

# Parental Involvement in Children's Learning: The Role of Children's Emotion Regulation

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The current study seeks to clarify the relationship between learning-based parent-child interactions, and children's ability to self-regulate emotions. Previous research has established a strong basis for the importance of parenting style on children's academic outcomes and on the development of their self-regulation abilities, but has failed to address how parental involvement in learning is related to children's emotion regulation abilities. The current study uses questionnaire data from 825 children aged 13-14 years. Regressions were applied to the resulting data and results indicated strong, predictive relationships between supportive parent-child interactions and increased emotion regulation skills, as well as between controlling parent-child interactions and decreased emotion regulation skills. These results indicate that the quality of parent-child interactions is associated with emotional development, an important attribute for successful academic functioning.

*Keywords:* control, emotion regulation, learning, parenting, support

La présente étude vise à clarifier la relation entre les interactions parent-enfant basées sur l'apprentissage et les habiletés de l'enfant à réguler ses émotions. Les recherches antérieures ont établi l'effet important du style parental sur les résultats académiques de l'enfant et sur le développement de ses capacités d'autorégulation, mais n'ont pas abordé les effets de l'investissement parental dans l'apprentissage de l'enfant sur ses habiletés à réguler ses émotions. La présente étude utilise les données d'un questionnaire rempli par 825 enfants âgés de 13 ou 14 ans. Des régressions ont été appliquées aux données et les résultats indiquent une forte relation prédictive entre les interactions parent-enfant de soutien et des habiletés de régulation des émotions élevées, ainsi qu'entre les interactions parent-enfant de contrôle et des habiletés de régulation des émotions plus basses. Ces résultats indiquent que la qualité des interactions parent-enfant est associée au développement émotionnel, un attribut important pour la réussite académique.

*Mots-clés :* contrôle, régulation des émotions, apprentissage, parentalité, soutien

Early adolescence is a crucial stage in development that offers many new challenges for parents' involvement in their children's academic lives. This stage involves many major cognitive developments, including the development of self-concept, knowledge integration, decision making and coordination of multiple goals, all of which contribute to academic functioning (Adams & Berzonsky, 2003; Byrnes, Miller, & Reynolds, 1999; Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001; Sebastian, Burnett, & Blakemore, 2008). This stage of development is also challenging for the adolescents; in this stage they are starting to discover, utilize their autonomy and acquire a heightened level

of independence (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Sanders & Epstein, 2000). This independence correlates with parents' declining involvement in schoolwork around the middle school years (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Although parents become less involved in schoolwork during this developmental stage, parental involvement remains a strong predictor of school outcomes in adolescence (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009) and the effects of either supportive or controlling parenting techniques is particularly pronounced (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). Emotion regulation is critical in this context because adolescents are learning to become independent, and can no longer depend on their parents to act as external regulators of emotion. Furthermore, adolescents face many academic challenges that require emotion regulation abilities to be successfully navigated. This makes adolescence a

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crucial time for examining the effects of parental involvement on learning, and the implications for adolescent emotion regulation.

Based on the *Family-School Relationships Model*, learning-focused parent-child interactions are thought to have a strong influence on children's personal characteristics, which in turn impact children's academic success. Previous literature has supported the importance of parent involvement in adolescents' academic success and has highlighted the distinction between the positive effects of supportive parenting and the negative effects of controlling parenting (Eskilson, Wiley, Muehlbauer, & Dodder, 1986; Fox & Calkins, 2003; Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993; Harper, Felicity, Brown, Arias, & Brody, 2006). However, within this literature, two main areas have been neglected: the relationship between parenting style during learning and the emotion regulation abilities of children, and the difference in this relationship between mothers and fathers. The first issue is critical because the *Family-School Relationships Model* suggests that adolescent's emotion regulation abilities will play a significant role in the relationship between parental involvement and academic success. In other words, this model and the research that supports it both suggest that emotion regulation is likely to be an important factor explaining why parent's involvement in learning is critical to academic success. The second issue is important because previous research has indicated that mothers and fathers may play differing roles in their child's socio-emotional and academic development. This study was designed to address these shortcomings by examining the impact of mothers' and fathers' supportive and controlling involvement in learning on young adolescents' emotion regulation abilities.

