Parents’ Reactions to Elementary School Children’s Negative Emotions: Relations to Social and Emotional Functioning at School

Sarah Jones, Nancy Eisenberg, Richard A. Fabes, and David P. MacKinnon, Arizona State University

This study addressed the role of specific parenting practices in children’s expression of emotion and social competence. The specific objective was to examine the relations of parents’ reactions to children’s negative emotions with children’s social and emotional competence at school and to explore the moderating role of children’s dispositional emotionality in this relation. A diverse sample of first to fourth graders was observed at school; teachers reported on children’s social competence and affect, and parents reported on their reactions to their children’s negative emotions and the intensity of children’s negative emotions. Parental problem-focused reactions were positively related to socioemotional competence for boys but negatively associated for girls. Parental punitive/minimizing reactions were associated with low socioemotional competence. Moderating effects were obtained for emotion-focused (comforting) parental reactions: Children prone to intense negative emotions were especially low in socioemotional competence if their parents reported using high or average levels of these reactions.

Problems in regulating emotion have been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for children, including social and behavioral problems.

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Consequently, researchers have begun to examine the role of specific parenting practices in children’s expression and regulation of emotion (see Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999). One such practice is parental reactions to children’s negative emotions, which are hypothesized to affect children’s regulatory skills (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997).

Theory on the relation of parental reactions to children’s emotions to children’s development preceded most empirical work on the topic. Tomkins (1991) suggested that rewarding parental responses acknowledge children’s negative emotions and attempt to teach the children to tolerate and regulate these emotions. In contrast, punitive parental responses communicate neither acceptance nor tolerance of the expression of negative emotion; rather, they focus on reducing the expression of emotion without providing regulation strategies or methods to deal with the evocative stimulus. Similarly, Skinner and Wellborn (1994) suggested that parents who tend to be positive and supportive when their children experience negative emotions help their children to manage their distress and to cope successfully in stressful situations; this success might in turn foster the development of social skills and reduce negative expectations about social interactions (Dusek & Danko, 1994; Hardy, Power, & Jaedicke, 1993). In addition, parents who instruct their children in regard to problem solving when their children express negative emotion are likely to foster the development of specific skills that contribute to the management of the experience and expression of negative emotion (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Moreover, Gottman et al. (1997) argued that children of parents who are accepting of emotions and who talk about them are relatively likely to develop an understanding and acceptance of emotion that contribute to their physiological regulation of emotion. Similarly, Buck (1984) theorized that children who are punished for displaying negative emotions will associate the experience of negative emotions with negative sanctions. This association is believed to increase children’s distress and arousal in contexts involving negative emotion, which might be expected to undermine attempts at regulation and hence, social functioning.

Thus, theorists have argued that parental punitive or nonsupportive reactions to children’s negative emotion are associated with children’s heightened experience and expression of negative emotion—although, over time, the children may start to hide their negative feelings (Buck, 1984). In contrast, parental support, discussion, and problem-solving reactions are expected to promote children’s regula-
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tion of the experience or expression of negative emotion and their socioemotional competence. There is some initial support for these predictions. Parents who are high in warmth and positive emotion and low in negativity with their children—more generally and not solely in response to their displays of negative emotion—have socially competent children who exhibit relatively low levels of hostility, externalizing problems, and internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, anger; Lindahl, 1998; Matthews, Woodall, Kenyon, & Jacob, 1996; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Rubin, Hastings, Chen, Stewart, & McNichol, 1998). Moreover, Gottman and colleagues (1997) found that children of parents who were supportive in regard to encouraging the appropriate expression of emotion and coaching children about emotions were relatively high in regulatory abilities and low in aggression.

Eisenberg, Fabes, and colleagues have examined a number of parental behaviors specifically in reaction to children's negative emotions. In regard to the expression of emotion, parental nonsupportive reactions such as punitive responses or minimizing of children's emotion tend to be modestly correlated with children's situational and dispositional proneness to frequent or intense negative emotions, although the degree of relations varies somewhat across studies (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; Eisenberg, Fabes, Carlo & Karbon, 1992; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Eisenberg et al., 1999). Minimizing children's emotion may often be viewed as belittling rather than acknowledging and supporting the children's emotional experience (at least in the United States). In contrast, more supportive parental reactions such as encouraging problem-focused or emotion-focused responses (e.g., comforting) have been associated with preschoolers' low anger intensity in peer conflicts and, for comforting, with relatively low venting of anger (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; also see Denham, 1993; Eisenberg, Fabes, Carlo, & Karbon, 1992). However, associations between supportive parental reactions and children's experience and expression of emotion have been somewhat inconsistent and also have been infrequent in studies of school children (unpublished data from Eisenberg et al., 1999).

Links of parental reactions to children's negative emotion with measures of children's social competence (rather than expression of emotion) have been somewhat more consistent. In general, punitive or minimizing parental reactions have been linked to low social competence (Denham, 1993; Eisenberg et al., 1996, 1999). Denham found that children whose mothers responded to anger with a calming, neutral attitude were rated as relatively socially competent, whereas those with mothers who responded with tender responsiveness to children's
sadness were low in positive affiliation. Eisenberg et al. (1996, unpublished data from Eisenberg et al., 1999) have found weak and inconsistent relations between parenting comforting reactions and children's social competence. Parental problem-focused responses were more frequently linked with socially competent behavior in a study of school-age children (Eisenberg et al., 1996).

