear regression models to examine whether gender moderated the association between each type of coping suggestion and internalizing and externalizing problems. Regression analyses were conducted in SPSS version 29, via the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022), specifically, PROCESS model 1. In each study, six regressions were run examining gender as a moderator of the association between each of the three types of socialization of coping (primary control engagement, secondary control engagement, disengagement) predicting each of the two outcomes (internalizing and externalizing problems). In each model, child age and the two alternate types of coping suggestions aside from the one being assessed in each model were entered as covariates. PROCESS model 1 automatically generates simple slopes for significant interaction terms, which in the current study represent separate slopes for boys and girls.

### **Mean-level Gender Differences**

The descriptive statistics for the variables in both Study 1 and Study 2 appear in Table 1. As observed in prior research, parents made primary engagement suggestions at a higher rate than other types of suggestions. The results of the independent samples *t*-test (Table 2) in Study



1 revealed that there were no significant differences by gender of the child for any of the types of coping suggestions. Thus, parents reported giving both sons and daughters similar levels of each coping suggestion. This is consistent with my hypothesis. In contrast, the independent samples *t*-test for Study 2 (Table 2) revealed significant gender differences. Specifically, parents were significantly more likely to make secondary control engagement and disengagement suggestions to daughters compared to sons. No significant differences emerged for primary control suggestions in Study 2.

### **Linear Regressions**

Results of the linear regression analyses appear in Table 3 and 4. In Study 1, results partially supported my hypotheses. Secondary control engagement suggestions significantly predicted fewer internalizing problems, and a marginal interaction effect emerged, suggesting that gender moderated this association. Simple slope analysis revealed that secondary control engagement suggestions predicted fewer internalizing problems in boys ( $b = -6.79, SE = 2.29, t = -2.97, p = 0.04$ ) but not in girls ( $b = -2.05, SE = -1.89, t = -1.08, p = 0.28$ ). No significant effects of socialization of coping emerged predicting externalizing problems, and no moderation by gender was found. In Study 2, there were no significant effects of coping suggestions predicting internalizing problems, and primary control engagement suggestions significantly predicted fewer externalizing problems. Contrary to my hypotheses, no evidence of gender moderation was found in Study 2.

### **Discussion**

This project examined both how parent coping suggestions differed depending on the gender of their child, and if gender moderated the association between coping suggestions and the adjustment outcomes of internalizing and externalizing problems in children and emerging

adults. The results found in this study revealed evidence for both mean-level child gender differences and gender moderation effects in the associations between parent coping suggestions and adjustment, but different patterns emerged in middle childhood compared to emerging adulthood. In emerging adulthood, parents offered different levels of coping suggestions dependent on their child's gender, but the association between coping suggestions adjustment problems were similar across genders; in contrast, in middle childhood, the levels of coping suggestions did not differ between boys and girls, but the association between secondary engagement coping suggestions and internalizing problems was moderated by child gender.

### **Implications and Interpretation of Mean-level Gender Differences**

In the middle childhood study (Study 1), both boys and girls received each coping suggestion type at equal rates, whereas in the emerging adulthood study (Study 2), girls received more secondary control engagement and disengagement suggestions than boys. I predicted that for social stressors, boys and girls would receive roughly the same amount of engagement and disengagement suggestions. My hypotheses were supported for youth in middle childhood, but not in emerging adulthood. One explanation for this pattern is that the empirical research that informed this hypothesis primarily included studies that focused on middle childhood, most of which tested for, but did not observe mean-level gender differences in socialization of coping (Peisch et al., 2020, Phan et al., 2022, Gaylord-Harden et al., 2013; Kliewer et al., 1996). The two Abaied et al. (2014; 2022) studies that examined SOC in emerging adults were skewed female and did not assess for mean-level gender differences amongst coping suggestions. Interestingly, Anderson et al. (2021), which focused on adolescents, an age-group much closer to that of Study 2, did find that girls received more secondary coping suggestions than boys. Thus, it appears that across many studies, including my own, the result is consistent that parents are

likely to offer their young school-aged sons and daughters roughly similar amounts of each type of coping suggestion.

