

## Parents' Responses to the Emotional Distress of Their Children: Relations With Children's Competence

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Although investigators have proposed in various theories that the socialization of emotions has important implications for children's general competence, very little empirical data exist. In the present study, parents' responses to the emotional distress of their preschool children were examined in the context of more general dimensions of parenting (warmth and control), and the relation of these responses to children's competence was assessed. Data on parent-child interactions were collected for 30 families, using home observations, parent self-reports, observer ratings, and child interviews. Children's competence in preschool was assessed by teacher ratings. Effective, situationally appropriate action was the most frequently observed parental response to children's upset, and children's attributions to parents of such pragmatic responses was positively related to their competence in preschool. Parental encouragement of emotional expressiveness was also positively associated with child competence. Variables assessing positive responses to upset, although related to warmth (as expected), also contributed independently to children's competence.

This research was designed to investigate parents' responses to emotional distress in young children (i.e., to their expressed anger, fear, and sadness) and to assess the relation of these responses to children's competence outside the home. Parental responses to distress were conceptualized as lying along a dimension of suppression to encouragement of active emotional expression. These responses were assessed in the context of parental warmth and control because children's competence is affected by these aspects of parenting (Baumrind, 1971; MacCoby & Martin, 1983; Martin, 1975) and because the effects of parents' responses to emotional distress may be moderated by parental warmth and control.

In everyday language, competence refers to the ability to meet the demands of a given situation (Webster & McKechnie, 1978). There is substantial agreement in the literature that for children these abilities are generally manifested as goal-oriented, planful behavior (Baumrind, 1971; Block & Block, 1980) and include in social situations the skills to initiate and sustain nondisruptive social interactions (Ainsworth & Bell, 1974; Baumrind, 1971; Lamb, Easterbrooks, & Holden, 1980; Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe, 1979). Whereas the distinction between social activities and purely task-oriented activities is clear in theory,

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in practice task-oriented activities frequently involve social components (Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978).

Diverse theoretical and empirical points of view highlight the importance of studying emotional socialization and imply that parents' responsiveness to, or suppression of, their children's emotional upset will have both specific and general consequences for children's competence. Positive affect and moderate levels of negative affect have both been thought to be essential aspects of the development of cognitive and social competencies (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969; Sroufe, 1979). Piaget (1932/1983), for example, considers that the negative affect accompanying parent-child or peer conflict constitutes part of the "energetics" that contributes to change in cognitive structures. However, high levels of negative affect have been thought to have debilitating effects in general process models of competence (Connolly & Bruner, 1974), in experimental paradigms of dysfunction such as learned helplessness (Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Dweck & Wortman, 1982; Maier & Seligman, 1976), and in clinically oriented research (Rutter, 1981). In all of these approaches, high levels of negative affect have been considered to have disruptive or disorganizing effects on concurrent behavior and to be at least partly responsible for long-term deficits in behavioral functioning.

The effects of parents' reactions to children's emotional distress are thought to be especially clear in one area: children's reactions to the emotional distress of others. For example, Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, and King (1979) found that parents who responded positively to their children's upset had children who responded positively to upset in others and were more often prosocial in their behavior. On the other end of the spectrum, Main and George (1985) reported that toddlers who are abused by their parents become emotionally distressed by their peers' emotional upset and attack them physically and verbally.

One suggested mechanism underlying these long-term effects has been suppression of the expression of negative affect. Paren-

tal efforts to suppress expression are typically thought to be triggered by relatively long or intense displays of negative affect by the child. To the extent that this suppression is successful, it is thought to lead to the storage of negative affect in memory (along with other aspects of the situation, including any maladaptive responses). Similar circumstances in the future then evoke both the stored negative affect and the disorganized response. As this behavioral pattern undergoes consolidation, the affective components may become less apparent (cf. Bowlby's [1980] account of the separation-protest-despair sequence), whereas the behavioral components may become ritualized and rigid. Freud proposed this mechanism as early as 1893 (Breuer & Freud, 1893/1959), and Piaget (1932/1983) gave a very similar account in his earlier work when describing certain "affective schemas" in parenting. The idea is also common in current humanistic clinical approaches. Jackins (1964), for example, has suggested that unexpressed negative affect underlies behavioral rigidity and dysphoria. The physical expression of emotion (by crying, etc.) is then thought to be a key component of the therapeutic process restoring flexible, resourceful behavior, because it is seen to facilitate both cognitive restructuring and current behavioral change (Somers, 1972).

