

## CHAPTER 5

# The Role of Parental Emotion Regulation in Parental Neglect and Violence

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### 5.1 Parenting Stress: The Key Concept between Emotion Regulation and Child Maltreatment

In the literature, parenting stress encompasses the psychological/emotional reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood (Deater-Deckard, 1998, 2004) and is associated with parenting outcomes and the quality of dyadic parent-child interactions (Camisasca et al., 2014; Crnic & Low, 2002; Miragoli et al., 2018). Specifically, parenting stress develops from parents' evaluations that the demands of the parenting role are currently exceeding their coping abilities. It has been theorized as a multifactor process, which includes both individual and parenting-related sources of distress, ranging from objective life events (e.g. the death of a family member) to the parent's evaluation of the child's behavior and to the parent's subjective feeling of failing in their own parental responsibility (Abidin, 1992, 1995; Deater-Deckard, 1998). High levels of parenting stress interfere with the caregiver's ability to effectively cope with parenting-related difficulties (Jackson & Huang, 2000; Scheel & Rieckmann, 1998), increasing negative emotions and interactions with children (Coyle et al., 2002), and the use of ineffective disciplinary strategies (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Crouch & Behl, 2001). In the field of child maltreatment, several studies have documented that maltreating parents report significantly higher levels of parenting stress and negative affect than non-maltreating parents and that parenting stress is related to increased child maltreatment (e.g., Ethier et al., 1995; Krahé et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2009; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991).

In the social information processing (SIP) model (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003), child maltreatment is regarded exclusively as an extreme consequence of parenting problems, resulting from bad cognitive processing of

social information and from high levels of emotional distress (Azar, 1998, 2002; Bugental et al., 2002). The SIP model (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003) assumes that parenting behaviors are marked by three cognitive processing stages (perceptions of the child's behavior; interpretations and evaluations of the child's behavior; and information integration and disciplinary response selection) and a fourth cognitive/behavioral stage consisting of the monitoring process and response implementation. These different processes are theory driven (based on preexisting cognitive schemata and beliefs about children and child-rearing, expectations concerning the child and concerning themselves as parents, including emotional components originating from emotions experienced during previous events involving attachment and parenting) and context driven (affected by situational factors, such as level of stress).

According to this cognitive-behavioral approach, maltreating (or at-risk) parents fail at several steps of the parenting process, leading to a negative characterization of their relationship with the child and increasing levels of stress (Dadds et al., 2003; Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Montes et al., 2001). Specifically, they fail to objectively interpret the child's behavior, which is viewed as more problematic than it actually is (Stage 1 of SIP model; e.g. Crouch et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2006; Miragoli et al., 2018). Moreover, several studies have linked these negative views of children's behavior to parental attributions of child-related stable, hostile, and provocative intent, due to automatic accessibility of developmental expectancy biases (Stage 2; e.g. Farc et al., 2008; Haskett et al., 2003; Mammen et al., 2002). Finally, the use of harsh parenting behaviors, including acts of physical maltreatment (Timmer et al., 2002), arises from some marked difficulties with assuming the child's perspective, which interfere with a parent's processing of mitigating information in discipline situations (Stage 3; e.g. de Paúl et al., 2006; McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008; Perez-Albeniz & de Paúl, 2003). For these reasons, in daily interactions, maltreating (or at-risk) parents experience a lack of efficacy in their own parental skills (in terms of self-efficacy) and their parent-child relationship is impaired by negative mental representations (expectations about their parenting and about their children's abilities and intent) and feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, with high levels of parenting stress and emotional reactivity (in terms of sadness, anger, hostility, and fear; Berryhill, 2016; Crnic & Ross, 2017).

Parenting stress and reactivity to negative emotions are further amplified by the embedded emotional components of the preexisting cognitive schemata (mainly due to previous childhood experiences; Lavi et al., 2021; Milner, 2003), which severely hinders parents' ability to attend to the child's needs and increases the risk of child maltreatment (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003). Parents who maltreat their children, or are at risk of

doing so, have more inaccurate and biased cognitive preexisting schemata than other parents, involving beliefs and values that influence the way they perceive, evaluate, integrate, and respond to information related to children (e.g. Dadds et al., 2003; Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Montes et al., 2001). In addition to ideational components, preexisting schemata include affective/emotional components (e.g. sadness, anger, hostility, anxiety, etc.) that were experienced during previous relational events and that influence how new information is perceived and processed. Maltreating (or at-risk) parents are more likely to use preexisting cognitive schemata if they are experiencing negative affect and/or high levels of emotional distress connected to parenting practice (e.g. Crouch et al., 2010; Dadds et al., 2003; de Paúl et al., 2006; Haskett et al., 2003).

