

How Does The Emotional Climate Of The Family Affect Emotional Regulation Abilities In Children And Adolescents?

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Date: 12th August 2022

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Summary:

The emotion regulation strategies that an individual tends to use is most likely the product of a long-term habit of employing said strategies to cope with certain situations. Like most habits, this one is also developed in the early stages of our life. Hence, the environment that we grow up in majorly determines the emotion regulation strategies we use. In my paper I shall be exploring how a turbulent emotional climate affects emotion regulation abilities in children and adolescents. Past research has mostly focused on the impacts and relations of caregivers towards emotional development. However, not a lot of research has focused on emotional development and hence emotion regulation abilities, due to interactions in the family system. (Blair et al. 2022) In my paper I will be exploring how the [turbulent] nature of these family interactions impacts the strategy by and extent to which a child/adolescent regulates their emotions. First, I will be defining emotion regulation in the context of children and their family climate. I will be supporting this definition with the unique predictor's model by Fosco & Grych. Expanding on this model, I will set down a definition of emotional climate and turbulent emotional climate for the purpose of this specific paper. Finally, using the regulatory flexibility model I'll detail the impact of turbulent emotional climates on the emotion regulation abilities of children and adolescents through different examples. The comprehension of these models and examples collaboratively has found that children and adolescents that grew up in a turbulent emotional climate are likely to have a limited repertoire. This means that they do not have easy access to different emotion regulation strategies and hence can not regulate emotions as effectively due to inability of adaptive regulation.

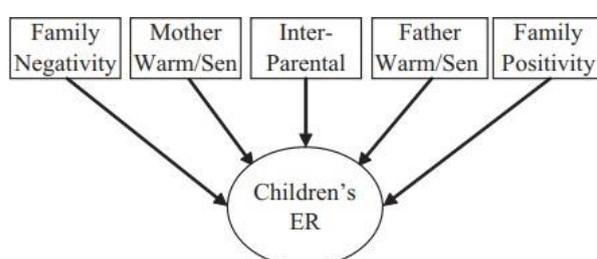
Before discussing emotional climates, I will discuss what emotion regulation is, generally as well as in respect to this paper.

Emotion regulation is the activation of a goal to up-regulate or down-regulate an emotional response (Gross, 2010). This goal activation leads to the deployment of one or more emotion regulation processes that can include attentional deployment, cognitive change, response modulation and such. This act of regulating emotion can be implicit and conscious or explicit and unconscious. A large part of development of emotion regulation skills in children is dependent on how emotions are handled by a child's caregiver and by extension, the entire family system in the early stages of his life. Hence, it is important for the emotional health and development of a child to have an environment that consistently attends to his emotional needs so that his regulation capabilities also progress in a uniform manner. Such uniformity is often what ensures healthy emotional development.

The development of emotion regulation skills includes recognizing emotions, identifying [conventionally] positive and negative emotions along with understanding how to respond and harness responses to these emotions. In children, emotion regulation focuses more on having control on inappropriate or excessive expressions of emotion and the ability to express one's emotional needs. It is essential to account for multiple dimensions of family functioning simultaneously in order to work with a more accurate reflection of the environment in which children's regulation develops. To be more specific, I will be referring to the unique predictor's model by Fosco & Grych (2012).

Figure 1 (Fosco, 2012, p.561)

Unique Predictor's Model



Note. The figure conceptualises each dimension of family functioning as a unique correlate of a child's emotion regulation

Emotion regulation in children is the product of different dimensions of family functioning working simultaneously both individually and interdependently. These dimensions include family negativity, family positivity, inter parental conflict, mother's sensitivity, and father's sensitivity. Repeated responses from different dimensions of the family shape the mechanism of early emotion regulation and future self-regulation. Hence, from the unique predictor's model we can infer that any type of change in these dimensions would directly impact the emotion regulation abilities of a child.

For the purpose of this paper, I will be defining an emotional climate as the resulting average of all major emotional interactions in a family (according to the unique predictor's model) i.e., family negativity, family positivity, interparental relations, mother's sensitivity and father's sensitivity. The nature of this climate is determined by factors like parenting behaviours, emotional expressiveness and the magnitude and types of responses one gets to these factors. The frequency of positive and negative expressiveness in the family as well as the quality of family relationships as a whole contribute to the emotional climate of a family (Fosco et al., 2012). (Morris et al., 2007) found that:

The emotional climate of the family is a reflection of a variety of intra-familial processes and dynamics. There are four important components of the emotional environment that likely affect the development of ER: the overall predictability and emotional stability of the environment; parental expectations and maturity demands; the degree of positive emotionality expressed in the family; and the degree of negative emotionality expressed in the family. (p.8)

Specific parenting behaviours (e.g., warmth, control, emotion expression) define a family's emotional climate, signalling to children through modelling or direct reinforcement/punishment which emotions are acceptable to display, and which are not (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995).

For a clearer picture, all the elements i.e. family positivity, family negativity, mother's sensitivity, father's sensitivity and inter-parental conflict (Figure 1) taken into account simultaneously will comprise the family climate and said family climate will directly affect a child's emotion regulation skills.

A turbulent emotional climate would be defined as one with an inconsistent temperament. In simpler words, it is an unpredictable emotional climate. Here, degrees of family negativity and positivity can be severely disbalanced or frequently fluctuating. The overall stability of the environment is not uniform. When a child's emotional climate is unpredictable, negative or coercive, children have highly reactive emotional responses due to frequent, unexpected emotional displays or because of emotional manipulations. (Morris et al., 2007) An environment where the degree of positive and negative expressiveness changes frequently or is disbalanced can be called a turbulent emotional climate. Basically, all the elements affecting a child's ER according to the unique predictor's model could be working in disproportionate amounts. For instance, mother's/father's sensitivity could be constantly fluctuating resulting in an exponential increase in family negativity as compared to family positivity and vice versa.