These considerations suggest that the transition from disruptively high levels of negative affect to more functional levels is best accomplished by allowing the expression of negative affect to run its course, rather than attempting to suppress it. (However, it is possible that additional benefits may not accrue to the child with very high levels of parental encouragement of expression, due to threshold effects.) In any case, it is plausible to suppose that for young children, parents' responses to emotional distress will have a large influence on how the transition from high levels of emotional distress is accomplished.

In addition to parental responses to emotional distress, two other aspects of parenting have been linked to competence. Parental warmth (which includes both affection and, on the level of action, behavioral responsiveness to child cues) is associated with secure attachment in infancy (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Secure attachment is considered to be both an age-appropriate competence for toddlers and a precursor of later competence in social, exploratory, and problem-solving situations (Arend, Gove, & Sroufe, 1979; Matas et al., 1978; Waters et al., 1979). Parental control has also been identified as a prepotent influence on the competence of preschoolers (Baumrind, 1971), although its effects are modified by parental flexibility and warmth. (These qualities distinguish Baumrind's authoritarian and authoritative patterns of parenting.)

Both parental warmth and control were expected to have nonlinear relations with competence. Baumrind (1971) reported nonlinear (inverted-U) relations for control, and it seems plausible to expect threshold effects for warmth and competence because the basic abilities that compose competence are environmentally stable (i.e., they develop adequately, given certain minimum environmental supports; Bowlby, 1982; Kagan, 1976). Threshold effects generate sigmoidal curves: Very low levels of one variable result in deficits on the second variable; crossing the threshold results in a rapid rise in levels of the second variable, followed by a plateau in which further increases of the first variable have little effect on the second. Recently,

a three-dimensional model has been proposed that integrates nonlinear relations for the socialization of competence (Roberts, 1986). With appropriate sample characteristics, the model generates inverted-U relations for control and competence and sigmoidal relations for warmth and competence. This model guided the analyses that are reported here.

With this background, the present study had two goals. The first was to provide basic descriptive data on naturally occurring episodes of children's emotional distress and parents' reactions to them. The second goal was to assess the relations between parents' responses to emotional distress and children's competence. These relations were also expected to be nonlinear. Specifically, sigmoidal relations were expected because of threshold effects: Deficits associated with suppression are thought to be more severe than benefits accruing with very high levels of expression. In addition, some degree of association between warmth and positive parental responses to upset was expected, but so was divergence: Positive responses to upset should show relations to competence independently of warmth.

## Method

### *Subjects*

In all, 35 two-parent families who had a preschool-aged child volunteered for the study in response to letters that were distributed through day-care centers and preschools in the Vancouver, British Columbia, metropolitan area. Among the 30 families who completed the study, the average age of the 19 girls and 11 boys was 4.3 years (range = 3.0 to 5.8 years). Of the children, 21 had at least one sibling, who was usually younger. Fathers' average age was 34 years; mothers' was 32 (range = 24 to 45 years for both). Mothers reported an average of 14 years of schooling, whereas fathers reported an average of 16 (range = 9 to 21 years for both). Mean family income was somewhat above the national average. Duncan Socio-Economic Index (Hauser & Featherman, 1977) scores ranged from 11 to 92, with a mean of 59. See Roberts (in press) for further details.

### *Instruments and Procedures*

Family interactions were assessed by four methods: home observations, observer ratings, parents' self-reports, and child interview, with constructs (responsiveness to emotional distress, warmth, and control) assessed across methods. Competence was assessed by teachers' ratings. Measures and variables are summarized in Table 1.

*Home observations.* Home observations were preceded by two other visits to the family, in order to let family members become acquainted with the observer. The observation session lasted approximately 3 hr, from suppertime until the child's bedtime. Initiator and target individuals, as well as their behaviors, were recorded on a small computerized encoder.

The intention of the coding scheme was to provide a comprehensive running record of family interactions, using a set of exhaustive, mutually exclusive codes. Activities (e.g., "watches TV," "reads") were coded, along with social initiations (e.g., "directs," "speaks") and social responses (e.g., "hugs, holds"; "ignores, no response"). Categories for coding agonistic exchanges (e.g., "hits," "threat gesture") were adapted from Strayer and Strayer (1976). Affective categories included "cry voice, whines"; "cries"; "anger voice, yells"; "anger gesture" (e.g., throws object); and "shows fear" (e.g., "startle," "alarm," and "hand cover"). Categories of response to upset included "hugs, holds"; "inquires"; "intervenes, takes action"; "distracts child"; and "directs child to control expression of upset." Complete details are in Roberts (1983).

Table 1  
*Methods, Instruments, and Variables for Family and Classroom Measures*

Method and instrument	Variable	Comments
Family measures		
Home observations Real-time coding using focal-individual sampling	Responses to upset	Used for description only
	Various coding categories	
	Warmth	Lag analyses: Responses to social initiations
	Father Responsive	
	Mother Responsive	
Control	Father Firm	Lag analyses: Responses to noncompliance
	Mother Firm	
Observer ratings Parent Rating Scales (Baumrind, 1970a, 1970b)	Responses to upset	Parents rated jointly on all scales Last four variables from Baumrind (1971)
	Encourages Expression of Negative Affect	
	Warmth	
	Warm	
	Responsive	
Self-report Child-Rearing Practices Q-Sort (Block, 1965)	Control	All scales assembled rationally and tested empirically; item-total $r_s > .40$
	Firm	
	Directive	
	Responses to upset	
	Father Encourages Emotional Expression	
Child interview Unfinished Stories	Mother Encourages Emotional Expression	Variables represent frequency of such attributions
	Warmth	
	Father Warm	
	Mother Warm	
	Control	
Teacher ratings Preschool Behavior Q-Sort (Baumrind, 1971)	Father Strict	First four scales from Baumrind (1971)
	Mother Strict	
	Responses to upset	
	Story parents comfort	
	Story parents take effective action	
	Story parents enforce directives	Last two scales from Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe (1979)
	Competence	
	Purposive	
	Friendly	
	Cooperative	
	Achievement Oriented	Last two scales from Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe (1979)
	$r$ to criterion sort	
	Ego Strength	
	Peer Competence	
Classroom measures		

A focal-individual sampling strategy (Altmann, 1974) was used, with 10-min sessions alternating between the child and each parent. Each 10-min session was separated by a 5-min break during which written notes were taken. This strategy (as opposed to event sampling of emotional distress) allowed the precursors of distressful episodes to be identified and also permitted measures of social responsiveness (the variables Father Responsive and Mother Responsive) and firmness (Father Firm and Mother Firm) to be derived by lag analyses. (These variables represent the conditional probabilities that certain events immediately followed certain other criterion events.) An average of 847 events were recorded for each family (range = 605 to 1,228 events), over a mean of 128 min of actual sampling time (range = 83 to 181 min).

Three reliability sessions totaling 300 min of observation time were conducted by two observers. Percentage agreement and kappa were calculated by comparing categories coded at each second in the two records, thus placing a premium on interrater timing as well as agreement. Under these stringent conditions, agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements equaled 79% ( $\kappa = .72$ ).

