The Role of Emotion Socialization in Promoting Child Flourishing

Emotion socialization refers to the direct and indirect ways that parents promote children’s capacities to experience emotions, identify and understand the contexts of emotions in themselves and in others, and efficiently manage their emotions (Friedlmeier, Corapci, & Cole, 2011; Hastings & De, 2008). Although there are a number of emotion socialization behaviors, most reflect key practices which include parents’ conversations with children about emotions and their responses to children’s expressions of emotions as strategies to scaffold children’s growing capacities to regulate emotions and behavior (Friedlmeier et al., 2011). Emotion socialization practices play an important role in promoting child flourishing, particularly among those at risk for less optimal developmental outcomes. Because emotions and their expressions are adaptive from evolutionary perspectives (Shariff & Tracy, 2011), considering contextual influences on emotion socialization is critical to understanding how such practices are related to children’s flourishing in diverse circumstances. We begin this chapter first by addressing key theoretical frameworks that reflect emotion socialization practices from evolutionary, cultural, and family contextual frameworks. Next, we examine variations in emotion socialization related to family, parent, and child characteristics. We conclude by addressing the role of emotion socialization in moderating the associations between risks and children’s successful developmental outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks Relevant to Emotion Socialization

Evolutionary perspectives on emotion socialization, cultural models of emotion socialization, and family contextual models of emotion socialization each offer complementary
frames from which to better understand the relations between emotion socialization practices and child flourishing. There is a wide body of literature on the adaptive nature of emotions. The main premise (Shariff & Tracy, 2011) is that emotions reflect “complex behavioral, physiological, cognitive and affective processes” (p. 396) that are designed to promote the species’ adaptive responses to the environment. The Social Brain hypothesis (Dunbar, 1998, 2014; Gowlett, Gamble, & Dunbar, 2012), for example, purports that the human brain evolved to allow for the negotiation of complex social processes in groups and, thereby, promote flourishing of the species. Humans have a unique capacity for awareness of their own and others’ emotions, including the awareness of shared affective states (Steklis & Lane, 2012), that promote these adaptive social processes. This advanced awareness of emotions requires the intersection of cognitive processes afforded by the prefrontal cortex and the socialization practices of adults with children. In the same way that parents around the world share a common goal to raise healthy children (Keller, 2007, 2012), socialization practices, too, reflect a universal goal to promote desired competencies. Of course, emotion socialization practices differ widely to reflect the norms and values of the culture (Friedlmeier et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2012).

Keller and colleagues (Keller et al., 2006), expanding on the work of Kagitçibasi (Kagitcibasi, 2005), discuss three cultural models of the self that inform parents’ socialization goals and strategies: models of independence, interdependence, and autonomous relatedness. Models of independence, more typical in Westernized and industrialized/post–industrial societies, emphasize the individual as separate from others and, thus, socialization goals focus on self-maximization. Models of interdependence stress the collectivist nature of the group and the individual and other as interrelated. Socialization goals aim to encourage the contributions of the individual to the optimal functioning of the group, which encompasses the cultural group and the
family. Interdependent cultures, typically reflecting agricultural and hunter-gatherer societies who endorse collectivist values, are more likely to emphasize the needs of the group and to value the preservation of interpersonal relationships and social networks (Keller, Völker, & Yovsi, 2005). Models of autonomous-relatedness reflect an emphasis on both self and other, and socialization goals speak to the role of the self as autonomous and the self as interrelated. Many cultures today include elements of both independence and interdependence (Raeff, 2010).

Based on conceptualizations of individualistic and collectivist societies, researchers have characterized parents’ emotion socialization as promoting children’s individualistic emotion competence or their relational emotion competence (Chan, Bowes, & Wyver, 2009; Friedlmeier et al., 2011). Cultures endorsing individualistic emotional competence encourage the expression of emotions associated with the expression of self-oriented needs such as the expression of pride. Emotion socialization efforts, then, focus on supporting children’s expressions of both positive and negative emotions. Emotion socialization strategies in support of relational emotion competence, however, tend to promote the expression of other-oriented emotions such as expressions of concern for others and to discourage personal expressions of negative emotions such as anger that could jeopardize interpersonal relations (Chan et al., 2009).

