

**Research article**

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## **Strategies for parents' response to negative emotions and empathic reactions of preschool children**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction.** The research goal involves the study of supportive and nonsupportive strategies of parents' response to negative emotions and empathic reactions of preschool children. **Methods.** The study involved parents of 5-7-year-old children in the number of 52 people (23 women and 29 male). Diagnostic tools: questionnaire "The nature of manifestations of empathic reactions and behavior in children" by Shchetinina A.M.; Scale of overcoming negative emotions in children (CCNES) by Fabes, R. A., Poulin, R., Eisenberg, N., & Madden-Derdich, D. A. Statistical data processing was carried out in the SPSS Statistics 25 program using correlation analysis according to Spearman's criterion. **Results.** The analysis of the empirical data obtained was carried out in several stages: the studied variables were identified (forms of empathic reactions of children according to their parents' assessment – humanistic, egocentric, mixed); types of parents' response to negative emotions of children (distress reactions; punitive reactions; expressive encouragement; emotion-oriented reactions; problem-oriented reactions; reactions minimization). The primary statistical characteristics of the variables are determined on the basis of which a statistical correlation analysis is carried out. The differences in parents' assessments of children's empathic manifestations and the types of parents' responses to negative emotions are shown, corresponding to two strategies of emotion socialization – supportive, optimal for preschoolers, and nonsupportive, disharmonious. Based on the model of emotion socialization, the key concept of which is the emotion-oriented socializing behavior of parents, the study examines the strategies of parents' response to negative emotions of children as a component of emotion socialization, emphasizing their unique role in the formation of basic emotional experience in preschoolers. **Discussion.** The conducted research shows the optimal types of parents' response to the emotional expressions of children and their contribution to the emotional development and formation of socio-emotional competence of preschoolers.

### **Keywords**

socialization, emotion socialization, emotion development, supportive strategy, non-supportive strategy, coping reactions, empathic reactions, emotional competence, preschoolers, parental behavior.

## Highlights

- as a result of empirical research, the dominant place of supportive strategies of parents' response to negative emotions of children has been established;
- correlation analysis revealed the presence of direct significant links between the level of children's empathic reactions and certain types of parents' reactions to their negative emotions (*emotion-oriented reactions; problem-oriented reactions; minimization reactions*);
- supportive strategies for emotion socialization are optimal for parents of preschool children.

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## Introduction

Emotion development is one of the major vectors of preschool child development (Kosheleva, 2003; Karelina, 2017). This phenomenon directly depends on the type of interaction between parents and the child (Karabanova, 2005). Currently, there is a growing interest in studying the phenomenon called "emotion socialization" in relation to childhood period of development. In a tradition dating back to the oft-quoted speech by Jastrow (1929) at the Wittenberg Symposium on Emotions, the term "emotion socialization" conceptualizes affective reactions unfolding in a social environment, simultaneously being a field for reference and reconstruction. Emotion socialization is considered as a process in which adults, as agents of socialization, with their direct reactions to children's emotions, teaching children knowledge about emotions, ensure that children acquire culturally acceptable emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). A wide range of verbal and nonverbal practices in the arsenal of adults, primarily families (Halberstadt & Eaton, 2002), specialists working with children (Denham et al., 2012; Denham et al., 2020), mediates ways of recognizing, labelling, and interpreting emotions, their expression, and regulation by children, contributing to emotional development mediated by social experience, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors (Denham et al., 2014).

Studies of emotion socialization as a relatively recent achievement (Kitzmann, 2012) reveal a tendency to shift from the primacy of cognitive and biological factors to the analysis of the phenomenology of emotional development in the context of the social world, understanding emotion-laden interpersonal interactions and social group-mediated emotional processes (Parkinson & Manstead, 2015).

The emotion socialization model of Eisenberg et al. (1998) describes three vectors of specific parental behavior associated with emotion socialization (ERSBs, Emotion-Related Socialization Behaviors): 1) parents' reactions to the emotional expression by children; 2) emotional expressiveness of parents; 3) discussion of emotions by parents with children (conversations about emotions). According to the ERSBs model and the studies carried out within the framework of this model (Cole et al., 2009; Denham et al., 2014), emotion socialization is defined as a dynamic process that unfolds during the direct interaction of parents with children and includes a broader emotional context of relationships, specific socializing practices, strategies for emotion socialization and the results of emotional development of children (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Loughheed et al., 2020).