*Observer ratings.* Following the observation session, the observer completed 46 rating scales (Baumrind, 1970a, 1970b), rating both parents jointly. (Average interrater correlation = .88; range = .50–1.0. Examination of worst cases revealed that raters never differed by more than adjacent categories on any scale.) These 5-point scales were aggregated into four variables, following Baumrind (1971): Firm (e.g., “willingly exercises power to obtain obedience”), Directive (e.g., “regimen set for child”), Warm (e.g., “warm,” “remains open and accessible”), and Responsive (e.g., “has empathic understanding of child,” “encourages verbal give and take”). The variable Responsive was called Encourages Independence and Individuality by Baumrind (1971). In addition, a new variable was developed, Encourages Expression of Negative Affect (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .63$ ), comprising two scales, one from Baumrind (“encourages emotional dependency”) and one devised for this study. On this new scale (“parents encourage expression of upset”), parents were rated as (a) valuing emotional expression or encouraging it for its cathartic value; (b) permitting emotional expression, although focusing on compliance (in agonistic situations) or on problem solving (in nonag-

onistic contexts); (c) distracting the child or denying the distress; (d) valuing or teaching emotional control, excluding threats of punishment; or (e) attempting to suppress expression by humiliation, physical punishment, or threats of physical punishment. Scores were later reflected so that high scores indicate responses that encourage the expression of negative affect. Because of the relative rarity of emotional distress, episodes of distress that were observed during all of the visits to the home were included in this scale. Even so, only 27 of 30 families could be rated on this dimension.

*Parent self-report.* Both mothers and fathers completed the Child-Rearing Practices Q-Sort (Block, 1965). This measure was dropped off and picked up during the first two visits to the family. It comprises a 91-item set that parents distribute across seven categories ranging from *least descriptive* to *most descriptive* of their own parenting practices. Because factors reported by Block for families with older children had low interitem correlations in this sample, three new scales for each parent were assembled rationally and tested empirically. The two scales, Mother Strict and Father Strict, contain items such as "I have strict, well established rules for my child." Mother Warm and Father Warm contain items such as "I express affection by hugging, kissing, and holding my child." Mother Encourages Emotional Expression and Father Encourages Emotional Expression contain such items as "I feel a child should be given comfort and understanding when s/he is scared or upset" and "I encourage my child to talk about his/her troubles." Items with an item-total correlation of less than .40 were deleted. Cronbach alphas averaged .72, ranging from .64 (Father Encourages Emotional Expression) to .78 (Father Strict).

*Child interview.* The last measure of family interactions, the Unfinished Stories, was devised for this study and administered during the final visit to the family. The child was asked to complete 10 short story stems depicting emotionally stressful events and involving a story child of the same age and sex as the subject, a mother, a father, and a sibling (if one was present in the subject's family).<sup>1</sup> Story characters were represented by dolls, which the child was encouraged to manipulate along with the accompanying doll furniture. Children completed each story by saying how the parents would respond. For example, one story child is playing outside when a "big mean dog runs up growling and barking." The subject was asked, "What did the story child do?" If an affective reaction was not implicit in the response (as it is, for instance, in "she cried" or "he ran away"), the child was asked how the story child felt. The mother doll and then the father doll (order varied) were introduced, and the subject was asked how each doll would respond to the child's emotion. Stories presented situations of fear (such as the mean dog story), physical hurt (she or he falls from a playground apparatus, burns her or himself on the kitchen stove, fights with a peer over a valued toy), and parent-child conflict (the story child is put to bed when she or he wants to stay up).

Responses were tape-recorded, transcribed, and scored for each story-parent's reactions, according to a seven-category coding scheme. These categories, ranked from responses thought to be most encouraging of the expression of negative affect to those thought most discouraging, were as follows: comforts child; discusses, acknowledges, or enquires about child's feelings; takes appropriate, pragmatic action (e.g., by putting on a bandage when the story child is hurt, by chasing away the dog, by punishing the peer and giving the child the valued toy); ignores upset to insist on compliance to directive; distracts story child or denies feelings; directs story child to control feelings; and threatens or punishes story child for being upset. Responses were coded by more than one category when appropriate. Interrater agreement divided by agreements plus disagreements was 91%.