Specific models of emotions in the context of culture provide helpful frames of reference. Cole and Tan’s (2015) model of the cultural socialization of emotion provides a framework on cultural views of desirable behavior and the emotion socialization goals driven by these views. Similarly, Dunsmore and Halberstadt’s (1997) socialization of emotion-related schemas model accentuates the role of culture in the interpretation of emotion-related contexts, expectations about the meanings of emotional experiences, and expectations for emotional expression. Both models provide complementary lenses suggesting the ways in which emotional socialization in
families may differ as a function of cultural context and socialization goals specific to cultural
groups. Hence, culture-wide norms are further dispersed to children through parents’ beliefs
about emotions and through their emotion socialization practices demonstrated during
interactions with children (Camras, Shuster, & Fraumeni, 2013).

Well-known heuristic models of emotion socialization in the family, most notably the
work by Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998) and Morris and
colleagues (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), emphasize the influence of the
home context in shaping children’s emotional development. Eisenberg’s seminal model
highlights the role of parents’ conversations with children about emotions, their reactions to
children’s emotions, and their own expressions of emotion as influential socialization strategies.
Morris and colleagues outline key elements of the family environment, specifically parents’
modeling of emotional behavior/children’s observations of parental behavior, the emotional
climate of the family, and parents’ emotion socialization practices, as influential in children’s
emotional development. Variations in the aspects of emotion socialization outlined by Eisenberg
and Morris and their colleagues help to explain why emotion socialization practices vary
between groups and why they may be differentially associated with child flourishing. These
models extend and complement critical research on emotion socialization including work on
meta emotion philosophy and parenting practices such as emotion coaching by Gottman, Katz,
and Hooven (e.g. Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Hooven, Gottman, & Katz, 1995; Katz,
Maliken, & Stettler, 2012). Denham’s work on parenting in support of children’s emotional
competence (e.g. Denham, Basset, & Wyatt, 2007) has also played a significant role in moving
the field forward both in theory and in practice.

**Emotion Socialization behaviors According to Parent and Child Characteristics**
We turn next to variations in how and when parents use emotion socialization practices with their children, including parental talk about emotions and their responses to children’s expressions of emotions, and how these variations in emotion socialization practices are related to child flourishing. We begin by examining variations in emotion socialization practices across cultural contexts and then we turn to differences in practices associated with individual characteristics including parent and child gender and child temperament.

**Cultural Groups**

Variations in emotion socialization practices across cultures reflect differences in expectations for what emotions should be expressed and how and to whom emotions are displayed (Parker et al., 2012). Rules for emotional display, and, hence, rules for emotion socialization, reflect practices that are designed to promote specific competencies unique to the culture and are adaptive for that cultural group.

*European American families.* Most research on the relations between emotion socialization practices and children’s outcomes has been conducted in middle-class, European American families (Le et al., 2008; Morelen & Thomassin, 2013). In this group, emotion socialization practices, including parental talk about emotions and supportive responses to emotions, are related to children’s emotional and behavioral competencies. For example, emotion talk is one of several emotion socialization practices associated with toddlers’ delay of gratification and coping skills (Brophy-Herb, Stansbury, Bocknek, & Horodynski, 2012), their prosocial skills (Brownell, Svetlova, Anderson, Nichols, & Drummond, 2013), and other behavioral competencies (McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007). Conversely, parents’ ignoring of children’s emotional displays or distressed responses to emotional displays are linked to European American preschoolers’ externalizing (Lugo-Candelas, 2012), internalizing, and
dysregulatory behaviors (Roberts & Strayer, 1987). Also, maternal beliefs about the value of emotions and expression of emotions are related to children’s behavioral and regulatory competencies (Brophy-Herb et al., 2012; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010; Katz, Maliken, & Stettler, 2012) while maternal invitations to explore feelings and express emotions are related to children’s positive peer relations and fewer behavior problems (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001; McElwain et al., 2007).