Specific socializing practices of everyday interaction between parents and children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993) include open and direct and/or more subtle and indirect ways of parents' attitude to children's emotions, modelling/correcting their own patterns of emotional expression, dyadic interaction (cooperation) of parents with children (Bao & Kato, 2020).

According to Seddon et al. (2020), there are two main types of emotion socialization strategies – supportive and non-supportive. The supportive one includes such parental practices as positive assessment and encouragement of the expression of emotions by children, teaching children emotional experiences adequate to the situation, and modelling strategies for adaptive regulation of emotions. Such practices help children develop the skills to effectively regulate their emotions and adequately express their emotional experiences outside. A supportive strategy promotes the acquisition of skills to control negative emotional reactions and, as a result, contributes to greater social competence and life satisfaction. Longitudinal studies have shown that the maternal supportive response to negative emotions of five-year-olds reveals a relationship with better regulation of emotions in these children at the age of 10 and general adaptation at 15.

At the same time, an unsupportive strategy of emotion socialization, manifested by parents ignoring the emotional expressions of children, emphasizes the inappropriateness of certain emotions by repeatedly minimizing their expression by children, expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment, including in a maladaptive manner (including aggression), use punitive measures, thereby projecting insufficient skills of emotion regulation in children. In a study by Seddon et al. (2020), it is shown that children aged 8-11 years who perceived their parents as neglecting their emotional experiences show greater difficulties in emotional regulation than children who perceived their parents as supporting their emotions. Cabecinha-Alati et al. (2021) showed the influence of a non-supportive type of emotion socialization on negative emotional manifestations of children - emotional inhibition and maladaptation. Jin et al. (2017) found a relationship between these types of emotion socialization and psychopathological internalization and externalization disorders in children.

Thus, we are talking about two strategies of emotion socialization – supportive, optimal for preschoolers, providing psychological conditions for the development and positive socialization of the child, and non-supportive, disharmonious, with an insufficient level of emotional acceptance of the child, the possibilities of emotional rejection and ambivalent attitude. The key characteristics of a supportive emotion socialization strategy include emotional awareness, acceptance and learning of children's emotions. A non-supportive one is characterized by a low level/lack of these indicators in parents. In terms of age, the supportive strategy is recognized as effective and productive in early and preschool childhood (Mirabile et al., 2018). As a child grows up and becomes involved in a variety of social connections and contexts, more complex and subtle social skills and greater autonomy are required, including from parents (Mirabile et al., 2018), although emotion socialization remains relevant until adolescence and later age stages (Denham et al., 1994).

The contribution of emotion socialization to emotion development in preschool age is described in terms of its role in the growth of children's basic emotional experience. Empirical studies have shown that emotional socialization: forms an extensive emotion repertoire of children in terms of recognition of visual and verbal signs of emotions (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006), their expression and regulation (Breux et al., 2016; Huguley et al., 2019); promotes the mastery of techniques for expressing emotions, cognition of the language of description

and interpretation of emotions by generally accepted definitions, comprehension of patterns of expression and understanding of one's and another's emotions, which, in turn, additionally affects the successful psychological adaptation of children and their positive relationships with peer groups (Katz et al., 2012; Jin et al., 2017). For example, helping children identify the causes of anger and learning to respond to problems that cause anger form skills to avoid aggressive verbal and nonverbal emotional reactions (Nelson & Boyer, 2018).

An important role is played by different tactics of emotional relations with children from the point of view of the gender of the father and mother, performing a reference role in mastering specifically female and male forms of emotional response (Baker et al., 2011).

A psychologically important mechanism, as a result of positive emotional socialization in preschool childhood, is presented in the form of the children's ability to control emotions.

The empirical study *aimed* to study supportive and non-supportive strategies of parents' response to negative emotions and types of empathic reactions of preschool children.

The following *goals* were solved in the study:

4. To empirically study the types of empathic reactions and behavior of older preschool children according to their parents' assessment using the questionnaire for parents "The nature of manifestations of empathic reactions and behavior in children" (Shchetinina, 2000).
5. To empirically study the types of parents' responses to negative emotions of children using the scale of overcoming negative emotions in children (CCNES). (Fabes et al., 1990).
6. To conduct a correlation analysis between the forms of empathic reactions of children and the types of parents' responses to negative emotions of children.

## Methods

The study used a questionnaire by A. M. Shchetinina "The nature of manifestations of empathic reactions and behavior in children" (Shchetinina, 2000), which allows us to study the form of parents' empathic reaction to negative situations and how children can experience them. The humanistic type of reaction is characterized by the manifestation of interest in the state of the Other, emotionally vivid reaction and identification with him, and active involvement in the situation trying to help and calm down. The mixed form is characterized by the manifestation of both types of empathy in the child, depending on the situation. In the egocentric form, the child, trying to switch the adult's attention to himself, emotionally reacts to the experiences of the Other while striving to receive the praise and approval of an adult and only portrays sympathy and empathy for the Other.