Although evidence suggests a substantial link between parenting stress and child maltreatment, the underlying emotional mechanisms that could potentially moderate this relationship have been less investigated. Internal appraisals of parenting (perceptions and attributions deriving from preexisting cognitive schemata) and emotional distress may interact and spill over into daily caregiver–child relationships, promoting maltreatment behaviors.

## **5.2 Emotion Regulation in Child Maltreatment**

Emotion regulation is defined as the “processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross & Thompson, 2007, p. 275). Parental emotion regulation serves several important goals in parenting (see Chapter 2), and, in disciplinary encounters with the child, involves the ability for parents to control and inhibit their avoidant, intrusive, and aggressive actions, when experiencing negative and stressful emotions (Leith & Baumeister, 1996).

In contrast to the many investigations of emotions as reliable correlates of parenting behaviors (e.g. Crandall et al., 2015; Rueger et al., 2011), work on parents’ emotion regulation (ER) and child maltreatment has lagged behind. In the examination of the predictors of child maltreatment, one important focus has been parents’ emotion reactivity and regulation (Lavi et al., 2021). To date, studies have shown great variability in the magnitude of the relationships between parental emotional processes and the risk of child maltreatment.

In this perspective, Dix’s model (1991) suggests that dysfunctional and ineffective parenting is characterized by inadequate ER, in terms of hyporeactivity (to positive emotions) or hyperreactivity (to negative emotions) or a mismatch of emotions between parent and child (e.g. child

expressing happiness and parent expressing disappointment), with deleterious effects on the parent–child relationship. Therefore, according to the model, guided by cognitive preexisting and biased schemata (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003), when faced with urgent negative emotions, maltreating (or at-risk) parents potentially tend to respond to the child with aversive control, avoidance, and emotional cutoff behaviors<sup>1</sup> (Bowen, 1993; Smith, 2003), in order to find a way to reduce the burden of emotional distress (Mence et al., 2014). For example, anger is conceptualized in the literature as an emotion leading the parents to react to the child with intrusiveness or disengagement (Crittenden, 1993), narrowing their attention to the anger-provoking stimuli alone (Gibb et al., 2011). This narrowing affects the parents' cognitive processes and leads them to express anger via impulsive and aggressive actions, with an elevated propensity to child maltreatment (Rodriguez, 2018; Rodriguez & Green, 1997; Rodriguez & Richardson, 2007). According to the SIP model (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003), maltreating (or at-risk) parents could be prone to respond aggressively to the perceived provocations of the child, because they feel that aggressive actions will enable them to let off steam and feel less upset and angry (Francis & Wolfe, 2008).

Overall, the literature suggests that aggressive and violent behaviors (e.g. child maltreatment, domestic and intimate partner violence) may function to regulate stress and negative emotions (Jakupcak et al., 2002). Aggressive people believe that violence can be a good way of getting rid of their emotional distress and that aggressive behaviors can be undertaken as a good strategy of emotion regulation (Bushman et al., 2001). Therefore, during daily caregiver–child interactions, for maltreating (or at-risk) parents, aggressive and violent behaviors could represent not only the inability to manage negative and stressful emotions but also a strategy to cope with this emotional dysregulation (Marziali et al., 2003).

In summary, parental reactivity to negative emotions could become a significant risk factor for child maltreatment, via the path of parental intrusiveness, disengagement, and cognitive narrowing of attention (Bowen, 1993; Crittenden, 1993; Dix, 1991), and this emotion dysregulation could be intended as an outcome of the activation of

<sup>1</sup> Emotional cutoff behavior can be considered a process of distancing and cutting oneself off from emotions or affects that lead, most often unconsciously, to a feared loss of control and/or suffering (Titelman, 2014). People who are emotionally cut off find intimacy profoundly threatening and, therefore, tend to display an exaggerated independence and to isolate themselves from others, denying the importance of attachment and family. In family systems theory of Bowen (1993), emotional cutoff behavior is a mechanism for managing relational anxiety and parenting stress, and in caregiver–child interactions is manifested in physical distance, lack of contact, and avoidance toward the child.

preexisting cognitive schemata that include previous unresolved relational experiences and unrealistic expectations of self and child (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003).

### **5.3 Gender Differences**

Currently one of the most interesting aspects of the field of child maltreatment is the analysis of possible gender differences to explain dissimilar trajectories of maltreating parenting and also to provide valuable information for intervention and prevention plans. Some studies have investigated general constructs (parenting stress, ER, negative affect, emphatic skills, etc.) and have shown comparable risk profiles for maltreating (or at-risk) fathers and mothers (Asla et al., 2011; Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2004; Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007), although some specific differences have emerged in other studies (e.g. Miragoli et al., 2018; Pittman & Buckley, 2006; Schaeffer et al., 2005).

