

## CHAPTER 6

# Parental Emotion Regulation, Stress, and Burnout

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Emotion regulation (ER) in parenting is ER undertaken in one's role as a parent. More specifically, it refers to the automatic or strategic process of regulating either one's own or one's child's emotion with the goal of maintaining one's well-being as a parent and/or fostering one's child's well-being or development (Mikolajczak & Roskam, in press). Thus, as illustrated in Table 6.1, the target of ER in parenting can be the parent's emotion (intrinsic ER, also labeled self-focused ER) or the child's emotion (extrinsic ER, also labeled other-focused ER), and the goal of ER can be self-serving (i.e. with an eye to benefits for the parent) and/or child-serving (i.e. with an eye to benefits for the child).

Note that, as pointed out earlier by Petrova and Gross (see Chapter 2), self-serving and child-serving regulatory goals can be co-activated on many occasions. Consider for instance the bottom left corner of Table 6.1: if the daughter is brilliant and will most likely pass her exam, the father may be driven in his actions exclusively by the goal of changing his daughter's emotion and making her feel more emotionally comfortable. But if his daughter has not done so well in school so far and she does even less well when she is stressed, the father may act with the goal of both making her feel more emotionally comfortable and increasing her chances of passing, and also of reducing his own stress about the possibility that she may fail.

ER in parenting is highly frequent and varied. As the examples in Table 6.1 suggest, parents do not downregulate only negative emotions. They also downregulate positive emotions or upregulate both negative and positive emotions. Thus, parental ER encompasses the downregulation of negative emotions (e.g. self-focused: downregulating one's anxiety at a teenager's first evening out with friends; child-focused: downregulating the child's sadness at a friend's move), the upregulation of negative emotions (e.g. self-focused: up-regulating one's facial manifestations of disappointment at a young child's misbehavior; child-focused: upregulating a

Table 6.1 Illustrations of the 2 × 2 matrix of emotion regulation in parenting

Target of ER/ Goal of ER	Self-focused ER (i.e. the parent's emotion)	Child-focused ER (i.e. the child's emotion)
Self-serving (i.e. the parent's benefits)	e.g. a mother downregulates her sadness when her son is ungrateful	e.g. a father upregulates his adolescent son's enthusiasm for helping him in the garden
Child-serving (i.e. the child's benefits)	e.g. a mother upregulates her own pride at her daughter's success to enhance her daughter's self-esteem	e.g. a father downregulates his daughter's anxiety before an exam

ER, emotion regulation.

teenager's stress to prompt him or her to study), the downregulation of positive emotions (e.g. self-focused: hiding one's amusement at a teenager's new outfit; child-focused: reducing a young child's interest in a product that is environmentally harmful), and the upregulation of positive emotions (e.g. self-focused: increasing displays of gratitude when teenager is helping; child-focused: increasing the child's pride at a hard-won success).

### 6.1 Protective Role of Parents' Self-Focused (Intrinsic) Emotion Regulation vis-à-vis Parenting Stress and Burnout

As the examples provided in the preceding section suggest, being able to efficiently regulate one's own emotion as a parent confers many benefits. Other chapters in this volume emphasize several of these (see Chapters 5 and 7). Here, we focus specifically on the benefits regarding parenting stress and parental burnout.

The vast majority of studies show that efficient ER strategies strongly reduce parenting stress and, accordingly, the risk for parental burnout. For instance, Babore et al. (2019) showed that the propensity to use cognitive reappraisal was negatively linked to parenting stress. In the same vein, Iswinarti et al. (2020) showed that the use of generally "adaptive" emotion regulation strategies (measured via the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire [CERQ; Garnefski et al., 2002]) was also related to lower scores for parenting stress. Unsurprisingly given these results, Vertsberger et al. (2022) found that higher use of cognitive reappraisal was related to lower levels of parental burnout.