### Emotion Regulation

Emotions are arousal responses that are triggered by environmental stimuli, which subsequently lead to cognitive and behavioural responses (Fox & Calkins, 2003). As such, emotions are useful in directing attention, optimizing sensory intake, tuning decision making, and readying behavioural responses, an ability that is especially useful when faced with challenging situations, notably, those faced at school (Gross, 2002; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). Though emotions play a significant role in goal-directed behaviours, they can be associated with negative effects as well; emotions can be too strong, inappropriate for the context, or lead to responses that are discrepant with the actor's goals (Murphy, Shepard, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 2004). Emotion regulation is the ability to regulate emotions through

awareness, monitoring, evaluation, and modification of emotions (Gross, 2002; Murphy et al., 2004). Emotion regulation is therefore an essential skill that allows children to handle challenges in social and academic functioning, and progress through development competently (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Gross, 1998).

Emotion regulation allows children to control their emotional output, which is important for having success in the academic environment (Graziano et al., 2007; Gumora & Arsenio, 2002). Furthermore, emotional control has been shown to be an important factor in the development of appropriate social behaviours, such as adhering to social norms and conforming to adaptive social rules (Fox & Calkins, 2003; Supplee, Shaw, Hailstones, & Hartman, 2004). Internalizing norms and appropriate social behaviours is one of the critical characteristics that children acquire during childhood, and emotion regulation is a key first step in developing this ability (Supplee et al., 2004). Emotion regulation is therefore an essential part of the developmental process and is especially important for the achievement of short and long term academic goals.

A study conducted by Graziano et al. (2007), used a longitudinal research design to examine the relationship between emotion regulation in kindergarten-aged children and early academic success. Data for this study was collected using a variety of different measures: (a) the *Emotion Regulation Checklist*, which is a parent-report method which assesses a child's behavioural displays of emotion regulation; (b) the *Academic Performance Rating Scale*, a teacher-report method to assess academic competence; (c) the *Behavior Assessment System for children*, a parent-report survey to measure behavior problems; (d) the *Student-Teacher Relationship scale*; (e) the *Wechsler Individual Achievement Test* as well as (f) the *Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence* as a measure of IQ. In order to address the main research problem (whether or not emotion regulation relates to early academic success) regression analyses were conducted. After controlling for IQ, it was found that emotion regulation skills were a significant predictor of success and achievement in the classroom setting.

Emotion regulation is an essential aspect of development that allows children and adolescents to accomplish goals, but the benefits of developing adaptive emotion regulation strategies reach much further than this example. Children who fail to develop these skills and consequently, exhibit emotion dysregulation have an increased risk of developing certain types of psychopathology (McLaughlin,

Hatzenbuehler, Mennin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). In a study conducted by McLaughlin et al. (2011), researchers used a longitudinal research design to examine the relationship between emotion dysregulation and risk of psychopathology. Emotion dysregulation was quantified according to three factors: (a) emotional understanding, (b) dysregulated expression of negative emotionality and (c) ruminative responses to stress and intense emotions. The researchers involved in this study found that adolescents who display symptoms of emotion dysregulation are at higher risk for anxiety disorders and aggressive behaviours, and that psychopathology did not necessarily predict negative emotionality. These findings evidence the premise that emotion dysregulation can act as a risk factor for children, and have severe negative effects on their overall quality of life and emotional well-being.

### Parental Involvement in Learning

Supportive parenting is characterized by parental warmth and nurturance, and is positively correlated with measures of children's psychological well-being (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). In the context of learning at home, supportive parenting behaviours include praising the child for its work, as well as encouraging the child's autonomy (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Parents who use supportive techniques provide the child with autonomy support, and allow the child to have space to figure their work out on their own. Instead of focusing on specific details such as timing and correctness, supportive parents emphasize the child's abilities to apply their problem solving skills. The supportive parenting style has also been shown to cultivate the development of children's self-esteem and positive self-evaluations, and is a strong predictor of a child's overall life satisfaction (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Harper et al., 2006).

Controlling parenting is characterized by pressure that is imposed on the child by the parent to behave and think in certain ways (Grolnick, 2003; van der Bruggen, Stams, & Bögels, 2008). Controlling parents exhibit lower levels of warmth and tend to be much more distant, demanding and harsh than supportive parents. They use methods such as commands to elicit behaviours from their children (Cui, Morris, Criss, Houlberg, & Silk, 2014; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Controlling parents employ methods such as pressure and punishment to coerce the child into completing a task, rather than encouraging the child to work at its own pace. For example, in the context of parent-child learning-based interactions, a controlling parent might set rigid guidelines about how the child's work should be completed, and how

long they can take on each question or activity. Controlling parents do not respect the child's autonomy and often undermine its sense of independence. The pressure that controlling parents place on children is associated with children with low self-esteem (Eskilson et al., 1986). Research indicates that the controlling parenting style is also associated with detrimental effects on the emotion regulation capacities of the child (Fox & Calkins, 2003). Children whose behaviour is heavily controlled by their parents tend not to have a substantial repertoire of emotion regulation strategies because they have become overly dependent on external support from the parent.