Eisenberg and colleagues (1996) obtained relatively little evidence of consistent relations between the parental response style of encouraging children's expression of emotion and children's social and emotional competence. Roberts and Strayer (1987), however, found a curvilinear relation; whereas a moderate level of parental encouraging the expression of negative emotion promoted children's social competence, the positive benefits declined slightly at higher levels. They hypothesized that a parental focus on the display of negative affect, especially without assistance in pragmatic solutions to solving the problem, may result in feelings of being overwhelmed and powerless to deal with the negative stimuli.

Relations between parental reactions to children's negative emotions and the children's emotional and social competence might be stronger if characteristics of the child were also considered. Rothbart and Bates (1998) noted that children's temperament likely moderates the relation between parenting and children's adjustment or other developmental outcomes, although there are few examples of such interactions. As one example, children's negative emotionality, real or as perceived by parents, may moderate the relation between parents' reactions to children's negative emotions and children's socioemotional development.

Specifically, children prone to intense or frequent negative emotions—that is, children prone to emotional dysregulation—are likely especially at risk if they experience punitive or nonsupportive parenting. Rubin et al. (1998) found that male toddlers with an angry temperament (i.e., approach and anger proneness versus avoidance) were prone to externalizing problems only when their mothers were high in negative control and hostile affect (combined). Belsky, Hsieh, and Crnic (1998) noted that more negative/less positive maternal parenting in the second and third years of life was associated with boys' externalizing behavior at age 3, but primarily for boys prone to negative emotionality. Similarly, Morris et al. (in press) found that among children high (but not low) in irritable distress, maternal psychological control was associated with internalizing problems. It is likely that children with different emotion-related characteristics, such as dispositional negative emotionality, react to the same parenting differently and that an easy disposition may buffer the effects of negative parenting.
In the present study, we examined direct or moderated relations of parents’ reported reactions to their children’s negative emotions with elementary school children’s observed emotional responding at school and their social competence and negative emotionality as reported by their teachers. Elementary school children were selected because the control of displays of negative emotion is expected more for elementary than for preschool children and because negative displays of emotion are likely to be more disruptive in the more structured elementary school context. Thus, children’s expression and control of negative emotions are likely to be greater contributors to their social competence in elementary school than earlier in development. Moreover, this age group was chosen because findings in regard to parental reactions to elementary school children’s negative emotion are limited in number and, for supportive reactions, quite inconsistent. The focal parental reactions included two nonsupportive ones (parenting punitive reactions and minimizing of children’s negative emotion) and three supportive ones (parents’ emotion-focused [comforting] reactions, problem-focused [problem-solving] reactions, and encouragement of the child’s expression of emotion). In general, we expected modest negative relations between parental nonsupportive reactions and positive outcomes for children (i.e., positive affective balance—the ratio of positive to negative expressed emotions—and higher social competence). Further, more negative emotional displays at school and lower social competence were predicted for children prone to frequent or intense negative emotions who were exposed to relatively high levels of parental nonsupportive reactions. These children, who are dispositionally reactive to emotional stimuli, are probably at risk for unregulated negative emotion reactions and are likely to become especially dysregulated if their parents respond to their emotional displays in a nonsupportive manner that increases the children’s negative arousal.

In addition, problem-focused parental reactions—which would be expected to promote the use of instrumental problem-solving skills—were expected to relate to more positive affective balance at school and higher levels of children’s social competence. Problem-focused parental reactions were expected to be equally useful to children prone to experience negative emotions because instrumental coping often is an effective means of coping with stress (Compas, Connor, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001).

We were unsure if parental comforting would be positively related to positive socioemotional functioning. By elementary school age, children who are frequently comforted when upset may be especially vulnerable or may not have learned how to manage their negative emotions
themselves; such a relation has even been noted with toddlers (Denham, 1993). Although comforting a younger child who has yet to develop self-comforting and other coping skills often may be an appropriate parenting strategy, continued use of this strategy with children prone to negative emotion may deny the children the opportunity to develop their own regulatory skills. These children would then be at a disadvantage in emotionally arousing situations in which the parent is unavailable to provide comfort, such as those that occur at school.

Finally, moderate, but not extremely high, levels of encouragement of the expression of emotion might be expected to correlate with positive outcomes for children—that is, a quadratic relation was predicted (e.g., Roberts & Strayer, 1987)—although this relation could vary for children prone and not prone to express their negative emotions freely. Children high in negative emotional intensity (NEI) were expected to exhibit impaired socioemotional functioning at school if their parents were high on expressive encouragement; such children would be more likely to express intense negative emotions, sometimes to their detriment in the social arena. In contrast, for children low in NEI, a positive relation was expected between parental encouragement of the expression of negative emotion and children’s affective balance and social competence.

A second issue examined was the relation of children’s affective displays to their social competence. Hubbard and Coie (1994) suggested that children who are effective in regulating their emotional reactions are likely to be viewed as more socially competent and evaluated more favorably than are children who have difficulties in this regard. Considerable support for this proposition has been obtained in studies of preschoolers. Generally, preschoolers’ displays of positive or low negative emotion have been linked to teachers’ and peers’ perceptions of children’s social competence (Denham & Grout, 1992; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud & Holt, 1990; Eisenberg et al., 1993; Sroufe, Schork, Motti, Lawroski, & LaFreniere, 1984). Although school-age children’s dispositional negative emotionality has been linked to indexes of social competence (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1997), to our knowledge, no one has examined the relation of observed real-life emotional responding at school with elementary school children’s social competence.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from two elementary schools. One hundred and nine parents (104 mothers or surrogate mothers, e.g., grand-
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mothers) completed questionnaires. Teachers completed questionnaires for 105 of these children, and research assistants conducted observations on 100 of the children. Both parents and teachers were paid ($5 to parents, $3 per child for teachers, $1 per child for the classroom fund).