Although most studies are based on self-reported correlational designs, the relationship seems real and causal: real, because better ER not only

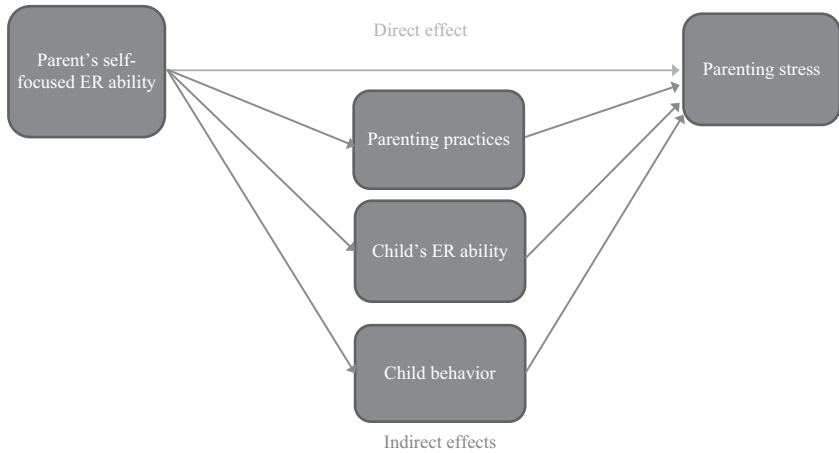


Figure 6.1 Hypothetical mediators of the relationship between parent's self-focused (i.e. intrinsic) emotion regulation (ER) and parenting stress

predicts lower self-reported levels of stress but also some biological indicators of lower stress such as higher heart rate variability (Costa et al., 2017; but see Doan et al., 2020 for null results on hair cortisol); and causal, because when ER is improved via a short psychological intervention (consisting for instance of teaching reappraisal skills), subjective parenting stress decreases (Preuss et al., 2021).

That a parent's ER predicts the parent's level of stress is not surprising given that studies have previously shown that both ER capacity and ER self-efficacy buffer the impact of parenting stressors on parents' affective response (Deater-Deckard et al., 2016). Beyond this effect, the parent's ER may also influence parenting stress indirectly. Although proper mediation studies are missing, likely mediators are represented in Figure 6.1.

One candidate is parenting behavior. Poor parental ER self-efficacy is associated with poorer parenting practices (e.g. authoritarian parenting; Hughes & Gullone, 2010; Shaw & Starr, 2019) and these have been associated with increased parenting stress (Hutchison et al., 2016). A second candidate is the child's ER. Poor parental ER self-efficacy is associated with poor child's ER and emotional lability (Bariola et al., 2012; Rogers et al., 2016; Tan & Smith, 2019), and poor child's ER and lability are related to higher parenting stress (Williford et al., 2007). A third candidate is the child's behavior. Poorer parental ER self-efficacy is related to more externalizing behavior problems in the child (Crespo et al., 2017) and these usually predict higher parenting stress (Stone et al., 2016; Williford et al., 2007). Note that, with the notable exception

of Deater-Deckard et al. (2016), most studies have measured parental ER using self-reported measures of parents' perceptions of their own ability (hence our label "ER self-efficacy" because self-reports capture ER self-efficacy rather than ER capacity). Future mediation studies would certainly benefit from going beyond self-reports and using indicators of both ER self-efficacy and ER capacity.

## **6.2 Protective Role of Parents' Child-Focused (Extrinsic) Emotion Regulation vis-à-vis Parenting Stress and Burnout**

The examples provided in the first section suggest that it is useful not only to be able to regulate one's own emotions as a parent but also to be able to regulate one's children's emotions (i.e. extrinsic ER). It seems quite intuitive to think that parents who are able to regulate their children's emotion may be less overwhelmed by the latter's emotions and may also have children with better adjustment, both of which would contribute to lowering their level of parenting stress. Several chapters in this volume emphasize the importance of parents' extrinsic ER for their children's adjustment (see Chapters 7, 8, and 9). Here, we examine specifically the advantages of parents' extrinsic ER vis-à-vis parenting stress and parental burnout.

Unfortunately, and somewhat surprisingly, the first thing that our literature review revealed is that this subject has not yet been researched. The closest proxy for measuring parents' extrinsic ER is the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES; Fabes et al., 1990; Fabes et al., 2002) and its version for toddlers, the Coping with Toddlers' Negative Emotions (CTNES; Spinrad et al., 2004). To date, neither the CCNES nor the CTNES has been studied in relation to parenting stress or burnout.