An appropriate example of this would be the family climate of children living with parents who harmfully consume alcohol. In such a situation there could be behaviour and interaction varying to two extremes, sober and inebriated. Alcohol misuse negatively affects parental

attitudes and internal relationships as well as representations of a family for the child and hence, negatively affects the perceived emotional climate of the family. Studies show that living in such an emotional climate increased the risk of having a higher level of emotional responses, distorted attitude towards illnesses and expectations from their parents (Iacopetti et al., 2021).

To discuss the impact of turbulent emotional climates on the emotion regulation skills I will be using the repertoire section provided in the regulatory flexibility model by Bonnano & Burton. The regulatory flexibility model focuses on the finding that any type of self-regulatory strategy will be unique to individuals based on their context sensitivity, repertoire, and feedback. There is no one inherently “right” or “wrong” strategy to approach a situation. What works for some, might not work for others. The efficacy of a certain strategy depends upon a broad range of contextual factors like personality, coping, variations in life domains and time orientation (eg. focusing on the past, present or future). Bonano & Burton define context sensitivity as the ability to perceive emerging demands and opportunities in the situational context and deploy regulation strategies to appropriately meet these demands and opportunities. Repertoire is the ability to choose from and apply a wide range of emotion regulation strategies for deployment in the situational context. And finally, feedback is the ability to monitor the efficacy of a chosen regulatory strategy through different feedback and modify it accordingly.

In this model, the repertoire is the component where regulatory strategies are evaluated, chosen and implemented. The repertoire includes the number and variations of strategies an individual can access. Studies show that people who possess the ability to approach and use different regulatory strategies experience less stress as compared to those who have a poor

ability of accessing various strategies. Repertoire also includes categorical variability, which considers the extent to which one can exercise regulatory flexibility. It is important to note that multiple studies have found that individuals with higher categorical variability, i.e. those which use a wider range of regulatory strategies are better adjusted.

The development of the entire repertoire consists of components like number of strategies, temporal variability and categorical variability that are likely to have developed over time with habit and practice. For instance, Person A who has used suppression as his primary regulatory strategy for different situational contexts throughout his childhood is expected to have a limited number and categorical variability.

The family emotional climate is one of a number of socializing agents that impact youth adjustment (Morris et al., 2007) It signals adolescents or children what emotions are acceptable and to what extent they should be expressed, through modelling or direct reinforcement. Thus, the family emotional climate directly or indirectly affects the repertoire development of an adolescent.

Adolescents growing up in a turbulent family climate with poor management of negative emotions and controlling parental behaviour result in them showing increased depressive symptoms (Ogabaselase et al., 2022). Inconsistent or decreased mother's sensitivity, an overall increased family negativity and high conflict and control were some of the features of said emotional climate. These adolescents used regulatory strategies cognitive reappraisal - shifting one's thoughts about the emotion eliciting situation before the emotion is generated and expressive suppression – change in behaviour in order to shorten the duration of the elicited emotion. Emotional inertia also played a part in these regulatory strategies. These three aspects considered together highlighted the adolescents' inability to practise regulatory

flexibility. They were unable to adapt to the impinging demands and opportunities of a situational context using temporal variability.

Another example of a turbulent climate is family enmeshment, where there is a difficulty defining emotional boundaries and an unhealthy intense mutual dependency. Enmeshment plays a large role in dysfunctional families and has been found to detrimentally affect adolescent's emotion regulation (Kivisto et al., 2015). Enmeshment prevents adolescents from mastering important developmental tasks which in turn results in the lack of foundation for transitioning into self-guided and peer regulated emotion regulation.

Another very common demonstration of a turbulent family climate is inter-parental conflict. When exposed to hostile family models, negative emotions and stressors increase and children employ strategies to regulate their emotions in such a situation. They tend to use strategies developing aggressive responses in an attempt to seek emotional security regarding parental conflict (Davies & Martin, 2013; Davies, Hentges, et al., 2016; Davies, Martin, Coe, & Cummings, 2016). Thus, children brought up in such a climate seek emotional security as a product of their past experiences with parental conflict and use that as their primary way to approach conflict in the future. This can be amounted to a limitation in the child's repertoire as he grows up.

Hence, looking at different turbulent family climates it is evident that a child or adolescent being brought up in said climate will experience its affects on his emotion regulation abilities, specifically the repertoire. In an attempt to cope with such climates, certain emotion regulation strategies were intimated in children and adolescents that gradually hindered their ability to adaptively approach situational contexts. So, a child who used suppression as his regulation strategy to survive a turbulent climate most likely will use the same emotional strategy when presented with similar situational contexts or emotions and thus limiting his

ability to access and employ varying strategies. In other words, his repertoire will be underdeveloped causing a hinderance in a smooth pathway (as described in the regulatory flexibility model) of emotion regulation.

In conclusion, emotion regulation in children is affected by the family emotional climate. Different family sub systems comprise the emotional climate of a family and each sub system directly or indirectly affects children's emotion regulation. Responses from different sub systems shape the mechanism of future emotion regulation in children and adolescents. In a turbulent emotional climate children and adolescents are met with negative and inconsistent responses which makes them employ regulation strategies accordingly. These strategies often become their habitual regulation strategy and result in a reduced temporal and categorical variability in their repertoire. Hence, adolescents and children growing up in a turbulent emotional climate are likely to have access to a limited range of regulatory strategies due to under or inconsistent development while being subjected to a turbulent climate.

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