The children were in Grades 1 to 4 (\(M\) age midstudy = 8 years, 2 months; \(SD = 15.6\) months, range = 6 years, 3 months to 10 years, 6 months; \(n\)s of girls in grades 1 to 4 were 18, 18, 7, and 17, respectively; \(n\)s of boys were 17, 11, 9, and 14, respectively). Children were mostly European American (52.3%), Hispanic (25.7%), and African American (16.5%); a few were Native American (2.8%) or of mixed heritage (2.8%). A majority lived with two parents (63.3%). The families were largely lower to middle class, with an average income of $35,000 (\(SD = $16,000; range = $6,000–$75,000\). A majority of parents completed high school; 8.6% of mothers and 5.7% of fathers had less than 12 years of formal education, whereas 17.2% mothers and 12.4% fathers graduated from college.

Procedures

Letters were sent home to parents of children whose teachers had agreed to participate. Assenting parents were mailed questionnaires regarding their reactions to their children’s negative emotions and their children’s emotional expressivity. When these measures were returned, observations of the children were begun during recess periods. Observers moved from observing one child to the next in a specified, random order. After observing a target child for 10 seconds, the observer coded the child’s emotional reactions and then looked for the next child on the list. When observers finished observing all children on their list, they began again at the top and repeated this procedure for much of an academic year (up to about 5 months). Observers were unobtrusive and did not interact with the children. Typically, children were observed at least two days a week, often more. Teachers completed questionnaires regarding children’s emotional expressivity and social competence, usually late in the first semester.

Measures

Parent Reactions

Parents’ responses to their children’s negative emotions were assessed with the Coping with Children’s Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; Fabes, Eisenberg, & Bernzweig, 1990). Parents were presented with 12 situations in which their child displays negative emotions (emotions included, but were not limited to,
anger, fear, anxiety, and disappointment—e.g., losing a favorite possession and becoming upset, being scared and nervous before receiving an injection. Using a 7-point scale, parents rated five behavioral responses as to how likely they would be to respond in each of the described manners.

Two categories reflected nonsupportive responses: (1) punitive responses—the degree to which parents react punitively in an attempt to suppress or control the child’s emotion (e.g., “get angry at my child”; \( \alpha = .75 \)), and (2) minimizing responses—the degree to which parents attempt to minimize or devalue the seriousness of the situation or their child’s response (e.g., “tell my child he (she) is overreacting”; \( \alpha = .83 \)). The remaining three subscales reflected supportive and encouraging parental reactions: (1) encourage expression of emotion—the degree to which parents validate and encourage their children to express their negative emotions (e.g., “tell my child it is okay to cry when you feel unhappy”; \( \alpha = .88 \)); (2) emotion-focused responses—the degree to which parents respond to their children with emotion-oriented strategies designed to comfort them (e.g., “try to make my child happy by talking about the fun things we can do with our friends”; \( \alpha = .79 \)); and (3) problem-focused responses—the degree to which parents attempt to use problem-oriented strategies to help their children solve the emotion-eliciting problem (e.g., “help my child think of something else to do”; \( \alpha = .72 \)). Due to missing data on some items, the sample size was 105 for each of the five subscales.

Assessment of Children’s Emotionality

Parents’ and teachers’ reports

Parents and teachers rated (1 = never; 7 = always) six items assessing the intensity of children’s negative emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1997, adapted from Larsen & Diener, 1987), for example, “this child’s negative moods are mild in intensity” (reverse coded); \( \alpha = .69 \) and .87.

Teachers also rated the children’s positive and dominant (hostile) negative emotions using items adapted from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Teachers reported “how this child feels on average” using ratings from very slightly or not at all (1) to extremely (5). The emotions included three positive (happy, excited, and enthusiastic) and five dominant negative (frustrated, upset, irritable, angry, and hostile) emotions.

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1 A sixth response, pertaining to the distress felt by parents in response to the child’s display of negative emotion, was not used because it taps parents’ internalized reaction to children’s negative emotions and not their overt responses to children’s displays.
For teachers’ reports, items pertaining to negative emotion from the PANAS and the CCNES were standardized and then averaged ($\alpha = .92$). The three positive emotions were averaged to form a positive emotion scale ($\alpha = .69$). A composite reflecting teachers’ ratings of children’s “affective balance” was created by standardizing the scale for positive emotion and then subtracting the score for a child’s negative emotion.

**Observed emotions**

Twelve trained undergraduate and graduate students coded children’s overt expressions of positive and negative emotions during recess. Observers watched a child for 10 seconds and then rated the child on the levels of anger/frustration, sadness, and positive emotion displayed in facial expressions and/or vocalizations, ranging from 1 = no emotion to 4 = high levels for each emotion (Fabes et al., 1999). Each child was observed by at least two different observers a minimum of 60 times ($M = 93, SD = 15$).

Reliability of the observational coding was assessed by having a primary coder observe with each of the other observers ($M$ number of reliability ratings = 32, range 22–42). On average, observers and the primary coder agreed on the level of emotions displayed 93% of the time (Pearson $r$s were .83, .76, and .82 for positive emotion, anger, and sadness, respectively).

Mean ratings of anger, sadness, and positive emotions were computed for each child. Similar to Denham et al. (1990), a measure of observed affective balance was created by first averaging anger and sadness and then subtracting the standardized value of this composite score from the standardized value for observed positive emotion.

