

IMPROVING PARENTING OF TODDLERS' EMOTIONS USING AN EMOTION COACHING PARENTING PROGRAM: A PILOT STUDY OF *TUNING IN TO TODDLERS*

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Parental responses to children's emotions influence children's emotion-related abilities. Tuning in to Toddlers (TOTS) is a new emotion-focused parenting program for parents of toddlers aged 18 to 36 months. It is based on the empirically tested Tuning in to Kids program that teaches parents how to emotion coach their children. In the current pilot study, an intervention-only sample of parents of typically developing toddlers attended a 6-session group program. At preprogram and postprogram, parents' emotion-coaching and emotion-dismissing behaviors were assessed using self-report questionnaires and observation measures. Results showed significant increases in self-reported and observed emotion coaching behaviors and use of emotion talk after intervention. There was also a significant decrease in self-reported and observed emotion dismissing behaviors, and toddler externalizing behavior problems. Overall, findings provide preliminary support for TOTS and suggest its potential as a valuable intervention for supporting parents in their efforts to emotion coach their toddlers. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Parent emotion socialization is one of the most established factors contributing to children's ability to understand and manage emotions (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). This includes parent's own expressiveness, and their reactions to and coaching of children about emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996, 1997) distinguished between two parent emotion socialization styles: emotion coaching and emotion dismissing. Parents who use an emotion-coaching approach are aware of emotions in themselves and their children; value emotional events as times for intimacy and teaching; encourage expression by empathizing and labeling emotions; scaffold self-soothing, and set behavioral limits. In contrast, parents who use an emotion-dismissing approach view negative emotions as toxic or unimportant, discourage emotional exploration, try to "fix" their child's emotions by ignoring, minimizing, or punishing the child. For preschool- and school-aged children, emotion-coaching parenting has been linked to better child academic results, emotion knowledge, and peer relations, and fewer physical illnesses and behavior problems (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997), while emotion-dismissing parenting has been linked to deficits in children's social skills and emotion knowledge, and increased childhood behavior problems (Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007). Despite the evidence demonstrating the link between emotion-coaching parenting and optimal child development, research translating these findings into interventions has been slow to emerge (Katz, Maliken, & Stettler, 2012).

Efforts to encourage emotion coaching should begin early (Barlow, Smailagic, Ferriter, Bennett, & Jones, 2010). Toddlerhood is when the foundations are laid for emotional competence while also being a peak time of challenge as toddlers develop a desire for independence (Sroufe, 1997). Parental intrusiveness may discourage toddlers from being self-reliant in coping with their negative arousal, whereas toddlers may feel more open to express emotions and view their parents as reliable resources in managing distress when parents are accepting of their feelings and behaviors (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). Thus, emotion coaching may be a valuable skill for parents of toddlers who frequently need to soothe their distressed child and guide their emotional learning (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997).

To our knowledge, there are no existing interventions targeting parent emotion socialization for this age group. There is, however, an existing evidence-based program that teaches emotion coaching to parents of preschool children: Tuning in to Kids (TIK) (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010). This six-session group program has demonstrated improvements in parent emotion coaching and child emotional knowledge and behavior with outcomes replicated in community (Wilson, Havighurst, & Harley, 2011) and clinical samples (Havighurst et al., 2012). With its focus on parent emotion socialization and strong evidence of effectiveness with preschoolers, TIK could be adapted for parents of toddlers. The current pilot study explored TIK's adaptive potential.

The adapted TIK, renamed Tuning in to Toddlers (TOTS), was piloted with parents of children aged between 18 to 36 months. Postintervention, it was expected that parents would display improvements in self-reported and observed emotion-coaching behaviors and reductions in self-reported and observed emotion-dismissing behaviors. It was also expected that there would be improvements in children's behavior. Overall the study sought to determine whether an emotion-coaching intervention, with adaptations to address the toddler developmental stage, would be worth investigating further.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Thirty-four parents (all mothers, mean age = 35.91 years, standard deviation [*SD*] = 3.36) and their toddlers (14 girls, 20 boys; mean age = 25.37 months, *SD* = 6.15) were recruited using information sheets distributed by nurses in Maternal and Child Health Centers in Inner Western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. Inclusion criteria were as follows: parent of an 18- to 36-month-old, and sufficient English language to understand the intervention. Parents were allocated to one of four group programs depending on location. Of the 34 parents, 26 (mean age = 36.15 years, *SD* = 3.33) consented to an observation assessment with their toddler (12 girls, 14 boys; mean age = 25.08 months, *SD* = 6.26). The study conformed to the University of Melbourne ethical requirements for research.

