

Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy: A Review of Research and Theoretical Framework

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ABSTRACT—*The concept of parental meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP)—the idea that parents have an organized set of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about their own and their children’s emotions—was introduced in 1996. Since then, empirical studies have examined the validity of the PMEP construct in relation to children’s psychosocial adjustment and parent and child characteristics. This article reviews the current state of knowledge regarding PMEP, summarizing what the field has learned, and identifying critical directions for future research.*

KEYWORDS—*parental meta-emotion philosophy; emotion socialization*

In 1996, Gottman, Katz, and Hooven introduced a new parenting concept called parental meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP), which refers to an organized set of feelings and thoughts that parents have about their own emotions and those of their children. Early empirical studies of PMEP suggested that parents varied in the degree to which they had an emotion-coaching or emotion-dismissing meta-emotion philosophy. Parents who had a PMEP that was high in emotion coaching were aware of low-intensity emotions in themselves and their children, viewed children’s negative emotion as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching, validated and labeled their children’s emotion, and discussed goals and strategies for dealing with the situation that led to the emotion. Parents who had a PMEP that was dismissive of emotion tended to deny or ignore emotion, viewed their role as helping to change negative emotions or make them go away quickly,

and conveyed to their children that emotions are unimportant. Gottman et al. identified parents’ style of coaching versus dismissing emotion as central to children’s emotional development.

HOW DID THE CONCEPT OF PMEP ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTION SOCIALIZATION?

Much of the early developmental research on parenting focused on parental affect and discipline, examining variables such as warmth, control, and responsiveness (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Grusec, 1997). In the 1990s, parents’ role in the socialization of child understanding, expression, and regulation of emotion emerged as an important parenting dimension. Researchers identified three social learning mechanisms involved in parental socialization of children’s emotion-related skills, including (a) parents’ own expression and regulation of emotion, (b) parents’ reactions to children’s expression of emotion, and (c) parents’ coaching and discussion of children’s emotions (Eisenberg, Cumberland & Spinrad, 1998; Halberstadt, 1991).

PMEP added to this literature in a number of ways. First, it highlighted the idea that parents’ beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes about emotion guide their emotion socialization behaviors. According to the meta-emotion framework, PMEP was an underlying basis for parents’ expression and regulation of their own emotions, and for their reactions to and coaching of their children’s emotions. The idea that PMEP is an important contributor to parents’ reactions to and coaching of their children’s emotions is supported by findings that PMEP relates to parenting behaviors such as emotional scaffolding, praising, validation, and self-disclosure (Cleary & Katz, 2008; Gottman et al., 1996).

Second, a central principle underlying PMEP’s conceptual framework is the idea that parents’ thoughts and feelings about their *own* emotions are related to their thoughts and feelings about their *children’s* emotions. Previous studies of emotion socialization had focused largely on parenting behaviors and responses to children’s feelings but had not examined parents’ thoughts and feelings about their own feelings as important contributors to how they respond to child affect.

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Third, awareness, acceptance, and coaching of emotion were identified as component processes central to PMEP. Identifying these processes set the stage for empirically testing the degree to which each component was operative in the socialization of children's emotions and whether their relative importance changed across development.

Finally, findings indicating that PMEP is distinct from parental warmth suggested that PMEP reflects a unique parenting dimension that had been previously unidentified (Katz, Gottman, & Hooven, 1996). Recent data also suggest that PMEP not only is distinct from warmth but also explains the variance in child adjustment over and above parenting qualities such as warmth or harshness (Sheeber, Shortt, Low, & Katz, 2010). This "value-added" effect highlights PMEP's unique contribution to children's socioemotional adjustment.