Overall, in terms of emotional reactivity and regulation, parents show some significant gender differences, which are attributable to biological factors, in interaction with social roles and ecological conditions (Wood & Eagly, 2002). In parenthood, social roles and sex-typed goals help define relationships, direct behaviors, and guide decision-making processes (Grusec & Davidov, 2014). Culturally shared beliefs may drive parenting practices of knowledge, expression, and regulation of emotions: mothers are expected to be more emotionally expressive through prosocial and caring parenting actions, whereas fathers are expected to be more pragmatic, detached, and oriented toward achievement (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Sigel et al., 1992). Moreover, parenting stress appears to have a greater impact on a mother's self-assessment of her role as a mother (Berryhill, 2016; Pearlin et al., 1981), further contaminating the quality of the caregiver-child relationship more easily.

With a view to identifying possible gender differences in maltreating (or at-risk) parenting, Miragoli and colleagues (2020) analyzed the ER processes in fathers and mothers. Whereas previous studies had illustrated the role of ER in the risk of child maltreatment, in terms of a unitary construct or the effects of single dimensions (e.g. impulsivity, emotional distress, or anger; e.g. Bushman et al., 2001; Dadds et al., 2003; Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Rodriguez & Green, 1997), in this study some individual components of ER were evaluated comprehensively (acceptance of emotional responses, ability in distracting and performing alternative behaviors when experiencing negative emotions, confidence in the emotional regulation skills, ability in controlling impulsive behaviors when distressed, recognition of emotions, and emotional awareness). The findings

confirmed the important role of ER in the risk of child maltreatment and provided support for gender differences in at-risk fathers and mothers. When at-risk fathers experienced negative and stressful emotions, they showed a significant lack of emotional awareness and difficulties in distracting themselves and using alternative behaviors. By contrast, when distressed about an unsatisfactory relationship with the child, at-risk mothers experienced more nonacceptance of negative emotions, difficulties in distracting themselves and using alternative behaviors, and subsequent difficulties in controlling impulsive/aggressive behaviors toward the child.

Both at-risk fathers and mothers, regardless of gender, when feeling emotional parenting stress, showed difficulty in distracting themselves and using alternative behaviors, resulting in an inability to concentrate or effectively complete their activities, because of emotional arousal and the consequent tendency to focus all attention resources on the negative emotional experience. More precisely, these parents failed to pursue goal-directed behaviors, in which distraction could be a protective factor for stress and predictive of adaptive coping (oriented to problem-solving and emotional acceptance; Reynolds & Wells, 1999).

A significant gender difference concerns at-risk fathers, who are more characterized by a lack of awareness in the management of negative emotions. A good level of emotional awareness allows individuals to know what they are feeling and to identify useful coping strategies to cope with the emotions and the demands of the context (Clare et al., 1994). Attention and emotional awareness are specific elements of mindful parenting (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997) and allow parents to communicate acceptance, compassion, and kindness in interactions with their child (Duncan et al., 2009; Turpyn & Chaplin, 2016). According to the SIP model (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003), in maltreating (or at-risk) parents a lack of emotional awareness interferes with all the cognitive stages of discipline response processing (perception and interpretation of child behavior, and integration of available information), causing a failure to choose an effective parenting behavior and leading to episodes of maltreatment to release the emotional anxiety. For these reasons, maltreating (or at-risk) fathers often show authoritarian and intrusive parenting, lack of anger and hostility control, and ineffective and coercive discipline (Rodríguez, 2010).

By contrast, nonacceptance of emotional responses and difficulties in controlling impulsive behaviors (when distressed) were specific deficits of at-risk mothers. In social contexts, individuals who do not accept their negative emotions appear avoidant and constantly absorbed in suppressing this emotional distress, failing to achieve the social information needed to respond appropriately to others (Brockman et al., 2017).