One possible explanation for the mean-level gender differences that tend to only appear starting in adolescence/emerging adulthood is that in early and middle childhood, parents perceive their son's and daughter's interpersonal struggles as roughly similar, garnering the same coping suggestion for the same situation, across both genders. In middle childhood (8-10), most boys and girls have not started going through puberty yet, or are in the early stages (Viner et al., 2017). Thus, it is possible that gender-specific interpersonal issues that arise typically with the on-set of puberty and adolescence, like romantic relationships (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003, Collins et al., 2009) and body insecurity in comparison to others (Cash & Smolak, 2011), have not started to appear as issues that parents need to help their children work through. In middle childhood, boys and girls could both be going through more similar struggles, like what to do when a friend is leaving you out, being mean, or how to deal with bullying. Additionally, prior to the on-set of puberty, parents are possibly perceiving boys and girls as behaving more similar in general, due to their children's lack of gender-specific differences and struggles that come with the physical effects of puberty (Viner et al., 2017), and believe both genders could handle all types of coping suggestions equally. We know from prior studies that some of the most consistent and obvious gender differences in parenting can be seen in parental encouragement of gendered activities and stereotypes ("girls should be ladylike and play with dolls, boys should be tough and play football, etc."; Friedman et al., 2007, Gelman et al., 2004) and it is possible that parents are falling back on their learned stereotypes and gender biases when confronted with gender-specific interpersonal issues in their children. This could explain why women receive more secondary control engagement and disengagement suggestions than men in adolescence and emerging

adulthood. If parents are parenting their children differently by gender by reinforcing gendered activities and norms, then they may believe the best way for their daughter to handle an interpersonal issue may be through being passive, softspoken, or nonconfrontational.

Something else to consider is that there was an informant difference between Study 1 and Study 2; in the middle childhood study, parents were reporting the type of coping suggestions they typically offered, whereas in the emerging adulthood study, the children themselves were reporting which suggestion they typically received from a parent. This could possibly account for the lack of mean-level gender differences in the middle childhood study, and their presence in the emerging adulthood study. Parents may over/underestimate the number of times they encourage different styles of coping, especially if they are trying to look like a good parent to the researcher. Emerging adults may also over/underestimate the likelihood of different coping suggestions. Future directions for a study of this kind could examine *both* child and parent reports for levels of each type of coping suggestion, especially in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Additionally, a longitudinal study, starting in middle childhood, examining whether mean-level gender differences start to appear in adolescence and emerging adulthood, using the same sample, could prove beneficial to examine whether the on-set of puberty and more gender-specific issues is a factor in the type of coping suggestion a parent makes to their child.

### **Implications and Interpretation of Gender Moderation Effects**

For the results of the linear regression models, gender, to some degree, moderated the effects of SOC in middle childhood, but it did not in emerging adulthood. In the middle childhood study (Study 1), secondary control engagement suggestions significantly predicted fewer internalizing problems in boys, but not girls. In the emerging adulthood study (Study 2), there were no significant effects of coping suggestions predicting internalizing problems, and

primary control engagement suggestions significantly predicted fewer externalizing problems in boys *and* girls. These results partially supported my hypotheses. I expected to find that girls and boys would both benefit from engagement coping suggestions in terms of less internalizing symptoms, as has been observed in prior research (Peisch et al., 2020); however, I only found support for this result in boys in the middle childhood study. I also expected that engagement suggestions would predict more externalizing symptoms in boys but not girls (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010), and I found that both boys and girls both experienced a reduction of externalizing symptoms when socialized with engagement suggestions in the college-aged study. I also expected to find that disengagement suggestions would predict fewer externalizing and internalizing symptoms in boys but not girls (Abaied & Rudolph, 2010; Anderson et al., 2021). I found no support for this hypothesis, as there were no significant effects of coping suggestions predicting externalizing problems in the middle childhood study, no significant effects of coping suggestions predicting internalizing problems in the emerging adulthood study, and engagement suggestions were the only beneficial suggestions for reducing internalizing and externalizing symptoms in both the middle childhood and emerging adulthood study.

These results were quite surprising, as they challenged and supported my hypotheses in a variety of ways, as well as the results of prior studies examining socialization of coping and gender moderation. Extant socialization of coping research has found a variety of gender moderation effects but has not demonstrated a clear and consistent pattern of gender moderation effects across studies. A potential direction for future studies could be conducting a meta-analysis of all studies that have looked at socialization of coping and conducted tests looking for gender moderation, to get a clearer picture of where the trends and patterns do or do not exist. One effect that has been demonstrated consistently across multiple studies, including my own, is

the positive benefit of primary control engagement coping suggestions on reduction of symptoms, in boys and girls. Finding this in my study further bolsters the argument that encouraging youth, specifically emerging adults, to deal with interpersonal problems directly and not avoid them, is beneficial for positive developmental outcomes, regardless of their gender.

In terms of the specific gender moderation effect I found in my study, one interpretation could be that cognitive reappraisal strategies, a core component of secondary engagement suggestions, are simply more beneficial for boys than girls. Perchtold et al. (2019) found that men and women did not differ in their basic capacity to generate alternative appraisals for anxiety-eliciting scenarios, yet higher cognitive reappraisal capacity predicted fewer depressive daily-life experiences in men only. These findings, and the results of my own study, suggest that in the case of cognitive reappraisal, it is a protective buffer against depression in men only, and women may need a more complex combination of reappraisal, habits, social support, and other emotion regulation strategies to promote mental well-being.