It has now been more than 15 years since PMEP's introduction. To encourage the next generation of research on PMEP and emotion socialization, we review empirical work to date and identify critical directions for future research. The conceptual model at the center of our more recent research suggests that an emotion-coaching PMEP leads to improvements in three keys aspects of children's emotional competence: emotional awareness, expression, and regulation (see Figure 1). A child's skill in these areas, in turn, is associated with better psychosocial adjustment and peer relations. In this review, we identify aspects of the theoretical model that have received empirical support and those still in need of testing. First, we review research on relations between PMEP and child psychosocial adjustment, followed by studies that have examined mediating and moderating factors. Unless we state otherwise, the studies we include in this review used Katz and Gottman's (1986) Parent Meta-Emotion Interview to assess PMEP and are cross-sectional in design. We include research that addressed any of the three dimensions of PMEP—awareness, acceptance, and coaching—although most studies focus on emotion coaching. Because no studies have directly tested PMEP as a typology (i.e., comparing emotion-coaching with emotion-dismissing parents), we present findings of emotion coaching as a dimension of PMEP. Finally, in considering whether to include the body of literature

on parental discussion of emotion, we reasoned that these studies examine the awareness component of PMEP and therefore included those studies that relate to our conceptual model.

PMEP AND CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

A growing body of research suggests that PMEP is associated with socioemotional adjustment in children of varying ages, with benefits for both children's psychosocial adjustment and peer relations.

Psychosocial Adjustment

PMEP has been associated with a host of child outcomes. In a longitudinal study from preschool to middle childhood, PMEP predicted greater inhibitory control, lower levels of behavior problems, higher levels of academic achievement, and better physical health (Gottman et al., 1996). Emotion-dismissing behavior by parents, as measured by coded emotion talk during family interaction, also relates to child externalizing problems during middle childhood (Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007). PMEP also appears to be important to psychosocial adjustment during adolescence. In a normative sample of adolescents, youth who received more coaching about anger were better able to self-regulate and demonstrated fewer externalizing problems 3 years later when controlling for gender (Shortt, Stoolmiller, Smith-Shine, Eddy, & Sheeber, 2010). In a sample of male and female adolescents varying in depressive symptoms, mothers who were more accepting and expressive of their own emotions had children with lower overall depressive symptoms, higher self-esteem, and fewer internalizing, externalizing, and total problems (Katz & Hunter, 2007).

Peer Relationships

Children whose parents are more emotion coaching tend to be more socially adept, have enhanced social competence, and have better peer relationships than children whose parents are more emotion dismissing (e.g., Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997; Gottman et al., 1996). For example, male and female preschoolers whose parents pro-

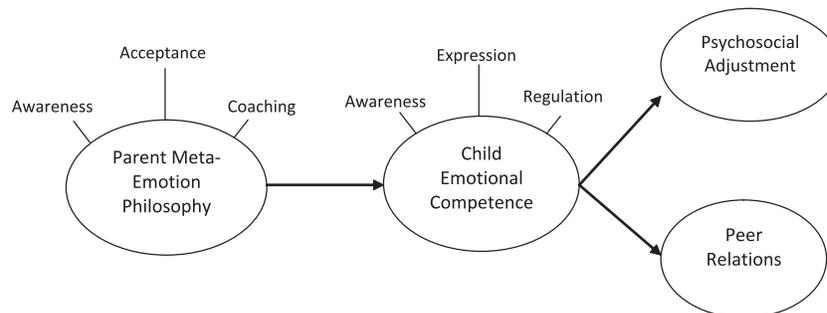


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

vided more scaffolding and guiding language and were more positively reinforcing of their emotional displays were rated as more socially competent by teachers than those whose parents less often engaged in these behaviors (Denham et al., 1997). In preschool children with conduct problems, those whose mothers were more emotion coaching had higher level peer play and less disconnected peer interaction, negative conversation, and negative affect than those whose mothers were less emotion coaching (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004). In children exposed to inter-partner violence, those whose parents exhibited high levels of emotion coaching were more likely to use appropriate strategies such as laughter to deflect teasing and less likely to demonstrate socially inappropriate behavior when engaging in a peer provocation task 4 years later than those whose parents were low in emotion coaching (Katz, Hunter, & Klowden, 2008). Similarly, in a sample of 9- to 13-year-old African American children exposed to community violence and crime, girls' understanding of their emotions mediated the relation between caregiver emotion coaching at the first assessment point and social skills 6 months later (Cunningham, Kliewer, & Garner, 2009).