**CHILDREN’S SOCIAL COMPETENCE**

Teachers were asked to rate children’s sociometric status using a 4-item questionnaire ($\alpha = .86$). For example, they were asked how many of the child’s peers would nominate the child in categories such as liked the most and liked the least. Possible responses range from top 15% (this child would be nominated by most of the class) to bottom 15% (Lemerise & Dodge, 1988). Teachers’ ratings of these items have correlated with children’s sociometrics; $r = .45$ for child liked the most, $r = .58$ for average popularity (K. A. Dodge, personal communication, 1994).

Teachers and observers completed a 9-item adaptation of Harter’s (1982) Perceived Competence Scale for Children assessing the child’s social skills and popularity. Three items tapped popularity (e.g., this child has lots of friends; $\alpha = .95$), whereas the remaining six items assessed general social skills (e.g., this child is usually well-behaved; $\alpha =$
The two measures of teachers’ ratings of popularity were correlated, $r(103) = .66, p < .001$, and were standardized and averaged to form a composite measure. Because the relation between this composite and the measure of teacher-rated social skills was also significant, $r(103) = .74, p < .001$, these measures were standardized and combined to form an aggregate measure.2

Results

Descriptive Analyses

One-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) and univariate analyses with sex as the independent variable were computed to examine sex differences in the major variables. In these analyses, similar measures from a single reporter were grouped together in three analyses (i.e., parents’ CCNES responses, teachers’ reports of children’s emotions, and the three different types of observed emotion); parents’ ratings of children’s negative emotionality were examined in a separate univariate analysis. According to a multivariate analysis, there were no significant differences in parents’ responses to children’s negative emotions. However, parents rated boys as higher than girls in NEI, $F(1,106) = 4.58, p < .04$. Moreover, observers rated boys and girls differently in terms of the children’s observed emotion displays, multivariate $F(3,96) = 54.84, p < .004$. Boys were observed expressing significantly more anger and less positive emotion and sadness than were girls, $F_s(1,98) = 4.03, 5.05,$ and $4.09, ps < .047, .027$ and .048 (see Table 1 for means).

Correlations between major variables and age and parental education level were examined. There were no significant correlations for age or for education level of the responding parent.

2 The same undergraduates who observed the children’s emotions also rated children’s popularity and socially appropriate behavior ($r = .95$ and .87). Observers’ reports of popularity and social skills were significantly correlated ($r = .76, p < .001$) and thus were standardized and combined to form a measure of observer social competence. This measure was significantly related to teacher-rated competence, $r(92) = .43, p < .001$ (this finding held for both sexes). Because the observers also coded children’s displays of emotion and because teachers likely had more information on children’s social competence, observers’ ratings of social competence were dropped from the major analyses, whereas the teachers’ ratings were retained.
Parents’ Reactions

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Major Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCNES (parent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused</td>
<td>5.65 (.66)</td>
<td>5.59 (.74)</td>
<td>5.69 (.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion-focused</td>
<td>5.43 (.85)</td>
<td>5.28 (.98)</td>
<td>5.55 (.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive encouragement</td>
<td>5.05 (1.07)</td>
<td>5.00 (.80)</td>
<td>5.09 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punitive/minimizing1</td>
<td>0.00 (1.54)</td>
<td>-0.06 (.93)</td>
<td>.05 (.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotion intensity</td>
<td>4.29 (.97)</td>
<td>4.50 (1.10)</td>
<td>4.11 (.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed emotion (observers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective balance^2</td>
<td>.00 (1.50)</td>
<td>-.34 (1.65)</td>
<td>.32 (1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>1.04 (.05)</td>
<td>1.05 (.06)</td>
<td>1.03 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>1.01 (.02)</td>
<td>1.01 (.01)</td>
<td>1.02 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
<td>1.64 (.27)</td>
<td>1.58 (.25)</td>
<td>1.70 (.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports of emotion (teachers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective balance^2</td>
<td>.00 (1.54)</td>
<td>-.31 (1.61)</td>
<td>.28 (1.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant negative emotion^2</td>
<td>.00 (.80)</td>
<td>.15 (.85)</td>
<td>-.13 (.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
<td>3.26 (.80)</td>
<td>3.16 (.82)</td>
<td>3.35 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence (teacher)^2</td>
<td>-.01 (.89)</td>
<td>-.17 (.91)</td>
<td>.14 (.85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 This is a standardized score. Prior to standardizing, means (and SDs) were 2.51 (.79), 2.46 (.80), and 2.55 (.79) for the total sample, boys, and girls.

Intraconstruct Correlations

Parental Reactions

The three supportive response styles, namely, problem-focused, emotion-focused, and expressive encouragement, were significantly positively correlated, rs(103) ranging from .46 to .65, ps < .001 (all reported correlations are 2-tailed, even if consistent with hypotheses). Similarly, the two negative responses (punitive and minimizing) were related, r(103) = .69, p < .001. Furthermore, the positive and negative response styles were generally, although not always, significantly negatively correlated. Specifically, problem-focused reactions were negatively related to punitive reactions, whereas parental encouragement of emotional expression was negatively related to punitive and minimizing practices, rs(103) = -.29, -.29, and -.23, ps < .003, .002, and .019. Because punitive and minimizing responses were so highly related
and similar results were expected for the two variables, they were standardized and averaged for subsequent analyses.