At preintervention, 32 mothers were married/de facto and two were single. Most ($n = 30$; 88.2%) spoke English as their first language and had a bachelor's degree or higher. Thirty-five percent were not in paid employment; of those employed, the mean number of hours worked weekly was 10.97 (*SD* = 10.79). Gross annual family income reported was \$AU40,000 (5.9%), \$AU40,000–59,999 (38.2%), \$AU60,000–99,999 (35.3%), and \$AU100,000 or more (20.6%), which is representative of Victoria (median household income = AUD\$63,232; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011).

Intervention: TOTS

TOTS was delivered for 2 hours across six weekly sessions with two facilitators (one of whom was Havighurst, Harley, or Wilson). The program teaches parents the five steps of emotion coaching (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997): (a) be aware of low-intensity emotions in your child, (b) view your child's emotions as a time for intimacy and teaching, (c) convey acceptance towards your child's emotions, (d) help your child label emotions, and (e) if necessary, set limits and assist with problem solving. This was done through various exercises, group discussions, role-plays, psychoeducation, DVD materials, and home activities. A structured manual was adapted from the original TIK manual (Havighurst & Harley, 2007), and facilitators completed fidelity checklists after each session. Adaptations were inclusion of information on the developmental needs and abilities of toddlers, a focus on recognizing and responding to attachment and exploration needs, and age-appropriate ways to deal with tantrums. All mothers (100%) attended at least four of the six sessions, and 16 mothers (47.1%) attended all six sessions.

Measures

At preintervention and postintervention, parents were asked to complete questionnaires assessing parent emotion socialization and child behavior (Table 1), as well as to participate in a parent-child observation (Table 2), which lasted 35 minutes on average. Preintervention questionnaires collected family demographic information.

Observation Coding

Videotapes were transcribed verbatim and coded to identify maternal emotion-coaching and emotion-dismissing behaviors and use of emotion talk (one aspect of emotion coaching). Inter-rater reliability was based on an independent recoding of a randomized

Table 1. Questionnaires Assessing Parental Emotion Socialization Behaviors and Child Behavior

Questionnaire	Details
Maternal Emotional Styles Questionnaire (Lagacé-Séguin & Coplan, 2005)	14 items measuring emotion-coaching and emotion-dismissing beliefs about children's emotions rated from 1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 5 (<i>strongly agree</i>).
Coping with Toddlers' Negative Emotions Scale (Spinrad, Eisenberg, Kupfer, Gaertner, & Michalik, 2004)	12 hypothetical situations where parents rated their likelihood of responding in six different ways each rated on a scale from 1 (<i>very unlikely</i>) to 7 (<i>very likely</i>).
Brief Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2007)	The behavior problems subscale comprised 11 items rated on a scale from 0 (<i>not true/rarely</i>) to 2 (<i>very true/often</i>).

Table 2. Parent-Child Observation Tasks

Tasks	Instructions
Task one: Dollhouse storytelling	Using a dolls' house, toy furniture, a dog, and six dolls, parents were asked to act out four events in a story: (a) the parents leave the children on an overnight trip; (b) the children fight over a toy; (c) the family dog runs away; (d) the parents return the next day (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998). Parents were told to add any details to the events, including what the story characters were saying, doing, and feeling.
Task two: Book reading	Parents were asked to read a book, titled <i>Annie to the Rescue</i> (Niland, 2007), with their child, and discuss any thoughts, feelings, or actions of the characters. The book was chosen as it had colorful pictures, a simple narrative, and characters who displayed a range of emotions.
Task three: Emotion discussion	Parents were asked to talk with their child about a recent time when their child was "emotional," and to discuss any thoughts, feelings, or actions of those involved (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000).
Task four: Toy waiting and pack up	Parents were asked to prevent their child from opening a transparent zipped bag containing an attractive music toy while they completed a brief questionnaire about parenting. Parents were told that their child could play with three plain wooden blocks while they waited. Once the questionnaire was completed, children had an average of 4 minutes to play with the toy before the parent asked the child to pack up the toy into the bag (at the experimenter's cue of three door knocks). Parents were told to use any strategies needed to get their child to pack up. This task has been shown to induce moderate frustration in toddlers (Martin, Clements, & Crnic, 2002).

20% of the videotapes by a TIK research team member not otherwise involved in this study.

