

## Summary

# Mother-Child Emotion Talk: Its Relation with Mothers' Beliefs About Emotions and Emotion Regulation Skills of Children

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The emotion socialization of children depends on the parental behaviors that reflect parents' beliefs, goals, and values. It also relies on the manner in which parents relate these behaviors to their children's experiences and expressions as well as to the modulation of their children's emotions (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Cumberland, 1998a).

The ways in which mothers talk to their children about emotions during conversations is an example of parental emotion socialization behavior (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998b; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Therefore, factors affecting emotion socialization behaviors of parents influence their emotion talk. Such factors can be related to mothers' beliefs about emotions, their parental attitudes, the degree to which mothers use emotional language, their educational qualifications, their income levels, and so on. The degree to which children use their language skills, their gender identity, and temperament are also issues that influence the emotion socialization of children (Degotardi & Torr, 2007; Denham & Auerbach, 1995; Gottman et al., 1997; Lee & Rescorla, 2008; Perez-Rivera, 2008).

Parents' belief systems regarding their children's emotions represents one of the aspects that influence mother-child emotion talk. Parental beliefs affect how parents express their emotions to their children (Dix, 1991) and how they interpret their children's emotion-related behaviors during interactions.

Mother-child emotion talk refers to the level of emotion-related speech exchanged between them. According to Denham and Auerbach (1995), effective language usage is a reciprocal process, and mothers and children affect each others' conversations. Several studies have evidenced the positive results of emotion talk between mothers and children (Armstrong, 2011; Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Garner, Jones, Gaddy & Rennie, 1997).

The emotion socialization behaviors of parents are also related to the emotion regulation skills of children. Parents teach their children emotions, the reasons and results of emotions, and how to display and regulate them (Eisenberg et al., 1998b). Parents help their children to protect themselves from emotional dysregulation and to become independent. Some parents teach their children to suppress their feelings, while others educate their children on ways of coping with emotions, thereby passing on skills such as problem solving or using social support (Armstrong, 2011).

Studies conducted in Turkey on this issue pertain mostly to emotion socialization behaviors used by mothers and the relation of such conduct to attributes such as emotion regulation skills. However, no existing Turkish study was discovered on mother-child emotion talk. Thus, this study aimed to examine mother-child emotion talk in Turkey and to determine the associations between emotion talk, mothers' beliefs about their children's emotions, and the emotion regulation skills of children. It was hypothesized that 1) maternal emotion talk predicts the emotion talk of children; 2) there is a significant association between mothers' beliefs regarding their children's emotions and mother-child emotion talk; 3) there is a significant relation between emotion talk and the emotion regulation skills of children; and 4) there is a significant relation between children's emotion regulation skills and mothers' beliefs about their children's emotions.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty mothers and their 4-6-year-old preschool children participated in the study. The mean age of the children was 59 months. The demographic variables of the participants are presented in Table 1.

## Materials

**General Information Form.** This form was utilized to measure the sociodemographic information of the mothers who participated in the study.

**Parental Beliefs about Children's Emotions Questionnaire (PBACE).** This questionnaire was developed by Halberstadt et al. (2013); and it was employed in this study to measure parental beliefs regarding their children's emotions. The original questionnaire is meant for parents who have 4–10-year-old children, while the scale adapted to the Turkish context is available for parents who have 4–6-year-old children (Işık Uslu & Turan, 2017). The scale is comprised of 33 items with 7 sub-dimensions, and the responses of participants are measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale. The reliability coefficient (McDonald's omega) of the original scale varies from .65 to .83, while these values of the adapted scale ranges between .68 to .79 (Işık Uslu & Turan, 2017).

**Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC) - Mother Form.** Developed by Shields and Cicchetti (1997), the ERC was used in this study to measure the emotion regulation skills of children. The scale is comprised of 24 items and 2 sub-dimensions evaluated on a 4-point Likert-type scale; and it is available for use with mothers and teachers. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the lability/negativity subscale is .96 and this value is .83 for the emotions regulation subscale (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997). Adaptation studies found that Cronbach alpha coefficients were high; and the scale had discriminant validity (Altan, 2006; Ari & Yaban, 2016; Batum & Yağmurlu, 2007; Yağmurlu & Altan, 2010).

**Coding of Emotion Utterances.** Categories included in the coding were as follows: total emotion words, unique emotion words, emotion labels, explanations about emotions (cause, result, intervention, elicitation), and emotion exchanges (attribution, confirmation/denial, elaboration, negotiation) (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Fivush & Wang, 2005; Martin & Green, 2005).

## Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee before data collection, and the study was conducted on the basis of voluntary participation. Several toy figures (mother, child, dad) were used in the process of recording conversations between mothers and their children. A recorder was used during this process, and the recordings took 20 minutes. The study was conducted in an empty room with carpets on the floor, at home or in the kindergarten environment to make the children feel comfortable.