**Measures of Emotionality**

Teacher-rated affective balance was significantly correlated with observed affective balance, \( r(93) = .31, p < .002 \). Although the correlations for each sex were in the same direction, only the correlation for boys was significant, \( r(44) = .34, p < .016; r(47) = .16, ns \) for girls. Similarly, the relation between observed anger and teacher-rated negative emotion was significant for boys but not girls, \( rs(44, 47) = .48 \) and \( .07, ps < .001 \) and \( ns \) (the sex difference was significant, \( z = 2.14, p < .05 \)), \( r(93) = .36, p < .001 \), for the total sample. Children’s observed positive emotion was not significantly correlated with teachers’ ratings of positive emotion, although it was negatively correlated with teachers’ rating of negative emotion, \( r(93) = -.34, p < .001 \), and positively related to teacher-reported affective balance, \( r(93) = .24, p < .017 \) (these relations did not differ markedly for boys and girls).

Parents’ ratings of children’s NEI were positively correlated with teachers’ ratings of negative emotion, \( r(101) = .38, p < .001 \) (\( rs \) were similar for girls and boys) and negatively related to teacher-reported affective balance, \( r(101) = -.29, p < .003 \), but were unrelated to observed emotion or teacher-rated positive emotion.

**Correlations Between Measures of Children’s Emotionality and Their Social Competence**

There were many significant correlations between children’s emotionality and teachers’ ratings of social competence, far more than would be expected to occur by chance (see Table 2). Consistent with findings for preschoolers, the correlation between teacher-rated social competence and teacher-rated affective balance was high (and evident for both teacher-rated positive and negative emotion if examined separately). Moreover, teachers’ reports of social competence were negatively related to parents’ reports of children’s NEI, especially for girls. In addition, children’s observed anger, positive emotion, and affective balance were all significantly related to teacher-rated social competence in the expected directions. However, the negative relation between observed sadness and teacher-rated social competence was significant for boys only. Although in several cases the relation between children’s emotions and social competence was significant for only one gender, there were no significant differences between the correlations for boys and girls. These correlations changed little when the scores for observed emotion were transformed to minimize their skew.
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Table 2. Correlations Between Children’s Emotional and Social Competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Teacher-rated social competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective balance</td>
<td>.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>−.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>−.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotion</td>
<td>.25*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher-rated emotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Teacher-rated social competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective balance</td>
<td>.73***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parent-rated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Teacher-rated social competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotional intensity</td>
<td>−.34***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ns range from 97–104 for whole sample, 51–55 for girls, and 46–49 for boys.
+p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Relations of Parental Reactions to Child Variables

Correlational Analyses

Parents’ reports of children’s NEI generally were unrelated to their reports of reactions to their children’s negative emotions. The one significant relation between parental punitive/minimizing reactions and girls’ NEI, r(53) = .27, p < .05, may have been due to chance.

The correlations between CCNES scores and children’s emotions and social competence at school are presented in Table 3. Because the results were similar for teacher-rated affective balance and the individual emotions that formed the affective balance scores (with correlations for positive emotion being opposite of those for negative emotion), only the former are presented.

Parental reactions to children’s negative emotions were unrelated to children’s observed emotions. When the scores for observed emotions were transformed to reduce their skew, findings still were not significant, although the correlation between positive emotion and punitive/minimizing parental reactions was marginal, r(44) = −.28, p < .06, for boys. The lack of findings may be due partly to the low frequencies of observed emotions (see Table 1).
### Table 3. Correlations Between Parents’ Responses to Children’s Negative Emotions and Children’s Emotional and Social Competence at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ responses to children’s negative emotions</th>
<th>Problem-Focused</th>
<th>Emotion-Focused</th>
<th>Expressive Encouragement</th>
<th>Punitive Minimizing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed affective balance</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed affective balance</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed affective balance</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed affective balance</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed affective balance</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated affective balance</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated affective balance</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated affective balance</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
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<td>Teacher-rated affective balance</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated social competence</td>
<td>.06b</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>-.31*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated social competence</td>
<td>.01b</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated social competence</td>
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<td>.13</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher-rated social competence</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.30*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Ns range from 97–100 for whole sample, 51–56 for girls, and 46–51 for boys.

*There was a significant difference in correlations for girls and boys, p < .05.

*There was a significant difference in correlations for girls and boys, p < .01.

*p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
However, there were a number of significant or marginally significant relations between parental punitive/minimizing or problem-focused reactions and children’s affective balance and social competence, with the patterns of relations being stronger for the dependent variable of social competence than for children’s emotionality. Parents’ problem-focused responses were significantly correlated with boys’ and girls’ teacher-rated social competence, although in opposite directions (positive for boys and negative for girls; $z = 2.97, p < .01$, for the sex difference). Problem-focused reactions were also at least marginally correlated with teachers’ ratings of children’s affective balance, again in different directions for boys and girls, $z = 3.31, p < .001$, for the sex difference. Parental punitive/minimizing responses were significantly negatively correlated with teachers’ ratings of children’s social competence (especially for girls) and marginally negatively related to teacher-rated affective balance for girls ($p < .06$). Emotion-focused reactions were negatively related to teacher-rated social competence, but only for girls. This finding may be unreliable given the lack of significant correlations for this particular reaction. Moreover, parental encouragement of children’s expression of negative emotions was unrelated to children’s emotionality or social competence. The lack of relations between some parental reactions and children’s social competence or affective balance was not surprising because these relations were hypothesized to be moderated by the children’s NEI.\(^3\)

**Regression Analyses**

In regression analyses, we examined whether parents’ ratings of children’s NEI interacted with their reactions to children’s negative emotions when predicting children’s teacher-rated affective balance and social competence, as well as their observed affective balance. Because none of the moderational analyses was significant for observed affective balance, those analyses are not discussed further. To control for the possible effect of gender on social competence and expressive styles, gender was first entered into all regressions (but these results are not reported as they were already discussed). A given parent reaction (e.g., emotion-focused reactions) and parent-reported NEI were entered on the second step, and the multiplicative interaction term was entered on the third step. All predictors were centered in these analyses to minimize multicollinearity by subtracting the mean of a variable from each participant’s score (Aiken & West, 1991), and

\(^3\) Partial correlations controlling for whether children were European American or from a minority group were similar to the zero-order correlations between parental reactions and teachers’ ratings of children’s social competence and affective balance.
interaction terms were the product of the two centered predictors. Moderation was not expected for problem-focused reactions, so only linear relations were examined; these were consistent with the correlational analyses and thus are not presented.