*Competence.* Competence was assessed by having each child's preschool or day-care teacher complete the Preschool Behavior Q-Sort (Baumrind, 1968), a 72-item set distributed across nine categories, from *extremely characteristic* to *extremely uncharacteristic* of the child.

For five cases, this measure was completed individually by two teachers who knew the target child well. Their average correlation (.69) was almost identical with that reported by Baumrind (1971).

Seven variables were derived from the Q sort. Four were adapted from Baumrind (1971): Friendly (vs. hostile to peers), Cooperative (vs. resistive with adults), Purposive (vs. aimless), and Achievement Oriented. Two were adapted from Waters et al. (1979): Peer Competence and Ego Strength. Finally, a criterion sorting for competence was developed by having four child psychologists complete the sort for an ideally competent preschooler. Each child's Q sort was correlated with this criterion, and the correlation was used as a measure of the child's overall competence.

## Results

### *Descriptive Results*

*Child upset.* A total of 135 episodes of upset ( $M = 4.5$  episodes per family) involving 164 separate emotional displays were observed. The most common emotional category coded was "cry-voice" (52.4%), followed by "cries" (22.0%), "anger-voice" (17.1%), and "anger gesture" (6.7%). Perhaps due to the familiar home environment in which the observations were made, displays of fear were relatively rare (1.2%). Parent-child interactions were by far the most common context for all these displays (71.3%). Sibling interactions (present for 70% of the sample) and peer interactions were a distant second (13.4%), followed by solitary contexts such as play (9.1%). A total of 10 displays (6.1%) could not be classified according to their context of origin.

*Parental responses.* Analysis of the 297 parental responses to child upset observed in the total sample confirmed the impression that these parents were firm enforcers and—although responsive and warm in some contexts—also exerted pressure for control of emotional expression. When child upset followed a parental directive, parents were likely to respond by enforcing or issuing further directives (44%) or by speaking to or reasoning with their child (30%). They only rarely hugged or comforted a crying child under these circumstances (4%), although in situations that did not involve a parental directive this was not uncommon (21%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 4.7, p < .05$ . (For their part, children displayed anger more often following parental directives than they did in other situations,  $\chi^2[1, N = 30] = 5.0, p < .05$ .) Across all situations, nonagonistic as well as agonistic, parents not infrequently responded to crying by discouraging the expression of upset (13%) or by leaving, ignoring, or rebuffing their child (13%).

Because the mean number of episodes of upset per family was insufficient for lag analyses, it was not possible to derive home observation variables for this aspect of parenting.

Observer ratings and child interview data also indicated that most parents did not focus on upset per se, preferring instead to take a pragmatic, problem-solving stance. According to ob-

<sup>1</sup> The rationale for such a measure, that the responses of young children tend to reflect their experiences with their parents, was supported by their spontaneous remarks, such as "That's what my mommy would do." Parents who observed story sessions also indicated that children's responses had a foundation in their experience.

server ratings, a majority of parents (59%) responded to child upset either by taking pragmatic action to resolve the precipitating difficulty or by insisting on compliance in the case of parent-child conflict. (Only 7% were rated as actively encouraging emotional expression, whereas 22% encouraged its control or else attempted to suppress it altogether [4%.]) Similarly, in the Unfinished Stories, children described a majority of story parents as either taking pragmatic action to resolve the difficulty (51%) or insisting on compliance (20%). Consistent with home observation data, story parents were sometimes depicted as offering physical comfort to distressed children (18%) or as acknowledging children's feelings (7%). In contrast, they were rarely described as discouraging the expression of upset (3%).

Due to these frequency distributions, subsequent analyses of the Unfinished Stories were restricted to the three categories of pragmatic action, enforcement, and comforting in response to upset.

Sex differences were few and inconsistent. However, the present study was not designed to examine this issue and the number of boys included (11) was small. Clearer patterns might emerge in a larger or older sample.

