

Quality of early family relationships predicts children's affect regulation and mental health

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The birth of a child is often a long-awaited and deeply meaningful event for the parents. However, the transition to parenthood also forces the parents to revise their interparental romantic relationship and to answer the new questions arising from parenthood. At the same time as the parents learn how to cope with the new situation, the infant undergoes one of the most intense developmental periods in human life. Previous attachment research has demonstrated the importance of the mother-infant relationship to children's emotional development, but there is still relatively little research on the role of fathers, the marital relationship and the family as a whole.

This doctoral study in the field of psychology set out to investigate, firstly, how families change and reorganise during the transition to parenthood and, secondly, the consequences the early family relationships have on [children's emotional development](#) in [middle childhood](#). More specifically, the aim was to study the effects of early family relationships on children's emotion regulation, psychological defense mechanisms, and the related biases in their social-[emotional](#) information processing (i.e. attention biases to emotional [facial expressions](#)). In all, 710 Finnish families participated in the [longitudinal study](#) conducted during pregnancy, at the child's ages of two and twelve months and in middle childhood.

As a central result of the dissertation, seven unique family system types were identified using statistical analyses. The family system types were called cohesive (35 percent), authoritarian (14 percent), enmeshed (with

declining 6 percent and quadratic 5 percent subtypes), escalating crisis (4 percent), disengaged (5 percent) and discrepant (15 percent). Despite the uniqueness of each family type, the problematic family types predicted children's inefficient emotion regulation in middle childhood in a similar way.

Difficulties in emotion regulation also explained why the problematic family types increased the children's [depressive symptoms](#) indicating that family-related difficulties in managing their own negative emotions pose a risk for the children's mental health. Furthermore, children who had grown in problematic families relied more on psychological defence mechanisms (e.g. denied their own painful emotions and blamed others instead). Family-related alterations in affect regulation were also present in the laboratory experiment: children from enmeshed families tended to direct their attention towards threat-provoking stimuli (i.e. angry facial expressions) whereas children from disengaged families tended to defensively avoid such information.

Altogether, the results support the theoretical viewpoint that children adapt their affect regulation to fit the demands of their family environment. This may be based on both psychodynamic processes and the effects of the children's stress regulation system, which has been developed during the evolutionary process. The family as a whole is important for the development of children's emotion regulation. Therefore, mothers and fathers as well as the interparental romantic relationship and parenting should be considered in health services directed to parents-to-be. Finally, it is noteworthy that the early family relationships accounted for at the most only 10 percent of the children's affect regulation in middle childhood. The relatively modest size of this effect corresponds to the results of previous longitudinal studies.

The findings of this seven-year longitudinal study shed more light on the understanding of early family dynamics and on the identification of early

family related risks. The knowledge may also help to develop focused therapeutic interventions for children who have experienced early family problems and suffer from depressive symptoms. Such children may benefit from strengthening the experience of emotional security, learning more efficient [emotion regulation](#) and interventions to correct their biases in the processing of social-emotional information.

More information: Significance of early family environment on children's affect regulation : From family autonomy and intimacy to attentional processes and mental health.

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