**Emotion-Focused Responses**

We predicted NEI to be negatively related to children’s social competence or affective balance and expected this relation to be stronger for children whose parents used more emotion-focused responses. The main effect of NEI was significant but was qualified by the interaction of parents’ emotion-focused reactions and children’s NEI, \( \beta = -.19, F(1, 94) = 3.64, p = .05, R^2 = .03 \). The full model accounted for 16% of the variance in children’s social competence, \( F(4, 94) = 4.56, p < .003 \) (and the main effect of NEI was significant, \( \beta = -.29, p < .002 \)). The interaction between parents’ emotion-focused responses and children’s NEI was probed by testing the associated simple slopes using the approach of Aiken and West (1991). The simple regression of children’s social competence on parents’ emotion-focused responding was estimated at high NEI (1 standard deviation above the mean), average NEI (at the mean), and low NEI (1 standard deviation below the mean). The slopes for high and mean levels of emotion-focused responding were significant, \( \beta s = -.50 \) and \( -.34, ts (94) = -3.69 \) and \( -3.60, ps < .001 \), whereas the slope for low level of emotion-focused responding \( (-.18) \) was not. As predicted for children of this age, NEI was negatively related to social competence when parents were average or high in their use of emotion-focused responding. Children were highest in social competence when NEI was low and emotion-focused reactions were high; they were lowest when both NEI and comforting were high. When parents were low in emotion-focused reactions, children tended to be relatively average in their social competence, regardless of the NEI level (see Figure 1).

Similarly, children’s teacher-reported affective balance was regressed on the interaction of parents’ emotion-focused responses and children’s NEI. The interaction was marginally significant, \( \beta = -.28, p = .10, R^2 = .025, F(1, 94) \) for the change in \( R^2 \) on the third step = \( 2.70, p = .10 \) (the main effect of NEI also was significant on the second step, \( \beta = -.42, p < .009 \)). Probing of the simple slopes indicated that the slopes for high and mean levels of emotion-focused responding were significant; \( \beta s = -.73 \) and \( -.48, ts (94) = -3.01 \) and \( -2.99, ps < .01 \), whereas the slope for the low group \( (-.24) \) was nonsignificant. As for social competence, NEI was negatively related to children’s affective balance at high and mean levels of parents’ emotion-focused responses.
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Figure 1. Relation of parents’ emotion-focused responses and children’s negative emotional intensity to children’s social competence.

PUNITIVE/MINIMIZING RESPONSES

Consistent with the zero-order correlations, the main effects of punitive/minimizing and parent NEI were negative and significant on the second step of the equation predicting social competence, after controlling for sex on the first step, $R^2$ for the change in $R^2 = .14$, $F(2, 95) = 7.98$, $p < .001$, $\beta_s = -.20$ and $- .27$, $ps < .034$ and .003, respectively. The interaction was not significant. When teachers’ report of affective balance was the criterion variable, there was a significant negative main effect for parent NEI, $R^2$ change = .09 for the step, $F(2, 95) = 4.83$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.39$ for parent NEI, $p < .015$, but parental punitive/minimizing reactions and the interaction term were not significant predictors.

EXPRESSIVE ENCOURAGEMENT

After entering sex, the main effect for NEI on the second step of the regression was significant when predicting social competence, $\beta = -.43$, $p < .008$, $R^2 = .08$, $F(2, 95) = 4.35$, for the change in $R^2$. $p < .016$, for the step, or affective balance, $\beta = -.27$, $p < .008$, $R^2$ for the
step = .08, $F(2, 95) = 4.35, p < .016$. Neither the interaction nor the quadratic relations between parental expressive encouragement and measures of social competence or affective balance were significant.4

Discussion

The primary focus of the present study was on relations of parents’ reactions to children's negative emotion and children's social and emotional competence at school, as well as on possible interactions between such parental practices and children's emotional intensity when predicting children's socioemotional functioning. The findings indicated that some parental reactions (problem-focused and punitive/minimizing) were linearly related to child outcomes, whereas there was a moderated effect for emotion-focused reactions.

Although parental emotion-focused reactions generally were infrequently correlated with children's emotional displays, the interaction of children's NEI and parents’ emotion-focused responses was marginally related to teachers’ reports of children's affective balance and significantly related to their reports of social competence. At high and average, but not low, levels of parental emotion-focused responding, children's negative emotionality was negatively related to the children's affective balance and social competence. Thus, it appears the parents’ frequent use of emotion-focused responding is not optimal with children who are relatively reactive to emotional stimuli. The emotion-focused responses assessed with the CCNES primarily tapped comforting the child. Comforting may not be an adaptive strategy for parents to use with emotionally reactive school-age children, who are expected to manage stress and their negative emotion at school without the benefit of parental comforting. If parents help emotionally reactive children reduce their arousal, their children may be less likely to learn ways to reduce their own negative arousal quickly. Although this possibility has been observed in younger children (Denham, 1993; also see Malatesta et al., 1994), there are few data pertinent to this issue with school-age children.