*African American families.* Unlike Caucasian families, among African American individuals, extensive historical experiences of racism have influenced families’ emotional experiences (Morelen & Thomassin, 2013). As such, emotion socialization practices tend to reflect techniques that have been historically protective (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Henry, & Florsheim, 2000) and are probably intended to prepare African American children for the discrimination they may face (McHale et al., 2006). In general, African American mothers tend to use less emotion talk with their children than European American parents. Interestingly, there is some research to suggest that African American mothers use emotion talk with their infants and toddlers, but may use less emotion talk as their children grow older. For instance, some studies have shown that African American mothers (Garrett-Peters et al., 2008) and fathers (Garrett-Peters, Mills-Koonce, Zerwas, Cox, & Vernon-Feagans, 2011) use positive emotion talk in book sharing tasks with their infants. With their preschoolers, however, African American mothers are less likely to talk about emotions than are European American mothers (Nelson et al., 2013). Similarly, African American mothers’ experiences with racism are positively associated with their emotion talk during interactions with their toddlers (Odom et al., 2014), but with older children, mothers’ ongoing experiences with racism are related (via their effects on parental stress and depression) to declines in competence-promoting parenting that includes
areas such as shared positive affect (Brody et al., 2008). Thus, it may be that African American parents reduce their emotion talk as their children grow older in preparation for the discriminatory experiences children may encounter or it may be that long-term exposure to discrimination contributes to substantive changes in emotion socialization practices.

Relative to expectations for emotional expression, African American parents are generally less likely than European Americans to encourage expression of negative emotions, particularly anger (Nelson, Leerkes, O’Brien, Calkins, & Marcovitch, 2012). They tend to use what are considered from a Eurocentric perspective as punitive (Leerkes & Siepak, 2006; Montague, Magai, Consedine, & Gillespie, 2003) or minimizing behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 1999) in response to their children’s emotional distress and expressions of negative emotions (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004). However, African American children often do not interpret ignoring, dismissing, or punitive responses as diminishing their perception of parental love (Leerkes, Supple, & Gudmunson, 2014). Such findings underscore the importance of viewing socialization strategies as keys to child flourishing in the context of shared parent/child goals.

Some studies suggest that not only are emotion socialization practices differentially employed by African American parents as compared to other cultural groups but they may also be differentially associated with outcomes. For example, among African American children, adults’ encouragement of expressing emotions is related negatively to children’s academic competencies (Nelson et al., 2013), while in European American children such practices are related positively to children’s academic success (Hooven, Gottman, & Katz, 1995). Clearly, there is a critical need for longitudinal work examining changes in emotion socialization over time. Such work would contribute substantially to our understanding of how and why variations in practices occur and illuminate what may be differential impacts on development.
Asian American and Latin American families. One contribution to the differences in emotion socialization practices across cultures lies in the variation among subgroups within larger cultural groups, such as those variations in Asian American and Latino American families (Sue & Sue, 2013). Differences in language, dialect and acculturation levels in family members are key influences on emotion socialization practices (Friedlmeier et al., 2011; Perez Rivera & Dunsmore, 2011). Morelen’s and Thomassin’s (2013) comprehensive literature review on emotion socialization and ethnicity provides a critical resource underscoring the presence of differences and commonalities in socialization practices across subgroups.

Asian American families. Parents in Asian American families tend to socialize their children to suppress their individual emotions, a practice that differs from Westernized approaches which promote children’s open expressions of emotions (Saw & Okazaki, 2010). Differences between emotion-related behaviors of Asian Americans and European Americans likely stem from cultural norms, with Eastern preferences emphasizing the balance between expression and suppression of emotions while Western norms encourage a fuller expression of emotions (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, Freire-Bebeau, & Przymus, 2002). Chinese mothers are more likely to use an “emotion-criticizing style” which emphasizes perceived appropriate behavior and provides limited explanation, compared to European American mothers who emphasize a wide range of emotional expressiveness (Wang, 2001). In addition, Japanese mothers are less likely to encourage emotional expressivity in their children than are European American mothers (Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, Cole, Mizuta, & Hiruma, 1996), a practice likely informed by cultural standards of behavior. Thus, both Chinese and Japanese mothers are similar in practices around discouraging emotional expression unlike their European American counterparts.
Despite differences in socialization practices, associations with children’s outcomes show some similarities across groups. Punishing and neglecting negative emotions, for instance, are related to anxiety in Asian American young children (Huang, Cheng, Calzada, & Brotman, 2012), findings that are parallel to those among studies of European American children discussed earlier. Similarly, mothers’ emotion talk is related to both European American and immigrant Chinese children’s emotion knowledge, although the types of references to emotions vary between the groups (Doan & Wang, 2010). At least in our review of the literature, similarities or differences between Asian American and African American families have not been examined.

