

ABSTRACT

Mothers' stress and parenting behaviours, including their expression of emotions, contribute to their children's risk of developing behaviour problems, psychopathology, and other negative outcomes. Maternal emotion expressions during conflict serve as a means through which their children can learn about emotions. Conflict in early adolescence is a key period in development where adolescents and mothers experience and express more negative emotions. The present study examined whether parenting behaviours and perceived parenting stress of at-risk mothers were associated with their positive and negative emotion expressions during a conflict task with their 12- to 14-year-old adolescents. Mothers completed self-report measures of parenting (nurturance) and parenting stress and engaged in a videotaped conflict discussion with their adolescents in their homes. Videotaped interactions were coded continuously using a systematic coding system for maternal emotion expressions of negative affect (anger and sadness), positive affect and neutral affect. Results obtained from hierarchical regressions revealed that mothers who were less nurturing expressed more positive emotion expressions during conflict, thought to be expressed when mothers wanted to avoid discussing a conflict. Mothers reporting less parenting stress expressed more neutral emotion expressions which is likely related to their ability to modulate emotion during salient conflict. Lastly, mothers who were more nurturing and less stressed expressed more sadness, possibly as a means through which they can display empathy to their adolescent during conflict. Taken together, the findings of the present study contribute to the research on maternal-adolescent conflict by highlighting how different emotion expressions can be used by mothers to convey specific and different messages to their adolescent during conflict. Understanding maternal expression of emotions has implications for helping at-risk mothers at a higher risk of experiencing high levels of parenting stress and non-nurturing parenting behaviours to better understand the effects of their emotions during conflict with their adolescent.

INTRODUCTION

Mother-adolescent conflict

- Parent-child conflict is especially common in early adolescence, a developmental period characterized by an increase in conflictual interactions, increased negative emotion expressions, and decreased positive emotions in both mother and adolescent (Flannery et al., 1993; Hollenstein & Lewis, 2006; Morris et al., 2007).
- Experiencing conflict in early adolescence is found to be especially stressful for mothers, as mothers are known to have a harder time coping with the transition from childhood to early adolescence (Steinberg, 2001).

Parenting Behaviours

- Mothers raised in disadvantaged environments are at a higher risk of displaying less adaptive parenting behaviours and creating more conflictual environments for their children (Stack et al., 2017; Temcheff et al., 2008).
- Mothers who exhibit parenting behaviours that are characterized by nurturance, responsiveness and support are more likely to have children that exhibit high levels of academic success, cognitive development and emotion regulation (Ferrar et al., 2019; Eisenberg et al., 2001a).
- Mothers that engage in harsher forms of parenting – characterized by low levels of nurturance and high levels of control and criticism – are more likely to have adolescents with more behavioural problems and poor emotion regulation (Jabeen et al., 2013; Serbin et al., 2015).

Maternal emotion expression

- Maternal affect, including the expressions of positive, negative and neutral affect, is reflective of a mother's overall parenting behaviours (Power, 2013).
- Parenting behaviors and stress are linked to overall maternal emotion expression and alter how a mother interacts with her child (Mackler et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2007).

Early Adolescence

- The occurrence of conflict during adolescence is a normative part of development as it allows both mother and adolescent to express different emotions together in response to difficult topics (Van Bommel et al., 2018; Van der Giessen et al., 2014).

OBJECTIVES

To study maternal emotion expressions in at-risk mothers during a mother-adolescent conflict task

- Determine the emotions expressed during the conflict task
- Examine whether self-reported nurturance was concurrently associated with emotions expressed during the task
- Assess whether self-reported parenting stress was predictive of emotions expressed during the task

METHOD

Participants

- Mother-adolescent dyads (27 mother-child dyads)
 - Mean age mothers = 42.62 years old ($SD = 3.57$)
 - Adolescents aged 12.17-15.23 years old ($M = 13.92$, $SD = .87$)
 - Recruited from an existing longitudinal sample, the Concordia Longitudinal Research Project where parents had childhood histories of disadvantage

Procedure

Dyads engaged in a videotaped 6-minute conflict discussion task in their homes. The dyad was provided with a conflict check-list in order that experimenters could select the conflict that was most contentious for both members of the dyad in their relationship.