The interaction between parental emotion-focused reactions and children's outcomes is evidence for the importance of considering both child characteristics and parental reactions—and their combined effects—when studying children’s socioemotional development. The interaction effect is most consistent with the notion that both types of influences contribute to developmental outcomes, rather than one

4 No outliers were found in the regression analyses.
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mediating the effects of the other on developmental outcomes (indeed, there was little relation between NEI and parental reactions). Of course, rather than parental emotion-focused reactions and children's NEI affecting their emotionality and social competence, it is possible that children who are low in social competence or prone to negative emotionality at school elicit both parents’ perceptions of their children as prone to negative emotions and the parents’ comforting reactions. Nonetheless, it is clear that the relation of children's characteristics to developmental outcomes varies as a function of parenting reactions.

In general, nonsupportive parental reactions were related to lower social and emotional competence, but particularly for girls. These data replicate findings in other studies with children both older and younger than those in the present study (Eisenberg et al., 1996, 1999). The unique additive effects of NEI and punitive/minimizing parental reactions on children's social competence also provide evidence of the importance of considering both children's characteristics and nonsupportive reactions when examining children's social functioning. The findings for nonsupportive reactions are consistent with the theorizing of individuals such as Buck (1984), Eisenberg et al. (1998), and Gottman et al. (1997), who have argued that children who are consistently exposed to punitive reactions do not learn to regulate their internal emotion-related experience well and thus are prone to dysregulated behavior. Alternatively, the relations of nonsupportive parental reactions to children’s lower socioemotional functioning at school could also be indicative of a pattern whereby children who display higher levels of negative emotion elicit punishing responses from their parents. It is most likely that the relation between parental punitive responses and children’s unregulated and social problematic behavior is bidirectional over time (Eisenberg et al., 1999). For example, punitive parents may initially foster negative emotionality and low social competence in young children, but as they grow, children who are low in social competence also may be more likely than other children to evoke punitive parental reactions. It also is quite possible that heredity contributes to this association; a hereditary tendency toward low regulation and experiencing negative emotions such as anger could contribute to both parents’ negative reactions and children’s low social and emotion competence.

It is unclear why the findings for punitive/minimizing parental reactions were primarily for girls. Eisenberg et al. (1996) did not find evidence of a sex difference. However, the sample in the present study was somewhat lower in socioeconomic status and more racially and ethnically diverse than in that sample. Perhaps the nature of punitive
and minimizing reactions differs across SES or ethnic/racial groups such that they were perceived as harsher by the girls in this sample. This sample also was younger on average than that in Eisenberg et al. (1996), and younger girls may react more strongly to nonsupportive maternal reactions than do boys (Eisenberg, Fabes, Carlo, Troyer, et al., 1992) because they typically receive more affective support from mothers in distressing situations than do boys (Fabes et al., 1994). Because the relevant correlations for boys and girls did not differ significantly, it is important to determine if this sex difference replicates in larger samples.

Contrary to prediction, parental punitive/minimizing reactions did not interact with parents' reports of children's NEI when predicting children's social and emotional functioning. Perhaps this was because a variety of negative emotions were included in the measure of negative emotionality in the home, and it is possible that punitive parental reactions are associated with worse outcomes only for children prone to certain types of negative emotions. For example, children prone to anger and frustration, but not those prone to sadness, may be prone to aggression and low social competence if their parents react in a punitive manner. Unfortunately, it was not possible to test such specific hypotheses with our data.

Consistent with the association between instrumental coping and adjustment (Compas et al., 2001), simple direct positive relations were expected between parental (primarily mothers') problem-focused reactions and children's social and emotional competence. However, problem-focused parental reactions were positively related to teacher-reported affective balance (display of positive minus negative emotion) and social competence for boys, and negatively related for girls. These findings are not consistent with those found by Eisenberg et al. (1996) for mothers, although they found a negative relation between fathers' problem-focused reactions and girls' parent-rated popularity and teacher-rated social skills.

Perhaps the relations between parental emphasis on problem-focused behaviors differed across studies in their associations by gender due to the nature of the measures of child functioning or the SES and ethnic composition of the samples. Regardless, the negative relations in the present study for girls may reflect a child-instigated pattern of causality, with higher levels of girls' negative affect prompting parents' greater use of a problem-focused approach. It is possible that the parents in this study encouraged a problem-focused approach primarily with those girls who were relatively low in social competence and
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who thus might benefit from social skills “training.” Because girls generally are higher in adult-rated social competence than are boys (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1996) and were marginally higher in the present study, \( F(1,102) = 3.25, p < .074 \), parents may tend not to try to teach problem-solving skills unless their daughter exhibits a deficit in her socio-emotional competence. Such a “hands-off” approach with adequately functioning girls may be more common in working-class than upper-middle-class families, as well as among some ethnic and racial groups than others. Alternatively, it may be that parents who react to daughters’ negative emotion by encouraging instrumental, problem-focused behavior tend not to teach their daughters other more gender-stereotypic ways of managing emotion (e.g., internal control of the expression of negative emotion) that other parents teach their girls, and this pattern may be stronger in lower SES or minority groups. Because an instrumental approach is consistent with the masculine gender role (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), parents may use problem-focused approaches more routinely in response to boys’ negative emotion. Additional longitudinal research is needed to examine how and why parents’ problem-focused reactions relate to boys’ and girls’ socioemotional competence over time and whether gender differences in behavior or stereotypes play a role.