### *Warmth and Responsiveness to Emotional Distress*

One of the basic issues raised earlier was the extent to which warmth and responsiveness to emotional distress show convergence, and the extent to which they are empirically distinct.

**Convergence.** As expected, parents' responses to emotional distress showed a partial convergence with warmth. The observer rating variable Encourages Expression of Negative Affect was significantly correlated with warmth across methods. (Four of six comparisons were significant. Encourages Expression of Negative Affect correlated positively with the observer rating variables Warm [ $r = .55, p < .01$ ] and Responsive [ $r = .48, p < .01$ ], the home observation variable Father Responsive [ $r = .52, p < .01$ ], and the self-report variable Father Warm [ $r = .40, p < .05$ ].) In contrast, other measures of emotional responsiveness were not consistently associated with measures of warmth.

**Divergence.** The distinctness of these two constructs (parental responsiveness to emotional distress and warmth) was indicated by the different relations each had to parental control, as assessed by observer rating and self-report measures. (Home observation variables assessing firmness were largely uncorrelated with other measures and will not be discussed further.) Measures of warmth often had strong negative correlations with self-report and observer rating variables of control: 13 of 24 possible correlations were significant at  $p < .05$  ( $r$ s ranged from  $-.36$  to  $-.71$ ;  $Mdn = -.49$ ). In contrast, there were 0 of 24 possible significant correlations between measures of responsiveness to emotional distress and measures of control. The point here is not that responsiveness to distress and parental control are unrelated; it is clearly improper to argue from null results. Rather, responsiveness to upset and warmth show different patterns of relation to parental control.

### *Parents' Responses to Emotional Distress and Children's Competence*

**Competence.** In order to simplify this section, the seven competence variables derived from the Preschool Behavior Q-Sort

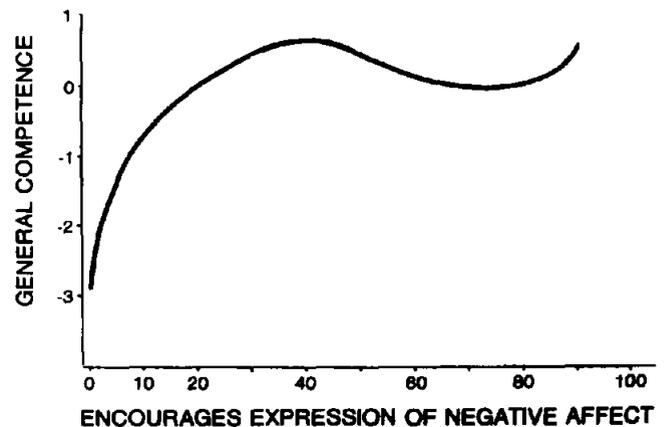


Figure 1. Third-degree polynomial regression of observer rating variable Encourages Expression of Negative Affect on general competence. ( $R^2 = .459, F(1, 26) = 9.19, p < .01$ .)

(Baumrind, 1968) were grouped on the basis of a cluster analysis and aggregated using  $z$  scores. Two aggregates were formed: (a) General Competence, comprising the correlation to the criterion sorting; Baumrind's scale, Purposeful; and Waters's scales, Ego Strength and Peer Competence; and (b) Cooperative-Task-Oriented, comprising Baumrind's scales, Friendly, Cooperative, and Achievement Oriented.

**Competence and parent responses to distress.** A major goal of this study was to look for nonlinear relations between parents' responses to emotional distress and children's competence. This was done by entering each parenting variable into individual polynomial regressions predicting each of the two competence aggregates.

These regressions revealed the expected nonlinear relations between children's competence and parental responses to emotional distress. The observer rating variable Encourages Expression of Negative Affect accounted for 46% of the variance in General Competence,  $F(1, 26) = 9.19, p < .01$ . This third-degree function is illustrated in Figure 1.

In addition, a significant inverted-U function, accounting for 35% of the variance, emerged for the self-report variable Father Encourages Emotional Expression and General Competence,  $F(2, 25) = 4.94, p < .02$ , indicating that moderate levels of responsiveness to upset were associated with higher levels of competence. The decline at very high levels of encouragement was slight.

Finally, the frequency of children's attributions to parents of pragmatic, situationally appropriate action showed a positive linear association with General Competence ( $r = .44, p < .05$ ), indicating that the salience of parental problem-solving responses was associated with higher levels of children's competence.

No significant relations were found for the self-report variable Mother Encourages Emotional Expression, nor for the second and third child-interview variables (attributions of comforting and of firm enforcement). The second competence aggregate, Cooperative-Task-Oriented, had no significant relations with variables assessing responses to emotional expression.

*Independent contributions.* As expected, polynomial regressions also revealed strong nonlinear relations between children's competence and warmth and control (Roberts, 1986). For example, the home observation variable Father Responsive, the observer rating variables Warm and Responsive, and the self-report variables Father Warm and Mother Warm, all had functions similar to that shown in Figure 1, each accounting for 61% to 69% of the variance in General Competence.

Because we expected responsiveness to emotional distress to contribute to competence independently of these measures, they were partialled individually from General Competence and the data were reanalyzed. Each of these analyses produced similar results. We will report the details of partialing the self-report variable Father Warm ( $R^2 = .62, p < .05$ ), because another paternal self-report variable, Father Encourages Emotional Expression, showed a significant zero-order relation with General Competence. Partialing the first variable is a conservative test of the second, because shared method variance is removed along with shared construct variance.

Supporting our expectation of independence, two of the three significant relations described earlier remained significant after partialing. The inverted-U relation between Father Encourages Emotional Expression and General Competence remained strong (partialled  $R^2 = .29, p < .05$ ). The linear relation between General Competence and children's attributions to story parents of effective, pragmatic action also remained essentially unchanged (partialled  $r = .47, p < .05$ ).

In contrast, the relation between the observer rating variable Encourages Expression of Negative Affect and General Competence became nonsignificant when Father Encourages Emotional Expression was partialled. This may be due in part to the functional relation to competence that this variable shared with variables assessing warmth.

## Discussion

Current results provide descriptive data on incidence and type of naturally occurring episodes of emotional distress in children, and parents' responses to this distress. This is an important area in which empirical data are not abundant. In addition, four conclusions are worth emphasizing: First, responsiveness to emotional distress, although related to parental warmth, also seems distinct from it. Second, for children—and for parents as well—"responsiveness to upset" seems to be linked with responsive *action*, not—as might be expected—with parental comforting. Third, parents' responses to children's emotional distress are an important aspect of parenting, particularly in relation to children's competence. Fourth, the relations between parents' responses to distress and children's competence may be nonlinear in nature.

### *Descriptive Results*

Descriptive results indicate both the relative rarity of emotional distress and the wide variability between families on this dimension. Although rarity often raises methodological problems, the strongest variables in this study, those associated with competence independently of warmth, are not subject to these difficulties because they are derived from fathers and children,

not from home observation data. Variability between families was marked. Some families were characterized by a matter-of-fact calmness and emotional control, others by boisterous activity and positive affect, yet others were marked by frequent or intense episodes of upset. We believe that these family differences will prove important in future research.

Across families, parental responses seem to vary according to the contexts in which they occur. Agonistic contexts, for instance, elicit fewer comforting and more power-assertive responses from parents and more anger displays from children. These results suggest (a) that parents' reactions to emotional distress are connected with how parents exert control and express warmth and (b) that although these last two aspects of parenting can and do occur in affectively neutral or positive contexts, they also occur in contexts of emotional distress as well. This is a distinction that we believe merits attention.

### *Responsiveness to Upset: A Distinct Aspect of Warmth*

Responding to children's upset is, for many, a salient aspect of parenting, and one on which parents in this sample sometimes spontaneously offered their views. Although such parental values deserve explicit investigation, present spontaneous reports indicated that comforting a distressed child was clearly an important value for some parents; other parents valued emotional control; yet others valued "doing something." Thus, although comforting was often associated by parents with warmth (as seen in the maternal self-report variables), its phenomenological distinctness is indicated by the possibility of parents taking other stances, such as valuing emotional control or resolute action, while continuing to think of themselves as "warm."

In this sample, the distinctiveness of parent responsiveness to upset was also indicated by a lack of negative correlations with measures of firmness and control, in contrast to the pattern that emerged for the warmth variables. Thus, warmth and responsiveness to upset seem to be distinct dimensions of parenting on phenomenological grounds, in terms of their different relations to parental control, and in terms of their statistical associations with competence.

### *Responsiveness as Action*

Among the various types of responses that parents make to their children's emotional distress, the importance of appropriate, pragmatic action is suggested by several findings. In the home observation data, the most frequent response that parents made to upset was taking action that effectively resolved the precipitating problem. This finding is paralleled in the literature on parents' responses to emotional distress in infants (Ainsworth & Bell, 1974; Bowlby, 1982). There, parents were reported to treat crying and fussing as signals for action—for feeding the baby or changing it, for holding or interacting with it.

Comforting a crying infant may have very different meaning than comforting a crying preschooler. Bowlby (1982) regarded holding as an effective terminator of high levels of activation in attachment systems. In this situation, holding a distressed infant exactly parallels feeding a hungry one. In contrast, our data

suggest that older children are comforted when parents are at a loss for an effective response (e.g., when the child is hurt, but not badly enough to warrant first aid). Thus, comforting may be a parental response that older children come to associate with being helpless.

Other findings have also indicated the importance of effective action in response to upset. Such action is salient for children, occurring in half of all responses made to the Unfinished Stories. In addition, the frequency of children's attributions of effective action were positively correlated to their competence in preschool. This salience of action may reflect the modeling of competent behavior by parents at important times, during conflict or crisis. Salience of action is also consistent with features of preoperational thought described by Piaget (e.g., Piaget & Inhelder, 1963/1969) and with the communicative function of emotional displays discussed by Bowlby (1982).

### *Responses to Upset and Child Competence*

A major result of this study is the demonstration of associations between parents' responses to children's emotional distress and children's competence that are statistically independent of warmth. Extending the work of other researchers (e.g., Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979) who have found associations between parental responsiveness to distress and children's prosocial behavior, the relations reported here are with even broader categories of behavioral competence, namely, children's abilities to be playful and effective in both social and nonsocial spheres. All of the relations with General Competence previously described, both linear and nonlinear, are consistent with views that parental responses that discourage or suppress the expression of negative affect do indeed impair children's abilities. Such general effects have been suggested by various theories, as reviewed earlier, but have never, to our knowledge, been empirically supported.

Several issues remain to be clarified. (a) The theories advanced by Freud, Piaget, and others, predict that one should see similarities between the situations in which the emotional suppression occurred and the ways in which the deficits are manifested. Such a detailed analysis was not attempted here, but is needed in order to clarify possible causal mechanisms. (b) The presence of an inverted-U function (with the self-report variable Father Encourages Emotional Expression) suggests that it may be possible to overencourage the expression of negative affect. Perhaps focusing on emotional expression and comforting results in the neglect of pragmatic solutions to problems or in some degree of learned helplessness. (c) The strength of the self-report variable Father Encourages Emotional Expression suggests that the role of fathers needs to be more closely examined. Fathers are thought to be important in the development of sex roles and the enforcement of sex role stereotypes (Lamb, 1981). Among other things, such roles often define parameters for the expression of negative affect: Boys should not cry or show fear; whereas girls should not show anger. Mothers are no doubt important as well, but it may be that the reactions of fathers are critical in establishing an overall balance between suppressive parental responses and responses more tolerant of emotional expression. (d) Finally, further research across different age groups is needed to examine the extent to which

parents' responsiveness to emotional distress continues to be important, the changing predominance of different types of responses, and how these are associated, linearly and nonlinearly, with children's competence outside the home.

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