Latin American families. Among Latin American families, cultural values emphasize group conformity and family harmony (Perez Rivera & Dunsmore, 2011) and reflect goals of relational emotion competence. Hence, Latino mothers socialize their children by focusing on children’s interdependence with their parents, particularly with their mothers (Harwood, Leyendecker, Carlson, Asencio, & Miller, 2002; Miller & Harwood, 2002). Family roles and gender roles, often clearly defined in Latino families, and values emphasizing respeto inform emotion socialization practices including how and to whom emotions are expressed. While European American parents value the promotion of children’s autonomy in expression (Leyendecker, Harwood, Lamb, & Schölmerich, 2002; Schulze, Harwood, Schoelmerich, & Leyendecker, 2002), Latin American parents generally tend to value the preservation of harmony in the group and the central role of the family, familismo. Moreover, acculturation is a major influence on socialization practices. Latina mothers who orient more toward European American values are less likely to view children’s expressions of negative emotions as concerning while mothers who hold to Latin American values tend to view such expressiveness as more problematic (Perez Rivera & Dunsmore, 2011). Some studies have shown that Latina
mothers are more likely to ignore children’s expressions of negative emotions (Lugo-Candelas, 2012), unlike African American parents who may be more likely to actively discourage such expressions (Nelson et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2013). These findings suggest that while negative emotions may be discouraged in multiple groups, the methods of discouragement differ.

The use of emotion socialization strategies also varies according to the topic of discussion. For example, Mexican American parents and children make more emotional references when discussing interpersonal topics, such as friends and family members (Flannagan & Perese, 1998). In contrast, European American dyads use more emotional references when discussing topics related to learning, while African American parents and children make more emotional references when the topic of discussion is neither interpersonal nor academic, such as conversation about circle time at preschool (Flannagan & Perese, 1998).

In some respects, parental emotion socialization strategies and relations to child outcomes are similar between Latin American and European American children. For example, among Latin American preschoolers, maternal discourse about resolutions to children’s negative emotional experiences is related to children’s later social problem solving skills (Leyva, Berrocal, & Nolivos, 2014). Additionally, emotional involvement, including encouragement of emotional expression and emotion talk, mediates the association between parental depression and Latino children’s social emotional competence and peer problems (Valdez, Shewakramani, Goldberg, & Padilla, 2013). In recently immigrated Mexican families, family cohesion and positive parenting, including parental communication with children about their problems in an emotionally-regulated manner, is associated with children’s social competence (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2012). These findings are similar to those reported in European American samples.
Among almost all cultural groups, there remains a paucity of research on emotion socialization relative to the larger literature on parenting and children’s outcomes. Closer examinations of emotion socialization practices across cultures are emerging. This work will aid in a more robust understanding of how and why emotion socialization practices differ across cultures, particularly with regard to how socialization practices vary within and between families as a function of characteristics such as immigration status, acculturation, and intersections between race and culture. The lack of this information significantly limits understandings about the specific ways in which emotion socialization practices promote child flourishing.

**Parent and Child Gender**

Mothers and fathers tend to vary in their types and frequencies of emotion socialization practices, although, as noted, the vast majority of this research is based on samples of European Americans parents in primarily intact families. Surprisingly, most of the work has focused on separate studies of mothers’ and fathers’ practices or on separate analyses of maternal and paternal data rather than using a dyadic approach to examine interrelations (Cook & Kenny, 2005) between mothers’ and fathers’ emotion socialization practices. Generally, the literature suggests that mothers tend to use more emotion words and to talk more specifically about emotional aspects of experience with their children as compared to fathers (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Zeman & Fivush, 2013). This may be based on the fact that, generally, females converse about emotions more frequently than males (Brody & Hall, 2010). Moreover, mothers and fathers may also utilize differing emotion socialization behaviors with their sons and daughters. With respect to very young children, a few studies show either no differences in parents’ use of emotion talk with toddler boys and girls (Brophy-Herb et al., under review) or greater parental use of internal state language, including emotion talk, toward toddler
boys (Roger, Rinaldi, & Howe, 2012). The research on parental talk about emotions with preschoolers is mixed with research with samples of preschool aged and older children suggesting that parents talk about emotions more frequently and use a greater variety of emotion words with girls than with boys (Kuebli & Fivush, 1992) and other work highlighting mothers equal use of emotion talk with boys and with girls (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007). Some work notes that fathers talk more frequently about emotions with their daughters than with sons (Denham et al., 2007). Thus, both boys and girls appear to be exposed to discussions of emotions at home. Despite this, there is a general consensus that girls may be socialized to focus more on emotional aspects of their life than are boys (Naghavi & Redzuan, 2011), which likely engenders a greater focus on discussions about emotions. Perhaps as a result, girls use a wider variety emotion words than do boys (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995).

