

Mothers' Reactions to Children's Negative Emotions: Impact of Children's Gender

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Abstract

Parental emotion socialization is critical in shaping children's emotional regulation and social competence. This study examines gender differences in mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotions within the cultural context of Kerala, India, where limited research has explored this phenomenon. The study utilized the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES) to assess six types of maternal reactions among 200 mothers (100 each with boys and girls aged 6-8 years). Independent samples t-tests revealed significant gender differences in punitive, distress, and minimization reactions, with boys receiving more punitive and minimizing responses compared to girls. Mothers also exhibited greater expressive encouragement towards boys. However, no gender differences were observed in problem-focused or emotion-focused reactions, suggesting consistency in these strategies across genders. These findings underscore the influence of cultural and societal expectations on maternal emotional socialization practices, potentially reinforcing traditional gender roles. The study highlights the need for gender-sensitive parenting interventions to promote supportive and equitable responses to children's emotions. Implications for parenting education, culturally sensitive interventions, and future research are discussed, emphasizing the importance of addressing gender biases to foster healthy emotional development in children.

Keywords: Parental emotion socialization, gender differences, maternal reactions, child negative emotions

INTRODUCTION

Parental emotion socialization refers to the processes through which parents teach their children how to understand, express, and regulate their emotions. This concept encompasses various dimensions of parental behaviour and interaction that influence children's emotional development (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Since children first feel and express their emotions at home, how parents respond to their emotional outbursts has a big influence on how emotionally competent their kids grow up to be (Fabes et al., 2002). Research highlights three main mechanisms through which parents socialise their children's emotions: 1) modelling emotions, 2) responding to children's emotional expressions, and 3) instructing children about emotions (Zinsser et al., 2021). Significant research has focused on the effects of parental responses to children's emotional expressions and their influence on children's emotional and social competence, as well as other developmental outcomes (Fabes et al., 2002, Eisenberg, 1998; Denham, 1998).

Review of Literature

Parental reactions to children's negative emotions play a crucial role in the emotional and social develop-

ment of children. As children navigate their emotional landscapes, they often express feelings such as sadness, anger, or frustration. How parents respond to these expressions can significantly influence children's emotional competencies and overall adjustment. Research has identified various patterns of parental reactions, which can be broadly categorized into supportive and unsupportive responses. Supportive reactions, characterized by emotion-coaching behaviours such as validation, teaching, and problem-solving, foster adaptive emotion regulation and enhance children's emotional intelligence and social competence. In contrast, unsupportive reactions, which include minimizing, avoiding, or responding punitively to emotional expressions, can lead to increased emotional distress and difficulties in emotional regulation (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Fabes et al., 2002).

Parental responses and children's emotional expressions influence each other through bidirectional mechanisms (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Fabes et al., 2002). For instance, a child's temperament or emotional expression can affect how parents respond, further shaping the child's emotional development (Jin et al., 2017). Parents' beliefs about their own and their children's emotions influence the nature of socialization practices they employ (Gottman et al., 1996). Parents who adopt an emotion-coaching philosophy which is characterised by coaching and discussing, tend to engage in more supportive emotion socialization behaviours. In contrast, those with an emotion-dismissing philosophy often exhibit unsupportive reactions, which can lead to negative outcomes for children (Katz et al., 2012). Research also indicates that fathers and mothers respond in different ways towards their children. For instance, fathers may provide less supportive responses compared to mothers, particularly in families with boys, which can exacerbate emotional difficulties in male children (Shortt et al., 2016). Emotion regulation acts as a mediator between parental emotion socialization practices and children's psychological adjustment. Supportive parenting helps children develop effective emotion regulation skills, while unsupportive parenting can hinder these skills, increasing the risk for internalizing and externalizing problems (Hu et al., 2024).

The nature of parental reactions to children's emotional displays has many implications for their overall development. Negative parental reactions to children's experiences of emotions such as distress, fear, anxiety, and sadness are generally associated with adverse socioemotional outcomes for children (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Gottman et al., 1996). Parental coping with children's emotions relates to children's emotional and social competencies (Denham et al., 1997; Fabes et al., 2002). Children whose parents respond in non-supportive manners, such as through punishment, dismissal, or minimization, are more likely to exhibit maladaptive, avoidant, or inappropriate strategies for emotion regulation and coping (Eisenberg, 1992; Eisenberg et al., 1996) and tend to show lower levels of socio-emotional competence. In contrast, children whose parents react in supportive ways tend to exhibit higher in levels of socio-emotional competence (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; Eisenberg, 1998).

