



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Children May Benefit When Mothers and Fathers React Differently To Their Negative Emotions

When a child is distressed, anxious, or angry, mom and dad don't have to respond in the same way. A new study finds that when both parents are supportive, they may shield the child from handling negative emotions.

The researchers suggest that when one parent provides little support and the other provides more support—for example, if a child becomes anxious or upset about losing a favorite toy, one parent may intervene by hugging the child and helping think of places to look for the toy, while the other parent hangs back and is available if needed—the child ends up with reduced conflicts with friends and a better understanding of negative emotions.

The research, conducted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, North Carolina State University, and the University of Michigan, appears in the September/October 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

In the first of two studies, researchers interviewed 55 kindergarten children to assess their understanding of emotions. In the second study, they observed 49 preschoolers interacting with close friends during two play sessions, noting levels of play and conflict between the children and their friends. In both studies, mothers and fathers independently answered questions about their reactions to their children's negative emotions. The researchers then used a measure of "supportive reactions" for each parent that captured levels of parents comforting their children and solving problems in response to their children's displays of negative feelings.

The researchers found that when one parent provided little support in response to a child's feelings of anger or anxiety and the other parent provided a lot of support, the child had less conflict with friends and a better understanding of emotions. When both parents provided a lot of support, however, children had less understanding of their emotions and more conflict with peers. This may be because when both parents support a child's negative feelings, they may shield the child from learning about and managing these emotions.

"The findings highlight the importance of understanding how mothers and fathers *together* may influence their children's ability to understand and manage emotions," according to Nancy McElwain, assistant professor of human development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the study's lead author. "By moving beyond a 'mother-only' model and examining the joint contributions that mothers and fathers make to their children's well-being, researchers, clinicians, and early childhood educators will be better positioned to design and implement interventions aimed at fostering healthy social and emotional development."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 5, *Mother- and Father-Reported Reactions to Children's Negative Emotions: Relations to Young Children's Emotional Understanding and Friendship Quality* by McElwain, NL (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Halberstadt, AG (North Carolina

State University), and Volling, BL (University of Michigan). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.