Observed emotion-coaching and emotion-dismissing behaviors were coded using global ratings developed by Baker, Fenning, and Crnic (2011). Emotion coaching comprised five dimensions: (a) structuring, (b) sensitivity, (c) validation/encouragement of emotions, (d) enthusiasm, and (e) intimacy/warmth/affection. These dimensions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, and averaged to give an overall score (observed emotion coaching; Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). Emotion dismissing comprised three dimensions: (a) derogation, (b) intrusiveness, and (c) minimization/discouragement of emotions. These dimensions were also rated on a 5-point Likert scale and averaged to give an overall score (observed emotion dismissing) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .50$). Inter-rater differences in the coding were present for 15 of 64 variables and only one-point interval apart, indicating high inter-rater reliability.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, *t* Values, Probability Levels, and Effect Sizes for All Parenting Variables

Variable	Preintervention		Postintervention		Paired sample <i>t</i> test		Sig.	Effect Size Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	df		
Emotion coaching beliefs ^b	26.00	3.49	27.61	2.87	2.44**	33	.020	0.50
Emotion-dismissing beliefs ^b	22.52	5.06	19.12	4.67	-6.23***	33	.000	0.70
Emotion coaching behaviors ^b	5.19	0.86	6.18	0.54	6.23***	33	.000	1.38
Emotion-dismissing behaviors ^b	2.71	0.68	2.20	0.59	-5.41***	33	.000	0.80
Observed emotion coaching	3.15	0.92	4.00	0.93	10.33***	25	.000	0.92
Observed emotion dismissing	1.56	0.70	1.24	0.60	-4.56***	25	.000	0.49
Emotion labels ^a	0.0231	0.0104	0.0329	0.0122	5.83***	25	.000	0.87
Emotion exploration ^a	0.0091	0.0047	0.0131	0.0069	4.38***	25	.000	0.68
Toddler behavior problems ^b	3.09	2.42	2.46	1.64	-2.14*	33	.040	0.30

Note. SD = standard deviation; df = degree of freedom.

^aThe small values of means and standard deviations are expressed as proportion scores.

^b*N* = 34; the remaining variables were based on a sample of *N* = 26.

p* ≤ .05. *p* ≤ .02. ****p* ≤ .001.

Transcripts were also coded for the use of emotion talk, calculated as the frequency of *emotion labels* and *emotion exploration* using Cervantes and Callanan's (1998) coding scheme. Emotion labels comprised parents' use of emotion state words (e.g., sad), emotion behavior words (e.g., crying), and emotion sound effects (e.g., sniffing sounds for crying). Emotion exploration comprised parents' asking their child: about emotions, what caused emotions, and what occurred during or resulted from an emotional event. Frequency scores were converted into proportion scores to adjust for the total number of words spoken. Intra-class correlations were 0.99 for emotion labels and 0.95 for emotion exploration.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

One-way analyses of variance for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables revealed no significant differences in demographic characteristics between participants by program group or between those who completed the observation assessment and those who only completed questionnaires.

Main Analyses

Paired-sample *t* tests were conducted to evaluate the effects of TOTS on parenting and child behavior. Means, standard deviations, *t* values, probability levels, and effect sizes for all variables are presented in Table 3. Results showed significant increases in self-reported emotion-coaching beliefs and behaviors, and observed emotion-coaching behaviors after program participation. There were significant increases in the use of emotion labels and emotion exploration. There were also significant decreases in self-reported emotion-dismissing beliefs and behaviors and observed emotion-dismissing behaviors. Parents also reported lower toddler externalizing behavior difficulties after completion of TOTS.

DISCUSSION

The current study pilot tested an adaptation of TIK, TOTS, with mothers of an 18- to 36-month-old child. The findings are considered in the context of a small intervention-only sample; further research using a randomized controlled design with a more culturally diverse sample will be necessary to establish program efficacy.

Consistent with the study aims, there were significant postintervention improvements in parents' emotion coaching and use of emotion talk and significant reductions in parents' emotion dismissing. Moderate to large effect sizes were obtained across these variables. These results indicate that the intervention significantly improved mothers' self-reported emotion socialization practices. These improvements were also observed, which increases the findings' reliability as observational assessment is less susceptible to expectancy bias.

Mothers also reported fewer toddler behavior problems after attending TOTS. Challenging behaviors are common in toddlers and it was noteworthy that an intervention teaching emotion awareness and understanding appear to be effective. Future research should include a control group to assess how much of this reduction can be attributed to the program rather than reflecting age-related improvement. The focus on helping parents recognize the child's emotional needs, which are often expressed by challenging behavior, encouraged mothers to respond to the emotions underlying the behavior. Existing programs for parents of toddlers typically focus on strategies for changing behaviors (Barlow et al., 2010). With its focus on addressing underlying emotional needs, TOTS offers an alternative and potentially effective approach to improving toddlers' behavior.

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