Although studies have found relations between PMEP and children's social and behavioral adjustment throughout childhood and adolescence, future research must explore potential mediators and moderators in order to better understand mechanisms and conditions under which PMEP is associated with healthy child adjustment. One proposed mediator is children's emotional competence.

DOES EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE MEDIATE RELATIONS BETWEEN PMEP AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT?

Emotional competence is often conceptualized as involving three core skills: (a) an awareness or understanding of emotion in self and others, (b) the ability to regulate emotion, and (c) the ability to appropriately express emotions to others (Halberstadt, Dunsmore, & Denham, 2001; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Saarni, 1999). Few studies have directly examined emotional competence as a mediator of relations between PMEP and child adjustment. However, there is evidence that PMEP is directly associated with all aspects of child emotional competence. When assessed through observation of parent-child interaction, emotion coaching relates to greater child awareness and acceptance of emotion (Denham et al., 1997). Emotion coaching has also been shown to relate to children's ability to calm themselves down when they are upset rather than rely on parents to help them regulate negative affect (Gottman et al., 1996). Parents who are more accepting of child emotion and provide more direct instruction have children who show better self-regulation (Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002) and emotion-regulation abilities (Lunkenheimer et al., 2007) in middle childhood than parents who are emotion dismissing. Similarly, children of parents with greater awareness of children's emotions, as measured by their use of

emotion talk, show more emotion understanding (Denham & Auerbach, 1995; Fivush, 2007) and greater ability to accurately identify emotions in others (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991) than children whose parents are less aware of child emotions.

Similar results have been found in at-risk populations. When maltreating mothers are more validating of children's emotions, children show better emotion regulation abilities (Shipman et al., 2007) than if mothers are less validating. Depressed 14 to 18-year-olds whose mothers were more insightful and coaching of emotion showed a more adaptive and proactive meta-emotion philosophy than those whose mothers were less insightful and coaching (Hunter et al., 2010).

PMEP has been shown to be related to children's respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), an index of parasympathetic nervous system functioning that has been associated with emotion regulation and attention (Porges, 1995). Children whose parents are high in emotion coaching and use scaffolding and praising teaching methods have higher baseline RSA and greater ability to suppress RSA when engaging in tasks that demand impulse control and mental effort than children whose parents are low in emotion coaching. Regulatory physiology at age 5 also predicted children's ability to downregulate negative affect at age 8 (Gottman et al., 1996).

Two studies have directly tested the idea that children's emotional competence mediates the relation between PMEP and psychosocial adjustment. Among 9- to 13-year-old African American boys exposed to community violence, emotion regulation mediated the link between caregiver meta-emotion philosophy at initial assessment and children's grades, internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and social skills 6 months later (Cunningham et al., 2009). Children's emotion regulation, as indexed by their physiological regulatory abilities, has also been found to mediate the relation between PMEP and children's psychosocial adjustment (Gottman et al., 1996).

These findings support the conceptual model regarding direct relations between PMEP and children's emotional competence. Being reared by parents who are accepting and coaching of emotion is associated with child awareness and acceptance of various emotions, as well as emotion regulation abilities. The two studies that have directly tested the mediating role of children's emotional competence focused on emotion regulation as the core emotional competence skill. Additional studies are needed to explicate whether emotional awareness/understanding and emotional expression similarly mediate relations between PMEP and children's psychosocial adjustment.

POTENTIAL MODERATORS OF RELATIONS BETWEEN PMEP AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT

Although relations between PMEP and child adjustment are well established, relatively little is known about moderators of this relation. Preliminary evidence suggests some potential moderators, including parent sex, child temperament, and child sex.