The results of this specific study could offer interesting implications for future directions of parenting. Potentially, the results of this study could encourage parents to start using more secondary control engagement suggestions with their sons in middle childhood, as it was found to be beneficial at reducing their symptoms of depression and anxiety. Also, due to the finding in the middle childhood study that parents offer their sons and daughters equal amounts of each coping suggestion, offer them a new perspective that perhaps their sons and daughters are not equally benefitted by the same types of coping suggestions at this age, and should keep in mind the unique benefits of encouraging their son to look on the bright side, or change the way they view their situation. Additionally, these results could show parents the benefits of encouraging their sons *and* daughters to deal with problems head on and directly when they are emerging

adults, by reducing their symptoms of aggression and rule breaking. This could be especially important to encourage in parents of this emerging adulthood age-group, since the results of the mean-level differences test showed that parents are already socializing their daughters with more secondary control engagement and disengagement suggestions at this age than sons, and this study found no evidence that those coping suggestions were particularly beneficial for daughters over sons.

### **Limitations of the Study and Conclusion**

It is important to note the limitations of this study when interpreting the results. First, both of my studies were comprised of predominantly white samples, and in both studies the relationship examined between parent and child was predominantly that of a biological mother to biological child. In Study 1, all the participants were sourced from a similar geographic location (Chittenden County, Vermont), and more than half of the parent-child dyads came from middle-to-upper middle-class families. Additionally, in Study 2, all the participants attended the same University. These factors could make the results more difficult to generalize to other populations, specifically families that are not white, not middle class, not biologically related or the mother of the child, or come from different geographic/cultural backgrounds. Additionally, Study 1 and Study 2 were not longitudinal studies, and consisted of different cohorts of families and participants, potentially making connections or implications between studies more difficult to interpret. A future study of this kind could use a larger sample size, consisting of a larger variety of racial, socioeconomic, familial, and cultural backgrounds, to be able to generalize better to other populations, and see if the results hold up when bringing in those new participant variables. It would also be beneficial to examine those same families over time, in a longitudinal study design, to look for consistencies or differences across age groups with more control amongst

variables. It is also important to note that we cannot determine direction of effect with a cross-sectional design, it is possible that symptoms elicit coping suggestions from parents.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the effect of gender on parent coping suggestions and their outcomes and found evidence for both mean-level gender differences and gender moderation, but in different age groups. I believe researchers could take from this study a greater need to examine this topic using a larger and broader sample and start asking why parents make the suggestions they do. I believe parents could take from this study the importance of primary control engagement suggestions, and their benefits for reducing externalizing symptoms in boys and girls. This study could also show parents that there is not a concrete benefit for offering girls more secondary and disengagement suggestions when they are young adults, although there could be a benefit for offering more secondary control engagement suggestions to their sons in middle childhood. Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that gender differences in the field of socialization of coping, in terms of mean-level differences and gender moderation effects, could be more complicated than previously thought, and deserve future focus and attention as it could benefit the field going forward.



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**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables*

Study 1			
Variables	Gender	N	<i>M (SD)</i>
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	Male	34	4.26 (0.42)
	Female	29	4.31 (0.52)
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	Male	33	3.17 (0.57)
	Female	29	3.10 (0.66)
Disengagement Suggestions	Male	34	2.60 (0.84)
	Female	29	2.57 (0.68)
Internalizing Problems	Male	35	7.57 (6.30)
	Female	29	5.83 (5.94)
Externalizing Problems	Male	35	7.46 (6.29)
	Female	29	4.62 (4.84)
Study 2			
Variables	Gender	N	<i>M (SD)</i>
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	Male	62	3.09 (0.77)
	Female	128	3.27 (0.67)
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	Male	62	2.64 (0.75)
	Female	128	2.91 (0.68)
Disengagement Suggestions	Male	62	2.25 (0.83)
	Female	128	2.69 (0.72)
Internalizing Problems	Male	63	14.90 (9.49)
	Female	128	20.29 (12.52)
Externalizing Problems	Male	63	12.30 (7.86)
	Female	128	12.16 (8.73)

**Table 2**

*Independent Samples T-Tests*

		Study 1					95% confidence interval of the difference	
		t	df	One- sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Mean parent report primary control engagement suggestions	Equal Variances Assumed	-0.38	61	0.35	-0.45	0.12	-0.28	0.19
Mean parent report secondary control engagement suggestions	Equal Variances Assumed	0.43	60	0.33	0.07	0.16	-0.25	0.38
Mean parent report disengagement suggestions	Equal Variances Assumed	0.16	61	0.44	0.03	0.20	-0.36	0.42
		Study 2						
Mean child report primary control engagement suggestions	Equal Variances Assumed	-1.67	188	0.48	-0.18	0.11	-0.40	0.03
Mean child report secondary control engagement suggestions	Equal Variances Assumed	-2.45	188	0.008**	-0.27	0.11	-0.48	-0.05
Mean child report disengagement suggestions	Equal Variances Assumed	-3.71	188	< 0.001**	-0.44	0.12	-0.67	-0.20