There are differences in parents’ talk about emotions with regard to the type of emotion in the context of child gender. For example, parents talk more about sadness with girls while they use anger-related words more with boys (Adams et al., 1995; Fivush, 1991; Fivush et al., 2000). Mothers and fathers pay more attention to boys’ anger, but ignore or punish girls’ anger, reinforcing boys’ expressions of anger (Chaplin, Casey, Sinha, & Mayes, 2010; Chaplin, Cole, & Zahn-Waxler, 2005). Moreover, some studies suggest that mothers focus on boys’ happiness and match boys’ emotions more than girls’ (Malatesta & Haviland, 1982). Some research reports mothers’ and fathers’ more positive responses to girls’ sadness than to boys’ sadness (Chaplin et al., 2010) while other work has shown that mothers’ are more supportive of their sons’ sadness and fathers are more supportive of their daughters’ expressions of sadness (Cassano, Zeman, & Sanders, 2014). Collectively, these practices likely contribute to later gender differences in boys’ and girls’ sadness and depressive states (Conway, Giannopoulos, & Stiefenkofer, 1990).
However, it is also important to note that some studies report no gender differences in parents’ socialization practices with boys and girls (Lytton & Romney, 1991).

Finally, some research suggests the mothers’ and fathers’ emotion socialization practices yield differential associations with child flourishing. For example, mothers’ attentiveness to children’s emotions and support of children’s regulation of negative emotions predicts young children’s emotion knowledge, while the relations of fathers’ emotion socialization to children’s emotion knowledge are less robust (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002). As was the case with changes in emotion talk over time in some cultures, so, too, does work suggest that fathers’ participation in emotion socialization behaviors may increase and change as children age (Baker, Fenning, & Crnic, 2011). This line of research again underscores the need for longitudinal research on emotion socialization practices among mothers and fathers.

*Associations between child gender, emotion socialization and child flourishing.* The associations between emotion socialization and child flourishing also vary in the context of the child’s gender. For instance, mothers’ supportive and problem-focused reactions to their children’s negative emotions promote boys’ comforting reactions to others’ negative emotions, while mothers’ moderate encouragements of expressivity may be more optimal for girls’ comforting reactions. Boys may require more encouragement of expressivity due to gender-role expectations related to the emotional expression (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996). Similarly, girls’ may be more susceptible to mothers’ and fathers’ emotion socialization (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010), perhaps because girls are socialized to be more keenly attuned to emotional messages within interactions than are boys (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Fivush et al., 2000). Thus, the same emotion socialization strategies may not lead to the same success for boys and girls.

*Child Temperament*
Variations in child temperament also relate to differences in emotion socialization and to the ways children process and incorporate those emotion socialization efforts into their own reactions to experiences. It is especially important to understand the manner in which perceived difficult temperament interacts with and affects parents’ responsiveness. Children with increased temperamental reactivity or heightened emotionality present many opportunities for supportive or unsupportive responses from parents. Challenging temperaments may also evoke harsher or less supportive emotion socialization practices (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001), or they may present more frequent opportunities for responsive parents to scaffold emotion regulation skills (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, & Cohen, 2009; Paulussen-Hoogeboom, Stams, Hermanns, & Peetsma, 2008). Highly reactive children or those with temperaments characterized by heightened negative emotionality may also be more susceptible to the effects of parenting (Belsky & Pluess, 2009) making the quality of emotion socialization practices, including supports for children’s regulatory skills, particularly important.