Parent Sex

No studies to date have directly tested moderation by parent sex, but two issues related to parent sex and PMEP have been examined: (a) mean-level differences between mothers and fathers in PMEP and (b) the role of fathers' PMEP as it relates to children's outcomes. There is mixed evidence regarding whether mothers and fathers differ in their PMEP. Using the Child/Adolescent Meta-Emotion Interview (Katz, Windecker-Nelson, & Asdel, 2001), Stocker, Richmond, Rhoades, and Kiang (2007) found that mothers were higher than fathers on emotion coaching. However, using the Emotion Styles Questionnaire (Gottman & DeClaire, 1996), Gamble, Ramakumar, and Diaz (2007) found no differences between mothers and fathers in their endorsements of a coaching, dismissing, or disapproving meta-emotion structure.

Most research has examined mothers' PMEP, but there is growing evidence that fathers' PMEP plays an important role in children's development. Hunter et al. (2010) found that fathers' PMEP makes unique contributions to predicting adolescents' own meta-emotion philosophy. Once fathers' PMEP was taken into account, mothers' contributions dropped below statistical significance, suggesting that fathers may play a particularly important role in the development of adolescents' meta-emotion philosophy.

Child Temperament

In early research on PMEP, parents' reports of temperament were not related to parental coaching (Gottman et al., 1996). However, longitudinal studies suggest that parents are more likely to be emotion coaching when their child has higher baseline RSA (Katz et al., 1996), suggesting that it may be easier for parents to be emotion coaching when their children are better able to self-regulate physiological arousal. Further analyses also showed that parental emotion coaching interacts with aspects of children's temperament to predict child outcomes. Children who are more persistent at age 5 have higher academic achievement and better physical health at age 8, but only when their parents are high in emotion coaching.

Temperament during preadolescence has also been shown to moderate associations between PMEP and maternal emotion socialization behaviors. Yap, Allen, Leve, and Katz (2008) found that during a positive parent-child interaction task, greater maternal awareness and acceptance of emotion were associated with reduced likelihood of punishing their preadolescents for showing dysphoric or positive affect if their preadolescent had an easy temperament (i.e., low in negative emotionality or high in effortful control). However, during a conflict task, greater maternal awareness of emotion was associated with reduced likelihood of parental punishment of dysphoric or positive affect if preadolescent had a difficult temperament (i.e., high in negative emotionality or low in effortful control). This suggests that parents who are more aware and coaching of emotion may vary their socialization behaviors depending on both child tempera-

ment and context, perhaps because they understand how their child's temperament may affect their behavior in different contexts.

Child Sex

Early studies found no direct or moderating effects of child sex in relations between PMEP and child outcomes (Katz et al., 1996). More recently, in a 6-month longitudinal study with a high-risk urban sample, Cunningham et al. (2009) found that PMEP predicted girls' later social skills by improving their emotion understanding and predicted decreases in boys' internalizing behavior. Moderated mediation was also observed in some pathways. For boys, but not for girls, PMEP was related to emotion regulation abilities, which in turn predicted higher grades, fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and greater social skills.

In summary, no studies have directly tested moderation by parent sex, and there are mixed findings on whether parents differ on any aspect of PMEP and what effect these differences may have. Emerging evidence suggests that child sex and temperament show promise as moderators of relations between PMEP and child adjustment, but only a handful of studies have looked at both dimensions.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The body of research indicating that PMEP is related to key aspects of children's socioemotional adjustment has grown since the concept's introduction in 1996. Findings are consistent with the conceptual model that has been at the center of our more recent research. There is also evidence that PMEP relates to child adjustment in samples of children with mental health problems, such as conduct problems (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004), behavioral difficulties (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009), and depression (Hunter et al., 2010; Katz & Hunter, 2007), and those exposed to violent environments, including interpartner violence (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006), maltreatment (Shipman et al., 2007), and community violence (Cunningham et al., 2009).

Many avenues of exploration remain. Emotion coaching has largely been examined as a component of PMEP, yet we also believe that we can classify parents as emotion coaching or emotion dismissing on the basis of a constellation of individual PMEP dimensions. Studies with large samples are needed to create and examine PMEP typologies and how each subtype is associated with child adjustment.