Note.  $\hat{p} < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3**

*Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing and Externalizing Problems in Study 1*

Predictor Variables	Internalizing Problems			Externalizing Problems		
	b [95% CI]	F	R <sup>2</sup>	b [95% CI]	F	R <sup>2</sup>
Model 1		1.65	.15		1.54	0.15
Age	1.09 [-0.97, 3.15]			-0.12[-2.22, 1.97]		
Sex	-2.55 [-30.67, 25.56]			11.27 [-39.89, 17.35]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	1.57 [-3.51, 6.65]			0.91 [-4.26, 6.08]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	-3.74* [-7.24, -0.24]			-1.25 [-4.81, 2.32]		
Disengagement Suggestions	1.07 [-1.64, 3.77]			1.94 [-0.82, 4.70]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions X Sex	0.09 [-6.43, 6.61]			1.79 [-4.84, 8.43]		
Model 2		2.41*	0.21		1.67	0.16
Age	1.50 [-0.49, 3.49]			0.21 [-1.88, 2.29]		
Sex	-16.90*[-32.16, 1.64]			-11.22 [-27.21, 4.77]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	1.67 [-1.68, 5.03]			1.96 [-1.56, 5.47]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	-6.79** [-11.38, -2.21]			-2.88 [-7.68, 1.92]		
Disengagement Suggestions	1.51 [-1.14, 4.16]			2.16 [-0.62, 4.94]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions X Sex	4.74^ [-0.085, 9.57]			2.46 [-2.60, 7.52]		
Model 3		1.71	0.16		1.49	0.14
Age	1.19 [-0.84, 3.22]			-0.04 [-2.11, 2.04]		
Sex	-5.11[-15.63, 5.42]			-2.55 [-13.32, 8.23]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	1.58 [-1.89, 5.04]			1.94 [-1.61, 5.49]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	-3.85* [-7.35, -0.34]			-1.26 [-4.85, 2.32]		
Disengagement Suggestions	0.68 [-2.32, 3.69]			2.07 [-1.01, 5.14]		
Disengagement Suggestions X Sex	1.15 [-2.81, 5.10]			-0.41 [-4.45, 3.64]		

Note. ^  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .



**Table 4**

*Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing and Externalizing Problems in Study 2*

Predictor Variables	Internalizing Problems			Externalizing Problems		
	b [95% CI]	F	R <sup>2</sup>	b [95% CI]	F	R <sup>2</sup>
Model 1		2.48*	0.08		2.25*	0.07
Age	-0.83 [-2.08, 0.40]			-0.49 [-1.38, 0.39]		
Sex	-1.34 [-17.35, 14.68]			-5.96 [-17.35, 5.44]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	-3.56 [-7.85, 0.73]			-4.14** [-7.19, -1.09]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	0.38 [-3.57, 4.33]			-0.25 [-3.06, 2.56]		
Disengagement Suggestions	-0.68 [-3.79, 2.43]			1.70 [-0.52, 3.91]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions X Sex	2.18 [-2.75, 7.10]			1.68 [-1.83, 5.18]		
Model 2		2.36*	0.07		2.10	0.06
Age	-0.78 [-2.02, 0.46]			-0.45 [-1.33, 0.44]		
Sex	3.62 [-10.59, 17.83]			-1.43 [-11.54, 8.69]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	-2.26 [-5.39, 0.87]			-3.14** [-5.37, -0.92]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	-0.06 [-5.16, 5.04]			-0.43 [-4.06, 3.20]		
Disengagement Suggestions	-0.60 [-3.72, 2.52]			1.75 [-0.47, 3.97]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions X Sex	0.70 [-4.26, 5.67]			0.28 [-3.25, 3.82]		
Model 3		2.49*	0.08		2.167*	0.07
Age	-0.81 [-2.05, 0.42]			-0.41 [-1.29, 0.47]		
Sex	0.52 [-11.16, 12.20]			1.90 [-6.43, 10.22]		
Primary Control Engagement Suggestions	-2.37 [-5.50, 0.76]			-3.08** [-5.31, -0.85]		
Secondary Control Engagement Suggestions	0.49 [-3.47, 4.44]			-0.29 [-3.11, 2.53]		
Disengagement Suggestions	-1.91 [-6.11, 2.30]			2.39 [-0.60, 5.39]		
Disengagement Suggestions X Sex	2.07 [-2.48, 6.63]			-1.05 [-4.29, 2.20]		

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$