The scale of overcoming negative emotions in children (CCNES) Fabes, R. A., Poulin, R., Eisenberg, N., & Madden-Derdich, D. A. (Fabes et al., 1990) was used to study the types of reaction (coping strategies) of parents to children's emotions manifested in stressful situations. The questionnaire presents 12 daily situations in which a child experiences negative emotions. For each situation, parents assess how likely they are to respond in one of six ways to respond to their child's negative emotions:

1. Distress reactions (DR) – a type of reaction of parents to negative emotions of children, characterized by the manifestation of distress (grief) in connection with the negative behavior of children.
2. Punitive reactions (PR) – a type of reaction characterized by punitive actions that reduce their anger or the need to cope with negative emotions of children.

3. Expressive encouragement (EE) is a type of reaction in which parents encourage children to express negative emotions, thereby confirming the negative emotional states of the child (for example, "it's okay to be sad").
4. Emotionally focused reactions (EFR) – a type of response in which parents display strategies aimed at helping the child feel better (that is, empathy-oriented in response to the bad feelings of the child).
5. Problem-focused reactions (PFR) - a type of response in which parents help the child to solve the problem that caused him an emotional disorder (focused on helping the child solve the problem or cope with a stressful situation).
6. Minimizing reactions (MR) – a type of reaction in which parents downplay the severity (minimize) situations either devalue the problem or the child's emotional reaction.

The authors describe the nature of the parents' reactions in accordance with the types of responses to the situations given in the test.

*Problem-focused reactions (PFR)*. The problem-focused responses reflect the extent to which parents help the child solve the problem that caused his distress. In contrast, *emotion-focused responses (EFR)* reflect the extent to which parents respond with strategies that help the child feel better (that is, calm or distract the child).

These two types of coping reactions reflect the main distinction made by stress and coping theorists (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), between coping responses aimed at eliminating a source of stress (problem-oriented coping) and those aimed at eliminating emotional distress (emotion-oriented coping). Parents who deal with children's negative emotions in supportive ways make a positive contribution to the development of children's social and emotional competence. Although both problem-focused and emotion-focused responses to children's negative emotions contribute equally to children's results, the authors of the questionnaire distinguish between the two. This is made because parents indicate that they do not use the two responses to the same extent. For example, parents are significantly more likely to use problem-focused strategies than comfort or distraction in response to their children's distress. Moreover, problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies differ in their effectiveness depending on the degree of control present in a situation. In situations where there is some degree of control, problem-focused strategies are usually more effective. Alternatively, emotion-focused coping responses are more effective when the situation involves a low degree of control.

Active encouragement of children's expression of negative emotions is reflected in the «*expressive encouragement*» (EE) subscale. The subscale reflects the degree of acceptance by parents of children's negative emotional manifestations.

The CCNES also includes two subscales focusing on non-supporting coping responses. The first of these is the «*minimizing reactions*» (MR) subscale. It reflects the degree to which parents reduce the severity of their children's emotional reactions or discount their problem reports or their emotionally distressed responses. As such, it represents one of the ways in which parents may attempt to limit or contain children's expression of negative emotions. The second non-supportive subscale is the «*punitive responses*» subscale. It reflects the extent to which parents use verbal or physical punishment to control children's negative emotional manifestations. Minimizing reactions are more subtle. They are less overtly controlled attempts to limit children's negative emotional manifestations. Although parents report relatively infrequent use of these non-supportive responses, their use in general may reduce children's social and emotional

competence (but potentially not to the same extent). The authors also present the results of a factor analysis of the CCNES structure, according to which there can be only four (instead of six) subscales (Fabes et al., 2002).

For the purpose of statistical processing of empirical material, methods of descriptive statistics, correlation analysis according to the Spearman criterion were consistently used. Calculations were made in Microsoft Excel and SPSS Statistics 25.

The empirical study involved parents of children aged 5–7 years in the amount of 52 people (of which 23 respondents were female, 29 were male). The study was conducted on the basis of the Municipal Budgetary Preschool Educational Institution of the city of Rostov-on-Don «Kindergarten No. 198».