The lack of findings for parents’ reports of encouraging the expression of emotion is inconsistent with some prior research (e.g., Roberts & Strayer, 1987), albeit Eisenberg et al. (1996) obtained only a small number of correlational findings for this type of reaction. Although Gottman et al. (1997) found that parental openness to the expression and experience of emotion was related to children’s regulation and social competence, such a relation may depend on the type of negative emotions expressed or the age of the child (Gottman et al.’s sample was relatively young). For example, it may be constructive to encourage children to express their fears and anxiety, but not their unbridled anger. Also, the expression of externalizing negative emotions may be less acceptable as children get older. Further, the ways in which parents encourage children’s expression of emotions likely are critical. Expressing negative emotions in a controlled manner may be related to positive outcomes for children, whereas the expression of negative emotion in an unregulated, hurtful, or destructive manner is not (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, Nyman, Bernzweig, & Pinuelas, 1994). In addition, it is possible that the ethnic and racial diversity in the sample diluted any results because the expression of emotion is differentially valued in different groups (e.g., Kitayama & Marcus, 1994).
Across the response styles, an interesting gender difference emerges. The few correlations of any size between parents’ reaction styles and boys’ social competence were positive relations involving supportive parental reactions. In contrast, all of the significant correlations between parental response styles and girls’ teacher-reported affective balance and social competence were negative (although not necessarily significant), even for those response styles that generally are considered to be more supportive. It is possible that many of the girls (but not boys) had already achieved a minimally acceptable level of social competence and that the negative relation between parental reactions and girls’ social competence was driven by the parents’ attempts to address the needs of those girls who were relatively less competent. As noted previously, the finding that there was a marginally significant difference between teachers’ ratings of boys’ and girls’ social competence, with girls rated as more positive, is consistent with such a hypothesis.

There were no significant relations between reported parental reactions and children’s observed emotions. As mentioned previously, this is likely due in part to the relatively low frequency rates for the emotions observed (see Table 1). However, the fact that observed emotions were related to teacher-reported social competence and negative emotionality suggests that the low frequency of observed emotion is not the only explanation. Children’s emotions on the playground with peers likely differ from those exhibited at home or with teachers. Thus, different factors may contribute to children’s emotional displays in interactions with peers and at home.

Although there were no relations between children’s observed emotions and parental reactions, children’s observed emotions are of interest because they were related with adults’ reports of both children’s emotionality and social competence. For example, observed and teacher-reported affective balance in the school setting were positively related. Thus, the observational data provided some support for the validity of the teachers’ reports. Of perhaps greater interest, observed emotions also were significantly related to teachers’ reports of children’s social competence. This finding is consistent with Hubbard and Coie’s (1994) argument that children who are more effective in regulating their emotional expressions are viewed as more socially competent and evaluated more favorably by others than are children who have difficulties regulating their emotional displays. Although a number of investigators have found that observed positive versus negative emotionality is related to social competence in preschool children (e.g., Denham & Grout, 1992; Denham et al., 1990; Sroufe et al., 1984),
there are few data linking naturally occurring expressions of emotion in social interactions to school-age children's social competence. Our findings suggest that even among older children, those who exhibit more positive emotion or less negative emotion are viewed as more socially competent in the school context.

An interesting gender difference emerged when the individual observed emotions were examined. Teachers seemed especially sensitive to boys' displays of negative emotions in their ratings of social competence. Expressions of anger and sadness were significantly negatively related to teachers' ratings of boys', but not girls', social competence. Because boys were higher in sadness and anger in this study, teachers may have been especially attuned to their negative emotion and its consequences. Overt expressions of anger tend to be associated with negative social consequences, at least for young children (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1994); thus, boys' relatively high expression of anger likely contributed to low social competence at school. In addition, the findings in regard to sadness are consistent with prior work on cultural gender stereotypes suggesting that expressions of sadness are considered more “aberrant” in males (Birnbaum & Croll, 1984; Fabes & Martin, 1991). Thus, the standards used to judge the appropriateness of girls' and boys' emotional displays, as well as the consequences of such displays, may differ.

Similarly, although not examined in this study, it is likely that the relations of parental reactions to children's socioemotional outcomes depend on the child's developmental level and the socialization expectations associated at each level. For example, parents of older children relative to those with younger children are more likely to believe that their children's expressions of negative emotions are used for manipulation or are reflective of poor character. As such, they are more likely to respond by ignoring or punishing such responses than would parents of younger children who are less likely to make such attributions (Gottman, 1997). In future work, it may be important to consider the role that parental beliefs play in their reactions to children's negative emotions.

The strengths of this study are its multi-method, multi-reporter approach and its assessment of moderated relations. Nonetheless, there are several limitations in the current study. First, although Fabes and colleagues did not find that parents' reports on the CCNES were related to social desirability (Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, in press), parents' self-reports of their own response styles could be tainted by concerns with social desirability, particularly for
questions about negative reactions. However, the standard deviations for the more socially undesirable reactions were similar in size to those for other more positive response styles. Thus, it does not appear that the range of responses was more restricted for these more socially undesirable reactions. Moreover, parents’ reports of their reactions sometimes were significantly related to teachers’ reports of socio-emotional functioning, a finding that provides some evidence of the validity of their reports.

Second, the power of this study was low and therefore may not have been sufficient to accurately detect true effects in the population, especially for the expected small- to medium-size interactions effects. Third, nearly all parent respondents were mothers. It is possible that some of the gender differences in the relations between parental reactions and children’s expression of emotion or social competence would change if fathers were considered, although in a study of older elementary school children, fathers’ reports of problem-focused reactions also tended to be negatively related to girls’ social competence. Finally, because the data were correlational and concurrent, it was impossible to determine the direction of effects. Longitudinal data and experimental data are needed to further examine the issue of causal relations.

References


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