Challenging temperaments provide more frequent opportunity for parents to respond to their children's emotions. If parents are able to respond supportively, more frequent emotional exchanges could mean that children with challenging temperaments receive an abundance of supportive emotional responses. In the case of unsupportive responses, however, they may be subject to a greater and more frequent lack of emotional support than their less challenging peers. Some research indicates that children who are highly reactive and prone to negative emotionality are, in fact, more likely to elicit unsupportive parental responses to their negative emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Fabes et al., 2001). In contrast, others show no relation between temperament and emotion coaching, which refers to parents’ beliefs and emotion socialization
practices in support of children’s emotional expressions (Gottman et al., 1996) or temperamental and maternal use of internal state language, including emotion talk (Garner & Dunsmore, 2011).

Because challenging temperaments include variations in reactivity (e.g., frequency, valence, intensity), developing an ability to regulate their reactions to environmental stimuli is important for these children. Outcomes are often determined by the relative success or failure of their developing regulatory capacities. Reactive temperaments bring increased opportunities for the children to regulate, which also means frequent opportunities for emotion socialization practices to enhance or inhibit children’s successful regulation attempts. For example, children with high levels of shyness demonstrate less adaptive play behaviors with peers when parents’ responses to negative emotions are unsupportive and more adaptive behaviors when they are supportive (e.g., problem-solving, encouraging emotional expression; Davis & Buss, 2012). Likewise, preschoolers low in approach behaviors show gain in their emotion regulation skills when parents are supportive of their expressions of emotions (Yagmurlu & Altan, 2010).

Differential susceptibility. Temperament is thought to reflect a biological sensitivity to the environment, including parenting behaviors. The increased opportunity that reactive children present for parents’ to respond to expressions of emotion may be combined with an increased sensitivity to the effects of parenting (Belsky & Pluess, 2009). Unsupportive responses to negative emotions, for example, can have a disparate impact on temperamentally reactive children as compared to children who are less reactive. Punitive responses to children’s negative emotions are only related to internalizing behaviors for those boys who are high on negative emotionality (Engle & McElwain, 2011). Other studies find that temperament moderates the effects of emotion socialization in very positive ways. For example, mothers’ emotional support via physically soothing toddlers during distress is associated with toddlers’ increased regulatory
behavior, especially for toddlers who are more reactive (Mirabile, Scaramella, Sohr-Preston, & Robison, 2009). Respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), a measure of parasympathetic regulatory activity, is a proposed biopsychosocial aspect of temperament as well as a marker of differential susceptibility to environmental influence (Porges, 2007). Some research (Hastings & De, 2008) indicates that emotion socialization practices have significant impacts on children’s later competencies and problem behaviors only for children with low RSA. Thus, differential susceptibility proposes the potential for increased benefit derived through interaction with positive parenting and suggests that children with more reactive temperaments may be poised to take particular advantage of positive emotion socialization practices.

**Emotion Socialization as Optimizing Children’s Social-Emotional Development**

Emotion socialization practices can optimize development for children in contexts characterized by elements of risk. Next, we will examine emotion socialization as promoting children’s flourishing in the contexts of poverty, family violence, parental psychosocial functioning, and children’s developmental risk.

**Associations Between Economic Disadvantage and Emotion Socialization**

The cumulative risk associated with economic disadvantage encompasses limited financial resources, home and neighborhood safety concerns, lack of access to quality education, and the strains on mental health associated with these stressors (Evans, 2004). Early, prolonged exposure to stress can impair physiological regulation systems reducing a child's ability to cope with challenges (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997; Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, 2013). Likewise, the accumulated stress experienced by many disadvantaged families may overwhelm parents' capacities to support children’s behavioral and regulatory competencies. Alternatively, however, research highlights a full range of parental functioning and behavior in
low income families (Ellingsen, Baker, Blacher, & Crnic, 2014) including the use of multiple, positive emotion socialization practices (Brophy-Herb, et al., 2012). This variation in parenting behaviors can help to elucidate key components of flourishing in contexts of risk.