Specifically, nonacceptance and repeated efforts to suppress negative emotions deplete cognitive resources that could otherwise be used for optimal performance in the social context (for example, for parents, for effective behavior in interactions with their children). In the literature, these individuals are described as avoidant and distracted, with negative feelings about the self and a sense of alienation from others, which often impede the development of emotionally satisfying relationships (Purnamaningsih, 2017). Clinical research has shown that these individuals may not always be healthy or effective: nonacceptance and emotion suppression could have paradoxical effects on adjustment, increasing the severity and frequency of stressful and unwanted internal experiences (Gross & John, 2003; Hayes et al., 2006). Therefore, for at-risk mothers, in discipline encounters with their child, non-acceptance and suppression of negative emotions decrease the behavioral expression of those emotions but not the subjective experience (Bailey et al., 2007; Jacobvitz et al., 2006). Thus this emotional strategy does not reduce the subjective experience but contributes to the maintenance and accumulation of unresolved emotions (Gross, 1998; Richards & Gross, 1999). In the literature, maltreating mothers show atypical caregiving and are basically unable to accept, monitor, and contain the emotional negative experiences of interaction with their child (e.g. Lyons-Ruth et al., 1987; Savage et al., 2019). At the base of these dysfunctional caregiving behaviors, many authors have identified different traumatic childhood experiences that break into the mother's mental state and prevent her from being responsive and sensitive with her child (e.g. Hesse & Main, 2006; Lyons-Ruth & Block, 1996). Accordingly, in discipline encounters, nonacceptance and suppression of negative emotions could be positively associated with poorer parental functioning (e.g. poorer parental adjustment and compromised discipline practices; Lorber, 2012) and more aggressive parental behaviors, as the capacity to accept negative emotions is a prerequisite for the development of the consequent capacity to maintain control over behavior even in the presence of emotional distress (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

## **5.4 Clinical Implications**

This chapter shows that ER processes must be considered when training programs for maltreating or at-risk parents are designed, to promote, specific adaptive regulative skills and adequate parenting behaviors in stressful conditions (Gratz & Gunderson, 2006).

Overall, treatments that focus on avoidance or control of negative and undesirable emotions may not be useful with maltreating or at-risk

parents and may inadvertently reinforce a damaging nonacceptance of negative emotions. Instead, treatments based on learning alternative ways of coping and responding to emotional distress could be more productive in mitigating aggressive parenting behaviors. Emotion coaching and mindfulness may be valuable skills for maltreating or at-risk parents, as they promote the emotional modulation of the arousal caused by negative experiences (rather than emotional detachment) resulting from the relationship with the child (Gratz & Tull, 2010). Specifically, for maltreating or at-risk fathers, interventions could focus more on the promotion of emotional awareness, by encouraging fathers to observe and label the negative emotions, facilitating contact with these emotions and differentiating between emotional states. By contrast, for maltreating or at-risk mothers, interventions could be more focused on letting go of evaluations (such as “bad” or “wrong”) and taking a nonjudgmental opinion toward the unwanted emotions, facilitating the acceptance and decreasing the development of secondary emotional responses (e.g. fear, anger, guilt or shame). Therefore, clinical interventions with maltreating or at-risk parents should involve reappraisal and modulation of arousal of the negative experience of emotions (rather than eliminating emotions). For at-risk fathers and mothers, it is important to learn to manage the emotional distress deriving from the relationship with the child, understanding that negative emotions can be tolerated (without necessarily being acted on) and facilitating the ability to control impulsive and aggressive behaviors.

## 5.5 Conclusions and Future Directions

In conclusion, this chapter set out to illustrate the essential role of emotional processes in underlying a cluster of maltreating behaviors and conditions, with significant practical implications for primary and secondary interventions.

First, it is important to highlight that the relation between ER and child maltreatment is bidirectional (Figure 5.1): (1) previous experiences of child maltreatment lead to parental dysfunctional emotion reactivity/regulation and (2) parental dysfunctional emotion reactivity/regulation leads to a higher propensity to child maltreatment (see Chapter 5).

Second, child maltreatment can be understood as the result of a dysfunctional ER strategy, where aggressive, violent, and avoidant parenting behaviors are a way to relieve the pressure of stress and negative emotions associated with interacting with the child.

Finally, although much remains to be done at the intersection of ER and child maltreatment, the most pressing requirements appear to be to

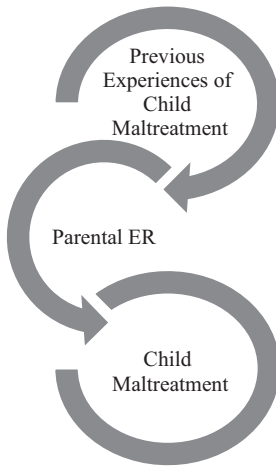


Figure 5.1 Bidirectional relation between emotion regulation (ER) and child maltreatment

explore the possible role of ER as a moderator between parenting stress and child maltreatment (in particular, the question whether stressed parents with good levels of ER are less likely to maltreat or be violent with their children), and to identify precise risk profiles for at-risk fathers and mothers to improve understanding of the emotional processes that guide the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment.

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