### Parental Involvement: Mothers and Fathers

The majority of the research investigating parental involvement in children's learning has focused primarily on mothers (Rogers, Wiener, Marton, & Tannock, 2009). Although studies addressing the influence of father involvement are less common, the limited existing literature suggests that fathers can have an influence on children's outcomes, above and beyond mothers' involvement (Greif & Greif, 2004). Fathers' involvement in children's learning is associated with higher child achievement and improved attitudes at school (Flouri, Buchanan, & Bream, 2002; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005). One proposed reason for this between-parent differential effect on child outcomes is that some fathers may mentor and encourage their children to explore and take challenges, which is an important component of supporting their development (Grossman et al., 2002). This possibly unique role for fathers in their children's development could also impact their emotion development, through the encouragement of taking challenges and exploring new situations, both of which are situations where emotions must be managed. This study sought to explore this possibility and simultaneously add to the research in this area by exploring the differential effect of mothers' and fathers' supportive and controlling involvement on their child's emotion regulation abilities.

### Family-School Relationships Model

Ryan and Adams (1995) developed an ecological model based in systems theory, the *Family-School Relationships Model*, to organize the many variables that are implicated in a child's academic success. The *Family-School Relationships Model* includes characteristics of parents and children, patterns of family relationships, and contextual circumstances that are implicated in child outcomes. This model can be envisioned as a three-dimensional universe of

variable classes with Level 0 (child academic outcomes) at the core and successive levels extending outwards to the most distant class of variables, Level 6. According to this model, influences will be strongest between adjacent levels of variables and the influence between each level will be bidirectional along the proximal–distal dimension. According to this model, a child’s own characteristics (e.g., motivation, self-competence) will have the most significant impact on their academic success, due to the fact that they are most proximal and adjacent to Level 0. Likewise, because parent-child homework-focused interactions are categorized in Level 2 (Family Relationships), these interactions will have the biggest effect on the child’s characteristics (Ryan & Adams, 1995).

Evidence from both path analytic and empirical studies suggests that the model is useful in organizing the many sets of variables that are significantly related to academic outcomes (Adams, Ryan, Ketssetzis, & Keating, 2000). The *Family–School Relationships Model* was used in this study to guide the development of the hypothesized relationship between parent-child learning-based interactions and emotion regulation. The *Family-School Relationships Model* provides a useful theoretical framework for the present study because it includes both intrinsic (emotion regulation) and external (parental involvement) factors, which both have a significant impact on the academic functioning of the child.

**Objectives of the Present Study**

The goal of the current study is to investigate the relationship between parents’ supportive and controlling involvement in learning and emotion regulation abilities of adolescents, and examines differences in this relationship between mothers and fathers. Controlling parenting has been consistently associated with a negative impact on child outcomes (Eskilson et al., 1986; Fox & Calkins, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007), while parental support, on the other hand, has been associated with children’s success and positive outcomes (Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993; Harper et al., 2006). This study is an extension

of the literature in the domain of academic functioning and an examination of the parenting style used during learning-focused interactions. We hypothesized that father’s and mother’s controlling behaviour will negatively predict emotional regulation, while fathers’ and mothers’ supportive behaviour will positively predict emotional regulation. These relations are expected to be independent of each other.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 825 participants in the current study were drawn from a larger pool of participants in Grade 9 who took part in a three-year longitudinal project investigating stress and coping strategies. Participants were recruited from 15 high schools in and around Montreal, Quebec. Of the total sample, the mean age was 13.37 years, 362 of the participants were boys ( $M = 13.34, SD = .48$ ) and 463 were girls ( $M = 13.41, SD = .52$ ). Of these, 768 spoke English at home, 252 spoke French at home, and 108 spoke another language at home.

**Measures**

**Demographic information form.** A demographics questionnaire was administered to students to gather information about: (a) age, (b) gender, and (c) language(s) spoken at home.

**Emotion regulation.** We used the *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) to assess emotion regulation abilities. The DERS is a 36-item self-report measure designed to assess clinically relevant difficulties in emotion regulation. This scale yields a *Total Emotion Regulation Scale*, with higher scores indicating more dysregulation. It consists of 36 items that are scored on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The DERS has been shown to have high reliability and internal consistency ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Psychometric research demonstrates that the DERS scores have good test-retest reliability (Gratz &

Table 1  
*Correlation matrix for parent factors and DERS results*

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
1. Maternal support	-	-.35**	.60**	.60**	-.32**
2. Maternal control		-	-.29**	.68**	.29**
3. Paternal support			-	-.33**	-.33**
4. Paternal control				-	.34**
5. DERS					-

Note.  $N = 825, ** p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Regression analysis of parent factors*

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>
Maternal support	-.15**	-4.05	1.42
Maternal control	.04	0.83	1.17
Paternal support	-.16**	-3.95	1.24
Paternal control	.21**	4.46	1.16

Note. \*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .16$  ( $p < .01$ ).

Roemer, 2004), and the total DERS score has been found to have high internal consistency within both clinical (e.g., Fox et al., 2007) and nonclinical populations (e.g., Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

**Parental involvement.** The *Parental Support for Learning Scale* (PSLS; Rogers, Markel, Midgett, Ryan, & Tannock, 2014) separately assesses students' perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' educational involvement at home. The original version of this scale was used to assess elementary school aged children's perceptions. However, a modified version of the scale has recently been developed to be more relevant for parental involvement in the adolescent years. The adolescent version consists of two subscales: *Controlling Parental Involvement* and *Supportive Parental Involvement*. Previous work using this scale with elementary school-aged children suggests that it possesses acceptable psychometric properties. The PSLS has been shown to have moderate to high reliability (controlling parental environment:  $\alpha = .90$  and supportive parental environment:  $\alpha = .87$ ) and fathers (controlling parental environment:  $\alpha = .89$  and supportive parental environment:  $\alpha = .89$ ). Examples of items on the *Controlling Parental Involvement* subscale include: (a) "This parent tries to tell me how to approach my schoolwork", (b) "This parent insists I do my schoolwork his/her way", (c) "When I get a poor grade, I feel the need to hide it from this parent". Examples of items on the *Supportive Involvement* subscale include: (a) "This parent is typically happy to talk to me about my learning", (b) "When I am struggling at school, this parent listens to my opinion and perspective", (c) "This parent allows me to make my own decisions about my school-work."

## Procedure

Participants for this study were recruited as part of a larger longitudinal project on coping with stress in the transition to high school. Students brought home a parental consent form detailing the main research purposes, and procedure. Of the students who returned consent forms, 67% agreed to participate. As per the ethical guidelines of the study, the students did not

have to give a reason for their refusal to participate. For this study, data was collected during the second year of the study. Participants completed questionnaires during two 45-minute sessions. Participants at each school were brought to a common area in the school (e.g., cafeteria, library) in groups of approximately 20, and were presented with an envelope that contained a student assent form and questionnaires. Instructions were read aloud by a research assistant, and participants responded individually. Students sat apart from each other and trifold screens were used to ensure more confidentiality in responses.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

In the three variables of interest, there was between 19-25% of missing data that were missing at random (MAR). Little's MAR test proved significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 825) = 185.91, p < .001$ , however separate variance t-tests indicated that the data was not missing in a pattern related to the DVs ( $ts > 0.05$ ). As such, in all our analysis, missing data were removed list wise. After missing data were removed, there were no significant outliers nor were there any issues with kurtosis or skewness in the data (all  $Zs < 1.96$ ). Mean scores and standard deviations were measured for all of the variables of interest, including the parent variables: maternal support ( $M = 4.07, SD = 0.74$ ), maternal control ( $M = 2.54, SD = 0.97$ ), paternal support ( $M = 3.94, SD = 0.83$ ), and paternal control ( $M = 2.46, SD = 0.97$ ), as well as for the DERS results ( $M = 71.09, SD = 20.21$ ). Information about the correlations is included in Table 1.

### Statistical Analysis

In order to assess the relationship between parent-child interactions and emotion regulation abilities, a simple regression analysis was performed. Scores from the PSLS for maternal support, maternal control, paternal support and paternal control were entered as the independent variable, and DERS scores were entered as the dependent variable. This regression was

significant,  $F(4, 514) = 29.03, p < .001$ , with paternal support ( $\beta = -.16$ ), paternal control ( $\beta = .21$ ) and maternal support ( $\beta = -.15$ ). However, maternal control ( $\beta = .04$ ) was not a significant predictor. We hypothesized that controlling parenting behaviours from both mothers and fathers would be predictive of children's difficulties in emotion regulation. This result indicates that mother's controlling homework-focused interactions are not related to children's DERS results, and therefore do not lead to difficulty in children's regulation of emotion, which is not supportive of our proposed hypothesis about our variables. More information is included in Table 2.

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to contribute to our understanding of the link between children's emotion regulation abilities and the quality of mothers' and fathers' learning-focused parent-child interactions. The relationship between parent-child learning-based interactions and child outcomes is well established in the literature; however, the role of emotion regulation remains unclear. The current study aims to address this deficit by examining the association between children's development of self-regulation abilities and supportive versus controlling parent-child learning-based interactions. Supportive parent-child interactions were strongly and negatively related to children's difficulty in regulating their emotions for both mothers and fathers. These findings demonstrate an association between supportive parenting and positive emotional development. Conversely, controlling parental involvement was strongly and positively correlated with children's difficulty in regulating their emotions for fathers, not mothers. These findings demonstrate a relationship between controlling parenting and negative emotional development, as well as an association between supportive parenting and positive emotional development. These results dovetail with previous findings by demonstrating a significant relationship between the style that parents use to assist their children with learning and a critical child characteristic: emotion regulation. When fathers interacted with their children in a more controlling manner, their children displayed impaired emotion regulation abilities, while when parents interacted with their children in a more supportive manner, their children displayed superior emotion regulation abilities. This indicates that support from parents is associated with the development of emotion regulation abilities, while fathers' controlling parenting is associated with impaired emotional development.

The results of the current study support the consensus that prevails in the existing literature: parental support in the context of learning is associated with better child outcomes, and parental control in the context of learning is associated with children's impairment in various aspects of functioning (Eskilson et al., 1986; Fox & Calkins, 2003; Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). This study, however, adds the dimension of children's emotion regulation abilities. The results of this study underline an important association between parental involvement in learning and children's capacity for emotional self-regulation. This is an association that is not yet well established in the literature. This association means that a child's interactions with its parents, especially in the context of learning, can have important implications for its achievement of emotion regulation, an important milestone for children and adolescents. Due to the research design of the current study, which is a cross-sectional, correlational study, the results cannot be said to infer causality. The results of this study highlight an important association between parent-child learning-based interactions. However, future research is required in order to determine whether these variables have a cause-and-effect relationship.

The second aspect of this study examined the difference between the relationship between parenting style and emotion regulation for mothers and fathers. The results of the current study do not indicate differences between mothers and fathers, as both regressions were significant and R values were very similar. This suggests that both mothers' and fathers' supportive parenting, and controlling involvement by fathers are related to children's emotion regulation in the same manner. Although most studies on this topic have previously examined mothers, some have included fathers, but the results have been mixed. Some researchers have found that fathers tend to play a larger role in disciplining their children, have a more distant relationship and show less support and affection than mothers do (Harper et al., 2006). These findings might be indicative of a less emotionally sensitive relationship between fathers and their children compared to mothers. On the other hand, others have found that fathers have a positive influence on children's development, such as contributing to higher achievement and improved attitudes at school, above and beyond that of mothers (Flouri et al., 2002; Greif & Greif, 2004; McBride et al., 2005). The results of the current study add to this literature and suggest that, in relation to emotion regulation, both mother's and father's style of parenting used during learning-focused interactions has a similar association with the development of this characteristic in the child.

This study contributes to our knowledge about learning-related parenting styles and their relationship with children's ability to self-regulate emotions. This confirms the theoretical underpinnings of the *Family-School Relationships Model*, demonstrating the strong relationship between parent-child interactions and child characteristics, and adds to the literature by illustrating that this model holds for emotion-related child characteristics. Finally, this study also contributes to our knowledge of the differences between mothers and fathers in how they affect their children. In this case, no major differences were found, suggesting that both parents can be involved in their children's homework in a supportive manner.

Many previous studies have found that supportive parenting is associated with better outcomes for children. This study expands on this by demonstrating that parenting style also impacts emotion regulation capacities, which are critical for development and academic achievement. It would be advantageous for future research to examine how parent-child interactions in domains other than homework can influence emotion development. Future research in this area should use a longitudinal research design in order to see the long-term effects of parental support or control on the emotion regulation abilities of children. The current study uses a cross-section of the population, which limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, a longitudinal approach would allow long-term associations between parenting style and emotion regulation abilities to be examined, which would be advantageous in the advancement of the knowledge on this subject.

While it was observed that no major differences exist between the effects of parenting styles of mothers versus fathers, there is still much that is unclear about the different roles that mothers and fathers play and the impact this has on their children's development, which makes future research essential. This study is another piece of the puzzle, both adding information to further our understanding and exposing the areas in which more work is needed. This study is an important first step towards understanding the impact of parental involvement in learning on emotion regulation, and future research should build from this knowledge to examine any causal, long-term effects.

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Received August 15, 2014  
Revision received January 10, 2015  
Accepted January 15, 2015 ■