Rationale of the study

Parental responses to children's emotions play a vital role in shaping children's emotional regulation, social competence, and overall psychological well-being. While extensive research has been conducted on parental reactions to children's emotions in various cultural contexts, there is a notable lack of studies addressing this phenomenon within the cultural framework of Kerala. Parenting practices are deeply influenced by cultural norms, values, and expectations, which makes it imperative to examine these dynamics within specific cultural contexts to understand their unique characteristics.

This study focuses on mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotions, with a particular emphasis on exploring gender differences in these responses. Research indicates that parental reactions can vary

based on the child's gender, potentially reinforcing gender-specific emotional norms and behaviours. However, such findings are largely absent in the context of Kerala, where socio-cultural dynamics may shape distinct patterns of parenting practices.

The objective of this exploratory study is to investigate gender differences in mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotions. The study focuses on a purposively selected sample of mothers of boys and girls aged 6-8 years, aiming to identify patterns and potential influences on these responses.

Methodology

Participants

The present exploratory study employed purposive sampling to select 200 mothers of children aged 6-8 years (100 girls and 100 boys). The mothers' ages ranged between 26 and 42 years and the sample included both working (N=91) and non-working mothers (N=109). Their educational qualification ranged from SSLC pass (N=109) to post-graduation (N=91).

Measures

The data collection included two tools:

1. Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale – CCNES (Fabes et al., 1990) – it measured six parental reactions towards children's negative emotions, namely: 1) punitive reactions - the degree to which parents respond with punitive reactions that decrease their exposure or need to deal with the negative emotions of their children, 2) distress reactions - the degree to which parents experience distress when children express negative affect, 3) minimization reactions - degree to which parents minimize the seriousness of the situation or devalue the child's problem or distressful reaction, 4) problem-focused reactions - the degree to which parents help the child solve the problem that caused the child's distress, 5) expressive encouragement - the degree to which parents encourage children to express negative affect or the degree to which they validate child's negative emotional states and 6) emotion-focused reactions - the degree to which parents respond with strategies that are designed to help the child feel better.
2. Personal data sheet for demographic information – the questions included basic demographic details of the mother and children such as mothers' educational qualification, occupation status and child's gender and age.

Analysis

The collected data were analysed using independent t-tests in SPSS to examine the findings.

Procedure

After informing the participants about the objectives of the study their consent was taken. Privacy and confidentiality were assured to them before giving them the scales.

Results & Discussion

The current study aimed to explore gender differences in mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotions, focusing on response types such as punitive reactions, distress reactions, minimization reactions, problem-focused reactions, expressive encouragement, and emotion-focused reactions. The analysis utilized independent samples t-tests to compare mothers' responses to boys and girls, revealing

intriguing patterns influenced by cultural expectations and traditional gender norms. In this section, the findings are discussed in light of previous research, highlighting consistencies and divergences in mothers' reactions and their implications for children's emotional and social development.

Table 1 Independent samples t-test analysis of Mothers' reactions to children's negative emotions to Child's gender

	Girls (N=100)		Boys (N=100)		df	t-test	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD			
Punitive reactions	37.37	12.60	45.43	8.95	198	-5.212	.000
Distress reactions	36.18	9.53	39.35	6.32	198	-2.770	.006
Minimization reactions	42.14	10.11	49.24	7.44	198	-5.653	.327
Problem-focused reactions	56.35	7.28	57.35	7.11	198	-.982	.000
Expressive encouragement	48.82	8.20	51.30	3.96	198	-2.772	.007
Emotion-focused reactions	54.38	9.17	55.86	6.06	198	-1.346	.180

