

PARENTAL STRESS, INCONSISTENT DISCIPLINE AND CHILDREN'S EMOTION REGULATION: A DYADIC ANALYSIS

MARIA CENUȘĂ, MARIA NICOLETA TURLIUC*
Universitatea "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași

Abstract

The preschool period is one in which parents experience high levels of stress, with one of the main tasks of parenting being related to promoting children's emotion regulation through appropriate parental practices. Previous studies focused mainly on investigating the effects of parental stress on children's broader socio-emotional outcomes (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Neece *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, our study aims to explore the association between parental stress and children's emotion regulation within a dyadic context, gathering data from both parents, while investigating the mechanisms underlying this association. This cross-sectional study involved 103 parental dyads, with at least one typically developed preschool children aged between three to six years. Parents completed self-reported scales regarding parental stress, inconsistent discipline as a parental practice, and children's emotional regulation. Dyadic analysis was conducted using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM). