Introduction

• Goodness of fit is a theoretical perspective that suggests the fit between the mother and infant promotes optimal parenting (Chess & Thomas, 2013), and thus, influences later outcomes.
• Parenting is difficult, especially when faced with a fussy infant. However, the quality of the parenting that infants receive is crucial for many developmental outcomes.
• Maternal characteristics may buffer or offset these difficulties. For example, mothers better at emotion regulation, or control, may display more sensitive maternal behaviors (Bridgett et al., 2017).
• However, it is possible that this effect may vary based on the type of emotion regulation, such that cry-specific emotion regulation may be more important for parenting than general, or global, emotion regulation (Lin & McFatter, 2011).

Current Study

• We aimed to test the extent to which the goodness of fit between mother emotion regulation and infant reactivity during a series of emotionally distressing tasks predicted insensitive maternal behavior.
• Emotion regulation was assessed via global and cry-specific measures.
• Maternal responses to infant distress were observed in two different contexts: anger- and fear-eliciting tasks.

Method

Participants

• Included 211 mother-infant pairs when infants (52% female) were 6-months old (M = 39.5 weeks).
• Mother age ranged from 18-44 (M = 25), majority had some college education, and median income was $35,000.
• Maternal race was 48% European American, 49% African American, and 3% identified as both.

Procedures

• Mothers completed questionnaires prior to the visit.
• Dads participated in a series of emotion-eliciting tasks (LAB-TAB; Goldsmith et al., 1994).
  • Anger-eliciting: Gentle Arm Restraint
  • Fear-eliciting: Novel Toy Approach
• Mothers watched the video of their interactions and rated the emotions they felt in the moment.

Measures

• Global emotion regulation was assessed via the Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004) to assess global emotion regulation. An overall difficulty score was used.
• Cry specific emotion regulation was assessed when mothers watched videos of their interactions with their infants. Mothers reported the emotions they felt during emotion-eliciting tasks (Leerkes, 2010).
• Mother-oriented (MO) anxiety (i.e., the crying made me anxious, like I am supposed to know what to do) and MO anger (i.e., I was irritated by the sound of the crying) responses were used.
• Infant affect was coded during distress tasks on a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating that the baby was fussier.
• Overly negative behavior was coded during the distress eliciting tasks and included behaviors that were insensitive, such as negative, intrusive behaviors, and mismatched mother-infant affect (i.e., mother was laughing while infant was crying).

Results

• Goodness of fit between maternal emotion regulation and infant temperament associated with maternal sensitivity.

Figure 1. Interaction between infant affect and MO Anxiety predicting Maternal Overly Negative Behaviors during the anger-eliciting task at 6-months.

• Infants that were more fussy during the anger task had mothers that exhibited more overtly negative behaviors. However this effect was stronger for mothers than were higher in MO anxiety compared to mothers lower in anxiety.
• Maternal global emotion regulation was not associated with insensitive maternal behaviors.

Summary and Conclusions

• Mothers higher in anxiety may be more dysregulated in their emotional processing when exposed to infant distress (Leerkes et al., 2012). Higher MO anxiety may reflect the mother’s feelings of incompetence, worry about being a bad mother, or discomfort about infant crying.
• It is possible that mothers higher in MO anxiety may respond more negatively and harshly to their infant’s distress because they are anxious about being perceived as a bad mother, or that they have anxiety about the sound of infant crying.
• We did not find any significant results for responses during the fear tasks. This may reflect differing maternal motivations when their infants are displaying anger compared to fear.
• Although previous research has found that global maternal emotion regulation can impact parenting, we did not find evidence of that in the current study. To our knowledge, few studies have simultaneously examined global and cry-specific emotion regulation together.

Implications and Future Directions

• These results support parenting education programs that enhance maternal emotion regulation during infant distress. Teaching mothers emotion regulation strategies, such as deep breathing, and to be mindful about their own emotions when babies are crying may decrease insensitive behaviors.
• Future research should examine predictors cry-specific maternal emotion regulation. Additionally, experimental manipulations (i.e., instructing mothers to use specific types of emotion regulation when exposed to distress) may provide more definitive predictors of the effects of emotion regulation on parenting practices.

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