Pending such research, we turned to slightly broader proxies of parents' extrinsic ER, namely the concepts of parental emotion socialization practices (Eisenberg, 2020; Eisenberg et al., 1998) and parental meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP; Gottman et al., 1996). These concepts capture how parents perceive children's emotions and react to them. "Supportive socialization practices" in Eisenberg's terms and "emotion coaching" in Gottman's terms refer to parents who are aware of their children's emotions, are supportive of emotional expression, and use emotion episodes as opportunities for intimacy and for teaching their children ways to understand and regulate their emotions. In contrast, "unsupportive socialization practices" in Eisenberg's terms and "dismissing emotions" in Gottman's terms refer to parents who feel threatened by children's emotions and who are likely to invalidate or punish emotional

expression, attempt to reduce the emotion quickly, and teach their child that emotions are undesirable or unimportant (Johnson et al., 2017).

We could therefore consider supportive/coaching practices as a proxy for “adaptive” parental extrinsic ER and unsupportive/dismissing practices as a proxy for “maladaptive” parental extrinsic ER, and expect that parents who display the former may be less stressed than parents who display the latter. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research examining the impact of either parental emotion socialization practices or PMEP on parenting stress. That said, two intervention studies suggest that better parental extrinsic ER may possibly decrease parenting stress.

The first is a pilot study conducted by Cortell (2009). This examined the impact of an intervention aimed at increasing parents’ emotion coaching of their adolescents. The results showed that parents who participated in the intervention displayed decreased use of emotion dismissing parenting behaviors and decreased parenting stress. Children of participating parents showed less anxiety and depression and exhibited fewer aggressive behaviors by the end of the intervention. Unfortunately, there was no control group. However, a dose-response effect was present: parents who attended more sessions had greater increases in emotion coaching behaviors, and increased emotion coaching was linked with increased parental positive emotions, as well as a reduction of aggressive behavior by children and parenting stress.

The second is a randomized controlled trial by Havighurst and colleagues (2022). This examined the effect of an emotion socialization parenting program (Tuning in to Toddlers) on parenting, children’s behavior, and the stress hormone cortisol. Compared to the control group, the intervention led to moderate increases in parents’ emotion coaching behaviors and a moderate decrease in emotion dismissing behaviors. There was only a small effect of the intervention on parents’ own emotion regulation, which can be interpreted as the intervention having a specific impact on parents’ extrinsic ER. There was also a small effect of the intervention on children’s emotional and social competence and a small-to-moderate effect of the intervention on parents’ cortisol level (Cohen’s  $d = .36$ , not reaching significance due to insufficient statistical power).

Taken together, these results may be interpreted as providing preliminary support for the idea that a parent who is able to regulate his/her children’s emotion may have children with better emotional/social adjustment, which in turn reduces the parent’s stress. There are, however, other possible interpretations of the findings: for example, participating parents may have been less stressed simply because the intervention made them feel more competent as parents or more supported by the group. Future studies are thus urgently needed to determine whether or not better parental extrinsic ER leads to lower parenting stress. This is all the more important given that such effects appear highly likely.

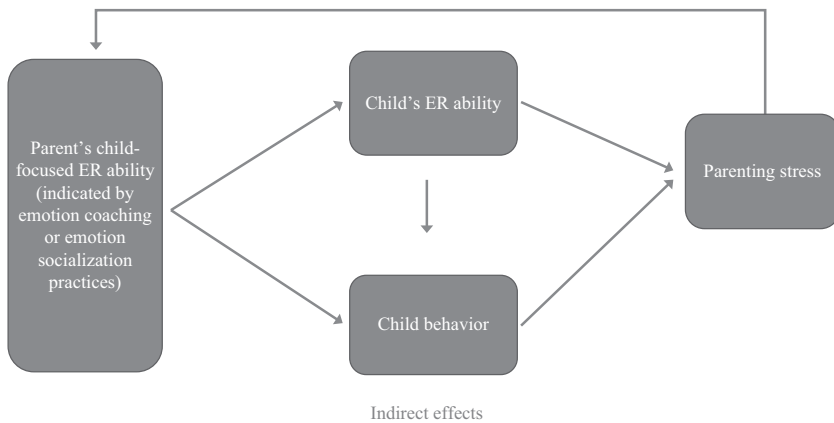


Figure 6.2 Hypothetical pathways leading from parent's child-focused (i.e. extrinsic) emotion regulation (ER) to parenting stress

Although proper mediation studies are needed, likely mediators are represented in Figure 6.2. One candidate is the child's ER. Poor socialization of emotion is associated with poor child's ER (Price & Kiel, 2022; Shaffer et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019; but see England-Mason & Gonzalez, 2020 and Rogers et al., 2016, for mixed results) and poor child's ER is related to higher parenting stress (Williford et al., 2007). Another candidate is the child's behavior. Poor socialization of emotion is related to more externalizing behavior problems in the child (for a meta-analysis, see Johnson et al., 2017) and these usually predict higher parenting stress (Stone et al., 2016; Williford et al., 2007).