## Results

The analysis of empirical data was conducted in the several stages:

1. The studied variables were identified:

► forms of empathic reactions and behavior of elder preschool children as assessed by their parents (humanistic, egocentric, mixed);

► types of parents' reactions to children's negative emotions (DR – distress reactions; PR – punitive reactions; EE – expressive encouragement; EFR – emotion-focused reactions; PFR – problem-focused reactions; MR – minimizing reactions).

2. The primary statistical characteristics of the variables are determined: mean value, standard deviation, median, range of ranks.

3. The statistical correlation analysis was conducted according to the Spearman criterion.

The basic statistical characteristics of the studied variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*The basic statistical characteristics of the studied variables (N = 52)*

Variables	Mean	SD	Median	Range
Humanistic form	21,19	1,12	21	20–24
Egocentric form	12,88	1,73	12,5	10–15
Mixed form	17	1	17	16–19
DR – distress reactions	3,74	0,92	3,92	1–3
PR – punitive reactions	3,77	1,31	3,7	1–4
EE – expressive encouragement	5,06	1,54	4,7	2–6
EFR – emotion-focused reactions	5,81	1,33	5,7	3–7
PFR – problem-focused reactions	5,87	1,12	5,4	2–7
MR – minimizing reactions	3,89	0,88	3,08	1–4

The analysis of the statistical characteristics of the variable form of empathic reactions and behavior of elder preschool children (based on their parents' assessments) showed the greatest manifestation of humanistic form of empathy among respondents (Mean = 21,19; SD = 1,12; Median = 21; Range = 20–24), and the least manifestation of egocentric form of empathic reactions and behavior (Mean = 12,88; SD = 1; Median = 12,5; Range = 10–15).

The analysis of the statistical characteristics of the variable of the type of parents' response to children's negative emotions showed that the most common types of responses are «expressive encouragement» (Mean = 5,06; SD = 1,54; Median = 4,7; Range = 2–6), «emotion-focused reactions» (Mean = 5,81; SD = 1,33; Median = 5,7; Range = 3–7), «problem-focused reactions» (Mean = 5,87; SD = 1,12; Median = 5,4; Range = 2–7). The least represented in the sample of respondents are such types of responses to negative emotions of children as «distress reactions» (Mean = 3,74; SD = 0,92; Median = 3,92; Range = 1–3), «punitive reactions» (Mean = 3,77; SD = 1,31; Median = 3,7; Range = 1–4), «minimizing reactions» (Mean = 3,89; SD = 0,88; Median = 3,08; Range = 1–4).

The statistical correlation analysis according to Spearman's criterion revealed the presence of the various significant relationships between the forms of empathic reactions of children and the types of reactions of their parents. Table 2 presents cross-correlations of all analyzed study variables.

**Table 2**

The cross-correlation matrix of the main studied variables (N = 52)

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Form (level) of empathic reaction	–						
2. DR – distress reactions	0,103	–					
3. PR – punitive reactions	0,043	0,176	–				
4. EE – expressive encouragement	–0,121	0,151	<b>0,571**</b>	–			
5. EFR – emotion-focused reactions	<b>0,469**</b>	<b>–0,378*</b>	0,014	–0,211	–		
6. PFR – problem-focused reactions	<b>0,441*</b>	–0,162	0,107	–0,022	<b>0,782**</b>	–	
7. MR – minimizing reactions	<b>–0,659**</b>	–0,142	–0,26	–0,041	–0,361	–0,399	–

Note: \*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,01$ .

The following significant correlations have been identified:

- the direct significant relationship ( $r = 0,469$  at  $p < 0,01$ ) between the level of empathic reactions of children and the type of response of parents: *emotion-focused reactions*. This indicates the fact that the more often parents show reactions focused on the emotions of their children, the higher the level of formation of empathic reactions is observed in their child. Therefore, the child is more prone to the manifestation of the humanistic form of empathy;
- the direct significant relationship ( $r = 0,441$  at  $p < 0,05$ ) between the level of empathic reactions of children and the type of response of parents: *problem-focused reactions*. This indicates that the more often parents show reactions focused on the problems of their children, the higher the level of formation of empathic reactions is observed in their child. It indicates the manifestation of the humanistic form of empathy;
- the inverse significant relationship ( $r = -0,659$  at  $p < 0,01$ ) between the level of empathic reactions of children and the type of response of parents: *minimizing reactions*. This indicates that the more often parents show minimization reactions, the lower the level of formation of empathic reactions is observed in the child. Therefore, the child is more prone to the manifestation of the egocentric form of empathy.