## Results

Descriptive statistics of emotion talk revealed that the median of emotion talks between mothers and children was quite low (*Min.* = 0, *Max.* = 3.5). When emotion talks of mothers and children were compared, it was found that mothers talked about emotions more than children. For the specified categories of emotion talk, the Mann-Whitney U test results revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between boys and girls ( $p < .05$ ).

The unique emotion words most frequently used by girls were *cry*, *kiss*, and *love*, whereas boys used *cry*, *enjoy*, *afraid*, *kiss*, and *angry* more frequently. However, girls used more emotion words in the aggregate than boys. Mothers of girls and boys produced similar emotion words. Moreover, mothers of girls and boys used similar unique words for children of either sex. The emotion talk of mothers was significantly higher than that of children but mothers did not utilize a greater variety of unique or total emotion words compared with children. There was a significant correlation between the emotion talk of mothers and children ( $p < .01$ ;  $r = .31$ - $r = .59$ ); and mothers' emotion talk predicted children's emotion talk ( $\beta = .403$ ;  $t = 2.864$ ;  $p < .05$ ). However, the mothers' beliefs pertaining to their children's emotions did not predict the mother-child emotion talk. Finally, there was no significant association between children's emotion regulation skills and mother-child emotion talk. However, there was a significant relation between children's emotion regulation skills and mothers' beliefs about their children's emotions.

## Discussion

The results of the current study indicate that the frequency of the emotion talk between mothers and children was quite low (*Min.* = 0, *Max.* = 3.5). Martin and Green (2005) found that the mean number of total emotion words uttered by mothers is 19.66 (5–62), and that children use an average of 5.24 (0–24) emotion words. Aznar and Tenenbaum (2015) evidenced that this value is 6.22–11.24 for mothers. This difference may be attributed to the disparity of methods used to measure emotion talk. Martin and Green (2005) assessed emotion talk between mothers and children by making them play games using a scenario designed to reflect discrete emotional expressions. Aznar and Tenenbaum (2015) evaluated emotion talk through a reminiscence task (conversations about past experiences) in addition to game play. Additionally, Aznar and Tenenbaum (2015) suggested that mothers tend to use more emotion words when they talk to their children about the past in compar-

ison to when they converse while playing games (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015). Another explanation for the differences in outcomes between the two studies may be the degree of usage of verbal language. In the current study, the mean number of emotion words did not take the mean length of the utterances into account. Hence, the effect of vocabulary on emotion talk could not be measured.

Some studies indicate that the effect of culture on emotion talk between mother–child is more significant than that of language (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015). The expression of emotions varies according to the culture as well as the individualism or collectivism orientation of a particular society (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Fontaine, 2008; Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Kağıtçıbaşı (1996, 2005) and Yağmurlu, Çıtlak, Dost and Leyendecker (2009) suggest that the cultural structure of Turkey includes both individualism and collectivism. Thus, it may be said that the results of the current study demonstrate the collectivist features of the Turkish culture.

Another finding of the present study indicates that mothers' emotion talk is positively associated with children's emotion talk; and that the former predicts the emotion talk of the latter. This finding is consistent with the outcomes of other studies (Armstrong, 2011; Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Garner et al., 1997).

Further, the results of the present study revealed no significant correlation between emotion talk and the beliefs of mothers about their children's emotions. However, a significant relation was found between children's emotion talk and the autonomy and parental knowledge subscales obtained through the PBACE outcomes of the parents' beliefs about their children's emotions. The regression analyses conducted after the correlation analyses evinced that parental knowledge and autonomy variables did not predict children's emotion talk. While some studies have found a significant relationship between emotion talk and the beliefs of mothers about their children's emotions (Karahuta, 2014); others have found no significant association between the two variables (Dunsmore & Karn, 2001; Halberstadt et al., 2013; Wong, McElwain & Halberstadt, 2009). According to the results of the present study, the children of mothers who think that their children must cope with emotions on their own (autonomy subscale) produce less emotion talk. Perhaps, mothers who do not train their children about emotions also do not talk about emotions with their children. However, the children of mothers who think that parents must know whatever their children feel (parental knowledge) produce more emotion talk.

In addition to these findings, no significant relation was observed between the emotion regulation skills of

children and mother–child emotion talk. Some studies, which use direct observations, found that emotion talk predicted children's emotion regulation skills (Armstrong, 2011; Laible & Song, 2006; Zeman, Perry-Parish & Cassano, 2010). In this study, emotion regulation skills were measured by using a questionnaire answered by mothers. While the total score of the questionnaire was high, the mean number of emotion talks reported between mothers and children was quite low. This result may explain why there was no significant relation between the two variables.

The results of the current study revealed the emotion socialization behaviors of mothers and the associations between emotion talk, parental beliefs about emotions, and the emotion regulation skills of children. To our knowledge, no study in the Turkish literature, examined mother–child emotion talk or the relations between emotion socialization behaviors. Thus, this study contributes to the Turkish literature on the topic. Nonetheless, there are certain limitations of this study. First, the sample size was small; and second, the ratio of emotion talk to the total number of words was not measured. Therefore, it can be suggested that future studies should consider these two limitations and use varied methods other than free play sessions to examine emotion talk between mothers and children.