The results of the independent samples t-tests reveal significant gender differences in mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotions for certain response types. Mothers exhibited significantly more punitive reactions toward boys ($M = 45.43$, $SD = 8.95$) compared to girls ($M = 37.37$, $SD = 12.60$), as indicated by $t = -5.212$, $p < .05$ in Table 1. Similarly, distress reactions were also higher for boys ($M = 39.35$, $SD = 6.32$) than for girls ($M = 36.18$, $SD = 9.53$), with $t = -2.770$, $p < .05$. These findings suggest that mothers respond more negatively and with greater emotional distress when dealing with boys' negative emotions. Significant differences emerged in minimization reactions, with mothers minimizing boys' negative emotions ($M = 49.24$, $SD = 7.44$) more frequently than girls' ($M = 42.14$, $SD = 10.11$), as shown by $t = -5.653$, $p < .05$. These findings suggest a tendency for mothers to both downplay boys' negative emotions and encourage emotional expression more in boys than in girls. These are in with previous research findings. Cassano et al. (2007) found that parents' reactions to children's emotions vary significantly based on the child's gender. Specifically, mothers tend to display more supportive reactions towards daughters while exhibiting more punitive responses towards sons. Studies conducted with Indian samples have also explored how Indian mothers react to their children's negative emotions and found that cultural expectations significantly influence these reactions. Mothers were more likely to encourage emotional expressiveness in daughters while being more dismissive or punitive towards sons (Raval et al., 2019). Another Indian study indicated that parental expectations regarding gender roles lead to different emotional socialization practices, with boys often receiving less emotional support compared to girls, reinforcing traditional masculine norms (Raval et al., 2018).

Table 1 also reveals that mothers provided more expressive encouragement to boys ($M = 51.30$, $SD = 3.96$) than to girls ($M = 48.82$, $SD = 8.20$), as indicated by $t = -2.772$, $p < .05$, suggesting a complex dynamic where mothers support emotional expression in boys while also exhibiting punitive responses. While certain emotions displayed by boys receive unsupportive reactions from mothers, certain others might not. A meta-analysis revealed that girls are generally socialized to express internalizing emotions (e.g., sadness) while boys are encouraged to express externalizing emotions (e.g., anger), reinforcing traditional gender roles (Else-Quest et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2015).

In contrast, no significant gender differences were observed in problem-focused reactions, as mothers responded similarly to boys ($M = 57.35$, $SD = 7.11$) and girls ($M = 56.35$, $SD = 7.28$), with $t = -0.982$, $p > .05$. This indicates that mothers are equally likely to employ problem-solving strategies regardless of the child's gender. Lastly, no significant gender differences were found in emotion-focused reactions, with mothers responding similarly to boys ($M = 55.86$, $SD = 6.06$) and girls ($M = 54.38$, $SD = 9.17$), as indicated by $t = -1.346$, $p > .05$. This suggests that mothers' use of emotion-focused strategies, such as comforting or empathizing, is not influenced by the child's gender.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the role of child gender in shaping mothers' reactions to their children's negative emotions. The findings reveal significant gender differences in punitive reactions, distress reactions, minimization reactions, and expressive encouragement, with boys receiving more punitive and minimizing responses but also greater expressive encouragement compared to girls. These patterns suggest that mothers' reactions are influenced by societal and cultural expectations of gender roles, potentially reinforcing traditional norms. Conversely, no significant differences were observed in problem-focused and emotion-focused reactions, indicating consistency in these strategies across genders. Overall, the results highlight the complexity of maternal responses, where certain emotions in boys may elicit punitive or dismissive reactions, while others receive encouragement. This underscores the need for nuanced understanding and contextualization of maternal emotional socialization practices.

Implications of the study

The findings of this study have important implications for parenting practices, education, and future research. The observed gender differences in mothers' reactions to children's negative emotions suggest a need for culturally sensitive parenting interventions that address and reduce gender biases in emotional socialization. Encouraging mothers to respond consistently and supportively to both boys and girls could promote healthier emotional development in children. These findings also highlight the importance of integrating gender-sensitive modules into parenting education programs and workshops conducted by schools and family counsellors. Such efforts can help parents recognize how cultural expectations and traditional gender norms influence their reactions, enabling them to adopt more balanced and constructive approaches. Furthermore, this study underscores the need for longitudinal and cross-cultural research to examine how maternal reactions influence children's emotional regulation and social adjustment over time, offering a deeper understanding of the interplay between culture, gender, and parenting practices. By addressing these implications, the study contributes to fostering equitable and supportive parenting strategies that benefit all children.

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