Observational coding

The conflict discussion task was coded for moment to moment maternal emotion expression using the *Emotion Behaviour Coding System* (Enns & Stack, 2007). Coding was based primarily on emotion expression, followed by general body language and tone of voice when emotion expression was unclear.

Table 1

Name of Code	Description of Code
Smile/Positive Affect	Facial expressions characterized by a lateral upward movement of the lips and cheeks. Other indicators of this code include a slight smile, cheerful tone of voice, laughing, etc.
Frown/Look Upset	Facial expressions that display annoyance, exasperation, anger or dissatisfaction. Characterized by a wrinkled forehead, lips pressed together and/or drawn downwards, and narrowed eyes. Other indicators of this code include angry verbal tone, and threatening body language.
Look Sad/Distressed	Facial expressions that display sadness or anxiety, characterized by a eyebrows drawn together and a downward turned mouth. Other indicators include signs of anxiety, nervousness, distress, quavering voice, resigned tone of voice and body language suggesting distress.
Neutral Affect	Facial expressions that display a neutral expression, characterized by a relaxed mouth, eyebrows and smooth forehead.

Questionnaires

Maternal nurturance was assessed using the parental support subscale of the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI: Slater & Power, 1987). Items were rated on a 6-pt Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all descriptive of me*) to 6 (*Highly descriptive of me*). Internal consistency of the measure was $\alpha = 0.91$. Parenting stress was examined using the shortened version of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI-SF; Abidin, 1995). The 36-item questionnaire uses a 5-pt Likert scale where responses range from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree*). Internal consistency of the measure was $\alpha = 0.90$.

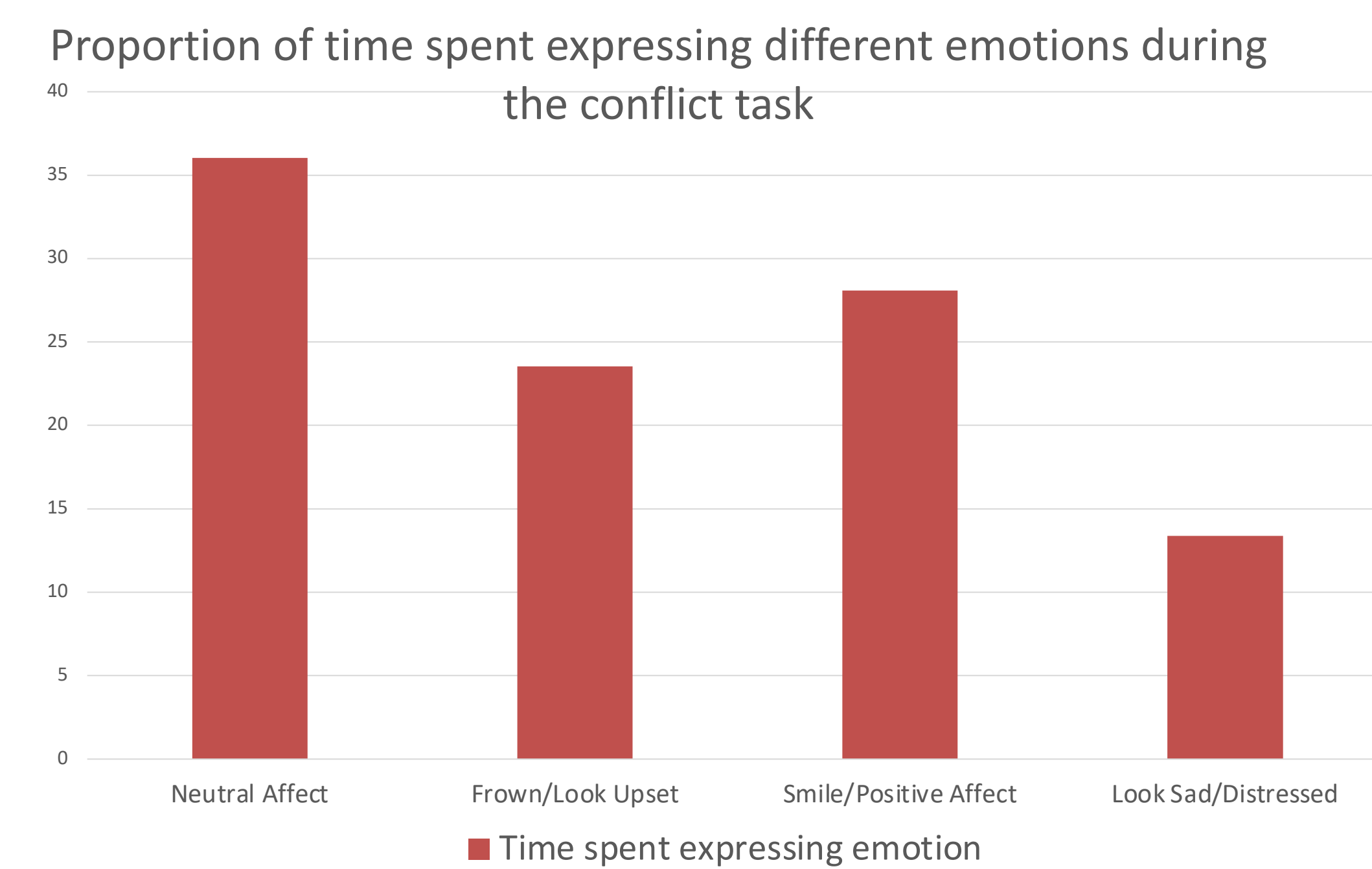
RESULTS

Objective 1: Descriptive Statistics

Time mothers spent expressing different emotions during the conflict task.

- Neutral Affect ($M = 36.03$, $SD = 17.28$)
- Frown/Look Upset ($M = 23.53$, $SD = 12.24$)
- Smile/Positive Affect ($M = 28.08$, $SD = 15.91$)
- Look Sad/Distressed ($M = 13.37$, $SD = 1.32$)

Figure 1



Objectives 2 & 3: Multiple Hierarchical Regressions

Associations between maternal nurturance, stress and maternal emotion expressed during conflict

- Mothers that smiled more during the conflict task rated lower on measures of maternal nurturance ($\beta = -.41$, $t = -1.42$, $p > .05$)
- Mothers that expressed more neutral affect rated lower on measures of parental stress ($\beta = -.47$, $t = -1.89$, $p > .05$)
- Mothers that expressed more sadness rated higher on measures of nurturance ($\beta = .22$, $t = .67$, $p > .05$) and lower on measures of parental stress ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -.80$, $p > .05$)
- Maternal nurturance ($\beta = .11$, $t = .32$, $p > .05$) and maternal stress ($\beta = .05$, $t = .18$, $p > .05$) were not associated with Frown/ Look Upset.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results demonstrate associations between maternal nurturance, stress and emotion expression during conflict discussions with their adolescent.

- Mothers expressed a wide range of emotions during the conflict task, as opposed to expressing mostly negative emotions which is typical during conflicts in early adolescence (Hollenstein & Lewis, 2006).
- The ability to express a variety of emotions during conflict is adaptive because different emotions serve different communicative purposes.
 - Mothers spent most of the task expressing neutral affect which is thought to be a transitional emotion that allows mothers to flexibly express positive and negative emotions during emotion-salient conflicts (Van Bommel et al., 2018).

Maternal nurturance and parental stress were associated with positive and neutral affect.

- Mothers that reported themselves as less nurturing were more likely to express Smile/Positive Affect during the conflict task. Mothers might have been expressing positive humour as a way of avoiding conflict of unpleasant topics which is considered maladaptive (Norrick & Spitz, 2008).
- Mothers that reported less parental stress were more likely to express Neutral Affect. Mothers that can remain calm and composed during conflict might be better able to regulate salient emotions during conflict and solve problems (Morris et al., 2007).
- Maternal nurturance and stress were not associated with Look Sad/Distressed. Expressions of sadness during conflict might be reflective of maternal sensitivity rather than stress and other negative emotions, which is why it was not expressed as expected in the present context.
- Maternal nurturance and stress were not associated with Frown/Look Upset. It is possible that they felt less comfortable expressing this emotion while being videotaped and/or the conflict discussion was not sufficiently contentious.

Taken together these results highlight the importance of maternal emotion expression, a crucial and often overlooked component of parenting. Understanding maternal emotion expressions during conflict has important implications for the development of healthy mother-adolescent relationships.

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