Recent work has focused on mothers’ comments about emotions and children’s behavioral outcomes in low-income populations and highlights the protective role emotion socialization practices may play among vulnerable children. For example, Meins and colleagues (2013) found that mothers’ sensitive comments (including the use of emotion talk) to children in infancy about their internal feeling states and mental states was linked to fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems beyond the contributions of sensitive parenting for children from the most economically-disadvantaged families. Mothers’ comments were not salient to the development of children from higher socioeconomic status homes. Similarly, we (Brophy-Herb et al., under review) have found that toddlers with early behavioral problems growing up in the most economically-vulnerable homes benefit the most from mothers’ specific comments about emotions, including the contexts and behavioral indicators of emotions and the relevance of the emotion to the child’s own experience. For toddlers in less economically-stressed families, mothers’ comments were not related to later behavioral outcomes.

Additional work also points to positive associations between emotion socialization and children’s emotion regulation skills in environments of economic disadvantage (Ellis, Alisic, Reiss, Dishion, & Fisher, 2014); this is important because emotion regulation skills can moderate the effects of contextual stressors and promote child flourishing despite risk. The use of emotion socialization behaviors in combination, including positive emotional expressivity and emotion talk, has been shown to improve toddlers’ coping and regulatory abilities in low income families (Brophy-Herb et al., 2012). Positive emotion socialization practices also predict children’s
emotional understanding and emotion regulation (Katz et al., 2012) which, in turn, promotes greater academic and social skills for children growing up in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods (Cunningham, Kliewer, & Garner, 2009). Moreover, in studies of toddlers and young children from low-income families, supportive parental reactions to children’s negative emotions positively impact children’s regulatory capacities, which then improves social and behavioral competence (Spinrad et al., 2007). Hence, emotional socialization is an important pathway by which children can develop the competencies necessary to flourish despite risk.

**Associations between Family Risk and Emotion Socialization**

Emotion socialization is also thought to promote flourishing in the context of serious family stressors including domestic violence (Katz & Rigterink, 2012). For example, among families experiencing lower levels of intimate partner violence (less intense forms such as grabbing and pushing and with lower frequency of occurrence), mothers’ emotion coaching (Gottman et al., 1996), including specific talk to children about emotions and their supportive responses to their children’s expressions of emotions, moderates the effects of the intimate partner violence on children’s aggressive behaviors. Moreover, fathers’ emotion coaching mitigates the effects of intimate partner violence on children’s social withdrawal (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006). Hence, these emotion socialization practices may assist children in regulating intense emotions via parents’ labeling and discussion of emotion and support in developing strategies to manage strong feelings (Gottman et al., 1996; Hooven et al., 1995). This effect is evident in other risk associated family contexts. For instance, Ellis and colleagues (Ellis et al., 2014) found that maternal emotion coaching mediated the association between family risk (family income, family stress, and report of maltreatment) and preschoolers’ emotional lability, a maladaptive form of emotion regulation. The positive effects of emotion coaching extend outside
of the family context to children’s social relationships with peers as well. For instance, mothers’ emotion coaching moderates the effects of intimate partner violence on children’s responses to peer provocations, suggesting the important role of positive emotion practices in supporting children’s positive social adjustment (Katz, Hunter, & Klowden, 2008).

**Associations between Maternal Depression and Emotion Socialization**

Emotion socialization practices are also thought to promote developmental success in the context of maternal depression, one of the most prevalent psychosocial problems mothers face (Ertel, Rich-Edwards, & Koenen, 2011; Horwitz, Briggs-Gowan, Storfer-Isser, & Carter, 2007). For example, after establishing that some of the relationship between depression and decreased maternal sensitivity could be explained by a reduced ability to take the infant's perspective, Trapolini and colleagues (Trapolini, Ungerer, & McMahon, 2008) reported that the impact of perspective taking on maternal sensitivity is greater for depressed mothers. An intervention focused on improving perspective-taking ability may not only preserve mother's caregiving capacity, but also promote increased sensitivity for depressed mothers. Similarly, mothers’ supportive responses to school aged children’s negative emotions minimize the effects of mothers’ psychopathology, including anxiety and depression, on children’s externalizing behaviors (Suveg, Shaffer, Morelen, & Thomassin, 2011). Interesting work examining emotional awareness as promoting optimal development of children with depressed mothers has shown that depressed mothers with greater emotional awareness are more likely to encourage their children to engage in strategies that require problem solving and emotion regulation as compared to their less emotionally-aware counterparts (Monti, Rudolph, & Abaied, 2014). Such findings underscore the importance of emotion socialization strategies as key strategies in helping children to flourish in the context of compromised maternal psychosocial functioning.
Associations between Children’s Developmental Risks and Emotion Socialization

