

# Mothers' Depression and their Children's Emotional Dysregulation

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The ability to regulate one's emotions is an integral part of the socio-emotional developmental process (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). In the emotion regulatory process, children learn how to manage the intensity and expression of emotions and adjust accordingly based on the situation (Thompson, 1994; Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). During the early years, a child's ability to regulate their own emotions is highly contingent upon a caregiver's ability to re-establish and reinforce a child's emotions and do so through response to their child (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002, Eisenberg et al., 2003). Because a child is so dependent on their parent to help reinstate positive mood and emotions, when a caregiver is emotionally or psychologically absent, the reciprocal emotional relationship that helps the child learn how to manage their behaviors can suffer (Thompson, 2001, Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002, Shipman et al., 2007). The lack of positive affect and sensitivity to others that can occur in maternal depression can affect how a mother is able to help their child regulate their own emotions (Thompson, 2001) and thus can affect the child's emotion regulatory capabilities (Morris et al., 2007).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how maternal depression affects a child's ability to regulate their emotions when they have been referred to Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) for their disruptive behaviors. There were 267 mother-child dyads; 88 depressive and 179 non-depressive mother-child dyads that were referred for PCIT because of their child's disruptive behavior problems. A pre-DPICS assessment which is a semi-structured interaction designed to elicit varying levels of structure from the parent is carried out in three segments: Child directed, Parent directed and Clean up. These assessments are observationally coded using the Emotional Availability Scales (EA; Biringen, 2000). Results showed that across the three segments, there was a significant drop in the child's emotional responsiveness and involvement with the parent. Furthermore, mothers who were depressed and who viewed their child as more emotionally reactive had more children who appeared more emotionally dysregulated in the observational interaction. These findings suggest that maternal depression plays a role in a child's emotion regulation.

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