Note that feedback loops are likely because, as suggested by Havighurst and Kehoe (2017), when parents are emotionally overwhelmed by stress, their ability to engage in perspective taking and extrinsic ER is compromised due to limited access to executive functions (Suchy, 2011). Moreover, the relationship between ER and mediators could also run in the opposite direction: the child's ER and the child's behavior could influence the parent's capacity to engage in extrinsic ER, and this may in turn increase the parent's own level of stress.

### 6.3 Might Too Much Parental Emotion Regulation Increase Parenting Stress and Burnout?

The preceding sections support the view that intrinsic and extrinsic parental ER may have positive outcomes for the parent. These results may have contributed to an increase in the pressures on parents to

practice ER in parenting and the constant efforts that today's parents make to regulate their emotions in the presence of their children (Lin et al., 2021). These pressures and efforts are based on the idea that the effects are linear: parents as well as parenting experts have assumed that the more ER, the better. Although this assumption may appear sensible at first glance, recent evidence suggests that it may not always be valid.

Recent research shows that when parents make too much effort to regulate their emotions, ironically, their risk of parental burnout increases (Lin et al., 2021). This is not so surprising, as ER can be costly (Milyavsky et al., 2019; Sheppes et al., 2009; Sheppes & Meiran, 2008), and the higher the discrepancy between the actual and desired affective state, the higher the negative affect and the higher the cost of ER (for a review, see Tamir, 2021).

In addition to being costly to parents, there are at least two reasons to suspect that too much intrinsic and extrinsic parental ER may also backfire on children (Mikolajczak & Roskam, in press). First, parents who are constantly regulating their own emotions may prevent children from being confronted with their parents' negative emotions, which would reduce their opportunities to learn to cope with others' emotions in a safe context. Second, parents who are continuously regulating their children's emotions to avoid them being distressed may reduce their children's opportunities to learn to manage their own negative emotions and hence slow down or even prevent the acquisition of ER skills, leaving children dependent on others to regulate their emotions. Thus, it is possible that too much intrinsic and extrinsic parental ER may actually help create "cotton wool children" (Bristow, 2014), that is, overprotected kids who become fragile through lack of opportunity to face adversity and develop strength and resilience.

#### **6.4 Directions for Future Research**

In spite of the frequency of ER in parenting, the ER field has long overlooked the parenting domain (for a recent review, see Mikolajczak & Roskam, in press). The field remains largely unexplored, and this chapter highlights three important research directions.

The first is focused on content: more research is needed on the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic parental ER on parenting stress and burnout. If future research confirms the preliminary findings reviewed in this chapter, studies will be needed to uncover the mediators of these relationships. We have proposed several possible mediators here, and research that confirms or refutes their mediating status is needed.

The second is methodological: future studies should use more objective measures of ER and systematically distinguish the effects of intrinsic

versus extrinsic parental ER on parenting stress. They should also go beyond cross-sectional designs. Longitudinal cross-lagged designs are necessary not only to inform causation (e.g. does parents' ER influence parenting stress?) but also to disentangle the direction of effects (e.g. parenting stress may reciprocally influence parents' ER). While such cross-lagged longitudinal studies are awaited, researchers should probably be more cautious in their interpretation of correlational results. So far, findings linking ER to another variable are almost systematically interpreted in the direction parent to child. In other words, we infer that it is the parent's ER that influences the child's ER or behavior. However, the child's ER and behavior may facilitate or, conversely, complicate the efficiency of parents' extrinsic ER. The direction of causation could therefore be different from what we have so far assumed.

The third direction is related to what we mentioned at the end of this chapter: future studies would certainly benefit from going beyond linear conceptions (where more ER is always better) and consider also curvilinear hypotheses (where too much parental ER may actually have adverse consequences). We hope that this chapter will encourage these studies and stimulate research at the intersection of ER and parenting more broadly.

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