Researchers are beginning to focus on emotion socialization practices with children who are atypically developing. Some research indicates that emotion socialization practices promote social-emotional competence in children with developmental risk in much the same manner as their typically developing peers. For example, while parents of children with developmental delays may value acquisition of living skills above certain emotional competencies, the extent to which parents focus on emotions during discussion with children is related to parents’ and teachers’ ratings of social skills for both typically and atypically developing children (Baker & Crnic, 2009). In other cases, specific emotional socialization practices may be of particular importance for children with developmental delays. Mothers’ sensitivity towards their children’s emotional states and shared positive affect, for example, predicts children’s later social skills but only for children with developmental delays as compared to their peers who are typically developing (Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007). In research on children with and without autism spectrum disorders (ASD), parental emotion coaching had no impact on the externalizing behaviors of typically developing children but it significantly reduced the externalizing behaviors of children with ASDs (Pasalich, Waschbusch, Dadds, & Hawes, 2014).

Children with behavior problems also appear to flourish in the context of positive emotion socialization practices. For instance, among children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder, maternal emotion coaching is related to fewer mother-reported externalizing behaviors and child-reported disruptive behaviors (Dunsmore, Booker, & Ollendick, 2013). Parenting programs aimed at enhancing parental emotion coaching show promising results. In recent pilot tests, enhanced emotion coaching was related to fewer behavior problems among children with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2014; Herbert, Harvey,
Future research focusing on emotion socialization as a key to child flourishing, particularly for children with developmental delays and behavioral challenges, will likely offer new insights in optimizing developmental outcomes.

**Conclusions**

Parents’ emotion socialization practices are rooted in evolutionary, cultural and familial contexts. Rich variations in emotion socialization practices reflect the unique goals across diverse cultural and family contexts. Emotion socialization practices, in their diverse forms, offer strategies to promote child flourishing in a variety of contexts including sociodemographic contexts, and family contexts with variations in parental and child gender, children’s temperament and developmental status, and parental and child psychosocial functioning. To date, research on emotion socialization practices has identified common and varying socialization strategies as well as similarities and differences in relations between emotion socialization practices and child flourishing. Integrative models of development for minority children (Coll et al., 1996) highlight the importance of accounting for the impact of race, ethnicity, and social class on developmental trajectories. Given the impact of factors related to sociocultural, familial, and individual psychosocial functioning on emotion socialization behaviors, identification of nuanced socialization practices and their impact on children’s outcomes in specific racial and socioeconomic contexts are necessary. Such research in emotion socialization is particularly important given the current Eurocentric definition of emotion socialization present in most school and parenting curricula (Morelen & Thomassin, 2013).

Across human development research, foci are turning towards better understanding individual differences in flourishing given unique developmental contexts. As the field of emotion socialization work expands, needed research foci include, for example, emotion
socialization practices with children with varying developmental disabilities and behavioral challenges. Emotion socialization practices as aspects of supportive parenting for children with serious and chronic illnesses also reflect emerging work. For example, Harper and colleagues (Harper, Penner, Peterson, Albrecht, & Taub, 2012) found that parents’ empathic affective responses mediated relations between children’s resilience and their reports of pain during oncology treatment. Such work reflects new horizons in potential links between parental emotion socialization practices and children’s capacities to cope with serious challenges such as illness.

At the family level, work is emerging on the role of emotion socialization in promoting family functioning and the development of children impacted by military deployment (e.g., Gerwitz, Pinna, Hanson, & Borckberg, 2014). Further, in a recent review of interventions in the context of trauma, Marsac and colleagues (Marsac, Donlon, & Berkowitz, 2014) highlight emotion socialization practices as important in helping children cope with such traumatic events as exposure to violence and natural disasters. Thus, burgeoning work on the protective role of emotion socialization practices under severe stressors and trauma will have important implications for parenting programs and children’s development.

As emotion socialization research continues to expand to address children and families in multiple contexts, research findings will inform the development of family support strategies that are tailored to unique child and family contexts. Collectively, research on emotion socialization offers the hope of fresh perspectives and meaningful supports for parents and families as they raise their children.
References


