Children’s Emotional Regulation Moderates Association between Mother’s Depression and Happy Attention Bias

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Introduction

- Children of depressed mothers are at risk for poor psychological outcomes, including high levels of depression and anxiety (Goodman & Gotlib, 1999).
- Children who are more dysregulated tend to be more vulnerable to the effects of their mother’s depression (Goodman & Tully, 2008), and depressed mothers tend to be less effective in facilitating their children’s development (Tully, 2010).
- Studies support associations between selective attention for positive faces and risk for internalizing problems in very young children (Deater-Deckard, 2007).
- Cognitive theories suggest that individuals who are vulnerable to depression, such as children of depressed mothers, may selectively attend to negative information and “filter” out positive information (Beck, 1967).

Methods

- Electrocardiograms (ECGs) were used to record the ECGs.
- Participants indicated the location of the asterisks that replaced one of the face stimuli (appeared equally behind left- and right-side stimuli).
- Recognition latencies < 200ms, or > 2 SDs from the mean latencies were considered outliers.

Results

- Attention bias scores were calculated from reaction times to respond to the asterisks that replaced the happy versus neutral faces.
- Data from trials with no responses, incorrect responses, or response latencies > 200ms, or > 2 SDs from the mean latencies were discarded.
- Participants missing >10% of their data were excluded from analyses.
- Bias scores were calculated separately for each emotion (happy, sad, threat).

Conclusions

- Our findings do not support the hypothesis that mother’s depression would be more strongly associated with attention bias away from happy faces in children with poor emotional regulation.
- One explanation for this finding is related to the idea that children of depressed mothers are less often exposed to positive emotions in their mothers, who play a central role in their development of knowledge and skills for emotion regulation (e.g., Brephp-Herb et al., 2011).

Limitations

- Although filtering out positive information is typically associated with risk for depression (Deater-Deckard, 2010; Gotlib & Gotlib, 2007), our recent study showed that young children of depressed mothers who are particularly attuned to their mother’s happiness have the greatest risk for internalizing problems (Tully & Donohue, 2010).
- A child of a depressed mother who has impaired capacity to self-regulate during negative interpersonal interactions may selectively attend to others’ happiness because it signifies a warm or nonthreatening individual, which may be particularly salient given his/her mother’s happiness is an important signal of safety and that the mother is emotionally available to connect with the child.

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