## Discussion

As a result of the empirical study, it was found that the majority of children in the study sample (based on their parents' assessments) are characterized by the humanistic form of empathy. It involves showing interest in emotional states of others, active involvement in a problem situation of the Other, and the desire to help them. The egocentric form of empathy, which involves a reaction to an emotional state of the Other in order to receive praise from an adult (for one's own benefit), is rarely observed.

By studying the types of parents' responses to children's negative emotions we revealed that the most common types of responses are «expressive encouragement», «emotion-focused reactions», «problem-focused reactions». This indicates that it is typical for the parents of the study sample to approve an external manifestation of negative emotions in their child, provide support in experiencing negative emotional states, and help in solving a problem situation.

These types of responses can be classified as supportive coping reactions, since they involve parents' orientation towards accepting the child's emotional state, providing support and assistance to their child in stressful problem situations. Parents, who deal with children's negative emotions in supportive ways, contribute positively to the development of children's social and emotional competence.

The least represented in the sample of respondents are such types of responses to negative emotions of children as «distress reactions», «punitive reactions», «minimizing reactions». That is, it is not typical for parents to frequently display punitive actions against children, show the feelings of grief and understatement, devalue the feelings and problems of their child. Punitive reactions and minimizing reactions can be attributed to non-supportive coping reactions. They do not lead to a problem solution and decrease in the negative emotional state of a child. The reactions are only aimed at protecting the feelings and emotions of a parent



oneself. Both types of non-supportive coping responses have been found to be associated with sub-optimal results in children, such as lower levels of empathy and social responsiveness, and increased anxiety.

The correlation analysis revealed the presence of direct significant relationships between a level of empathic reactions of children and certain types of parental responses to negative emotions of a child: «emotion-focused reactions», «problem-focused reactions». The inverse significant relationship was also found between a level of empathic reactions and behavior of children and the type of response of parents «minimizing reactions». That is, such supporting coping reactions of parents to their child's negative emotions as «emotion-focused reactions», «problem-focused reactions», contribute to the formation of a higher level (humanistic form) of children's empathic reactions. The «minimizing reactions», which is not a supportive coping reaction of parents, contribute to the formation of a lower level (egocentric form) of empathic reactions and behavior in children.

The results of the correlation analysis conducted in the study are consistent with the Eisenberg's model of emotional socialization (Eisenberg et al., 1998). According to this model, stable parents' reactions to children's emotions, and discussion of emotions with them, indirectly form social and emotional competence in children. It contains the approach to understanding the emotional socialization of a child through parents' reactions to emotions and their discussion, indirectly affecting the social-emotional competence of children throughout childhood further to adolescence.

That is, the current research and theory suggests that parents who use negative control strategies, when their children express negative emotions, raise children incapable for efficient emotions or behavior regulation. In addition, the use of non-supportive strategies to control children's negative emotions teaches children to suppress their negative emotions, which in turn increases their negative emotional arousal and anxiety. When parents are focused on the suppression of emotions, a child tends to «keep» a negative emotion until a moment when a similar situation arises. That way, over time, the pattern of accumulated and released negative emotions is formed. As a result, it can provoke more intense emotional manifestations that are difficult for children to cope with.

The last possible reaction of parents to expression of negative emotions by children is that parents themselves may experience distress. The degree of parents' distress is important because it affects their socializing behavior. Parents who experience distress when their children express negative emotions are more likely to focus on their own discomfort rather than their children's needs and condition. In a situation of distress, for parents it is difficult to calm down. They may feel emotionally disorganized, feel like they are «losing their temper», when faced with negative emotional manifestations of children. Such parents are unlikely to be able to support their children in their negative emotional experiences. On the contrary, they are likely to intensify own efforts to control their children's negative emotional manifestations by punishing or minimizing them. In turn, children, who are punished for expressing negative emotions, tend to suppress those emotions until they will lose control of them. Parents, who become emotionally overexcited by children's negative emotional response and rely on punishment

and minimization to achieve relief from aversive exposure, are sacrificing the socialization of children. Insufficient socialization leads to the repress of emotions until their release in a very intense and dysregulatory manner.

The supporting strategies of emotional socialization can be considered as the most optimal, corresponding to the context of emotional development of a preschooler, and increasing their emotional competence.

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#### Author contribution statement

**Anna Viktorovna Chernaya** – development of the concept and design of the study, writing a review and discussion parts, data analysis and theoretical generalization of the results, approval of the manuscript for submission for publication, editing the text of the article.

**Yuliya Aleksandrovna Margunova** – obtaining, analysis and interpretation of data; writing of the discussion part; article text design.

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**Conflict of interest information**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.