There is also a need to identify additional moderators of relations between PMEP and children's emotional competence and psychosocial adjustment. Future studies should consider a broader range of child temperament characteristics. Given evidence that children high in impulsivity and frustration and low in effortful control are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of negative parenting (Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011), tests of

interactive effects between PMEP and these as well as other child temperament characteristics may provide a more nuanced understanding of children for whom emotion coaching is most helpful. Similarly, there is also a need to identify whether there are familial contextual factors or subsets of youth for whom we may fail to observe relations between PMEP and children's adjustment. For example, although one study indicates that PMEP functions similarly in African American as it does in Caucasian populations (Cunningham et al., 2009), the potential moderating role of racial and ethnic group and the generalizability of PMEP cross-culturally needs exploration. Additionally, because mental health problems affect parents' emotion socialization efforts (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), studies should examine relations between PMEP and parent mental health (i.e., depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder).

We also know little about whether the component processes of PMEP function similarly at different ages. For example, when parents are emotion dismissing, young children's emotion knowledge is more negatively affected than older children's emotion knowledge, suggesting that younger children may be more sensitive to dismissal and punishment of emotion (Denham et al., 1997). However, preliminary evidence in adolescents suggests that parental acceptance of emotion may be more relevant than awareness and coaching during this developmental period (Katz & Hunter, 2007; Yap et al., 2008). When children are young and still developing emotion understanding and regulation abilities, they may have greater need for parents to label emotion, model appropriate emotional expression, and coach around distressing moments than older children. For adolescents, who are working on establishing autonomy, a more indirect approach that still establishes an accepting emotional climate in which they feel comfortable raising emotional issues may be more adaptive than would be the case for younger children (Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007). Prospective longitudinal studies of PMEP from preschool to adolescence can help identify the changes in PMEP across development and identify age-appropriate emotion socialization strategies.

Although our theoretical model assumes that PMEP constrains and directs parenting behavior and leads to child outcomes, future research should explore potential bidirectional relations between parenting and child characteristics. For example, some negative child characteristics, such as frustration and low effortful control, appear to elicit parenting behaviors that predict increases in these temperamental qualities (Kiff et al., 2011). The existing literature also suggests that some children, whether because of temperament or physiological regulatory abilities, may be more amenable to emotion coaching than others (Katz et al., 1996). It could be hypothesized that these children may be more reinforcing of their parents' emotion-coaching behaviors, thereby increasing their frequency and contributing to positive child outcomes. Longitudinal investigations of bidirectional relations between PMEP and child characteristics may help identify how parents and children's responses shape each other's behavior over time.

Studies of PMEP have been limited to the parent's role in child emotion socialization, but children's emotional competencies are also influenced by socialization agents outside the home, such as teachers. For example, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) classroom curriculum has been effective in improving the fluency in discussing emotional experiences and self-efficacy around emotion self-management in both typical and special-needs classrooms (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995). Additional research is needed to explore both the unique contributions and interactions of parent and other emotion socialization agents (such as teachers and peers) in the development of children's emotional competencies.

A next step is to translate basic research on PMEP into parenting interventions. To that end, several emotion-coaching interventions are currently under development. Tuning into Kids, a six-session emotion-focused parenting intervention with normative populations of preschool children, has demonstrated significant parent-reported improvement in emotion coaching from pre- to postintervention, particularly related to expressiveness and emotion-focused responses to their children, and reductions in punitive, minimizing reactions to children's emotions (Havighurst, Harley, & Prior, 2004; Havighurst et al., 2009). After 3 months, parents receiving the intervention reported significant improvements in emotion coaching, awareness, and ability to self-regulate emotion (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior & Kehoe, 2010). A public health model may also be appropriate for intervention development—a universal PMEP intervention could be offered to all families regardless of risk and without screening, whereas a selective PMEP intervention could be used for families with known risk factors for child adjustment and an indicated intervention might be used with families of children with preexisting mental health difficulties. For example, a selective emotion-coaching intervention is currently underway with female survivors of interpartner violence (L. F. Katz, personal communication), as children exposed to this are at high risk for a number of adjustment difficulties. These intervention efforts, along with basic research on child, parent, and family characteristics related to PMEP, will help clarify how emotion socialization processes can be improved, and how they affect child adjustment.

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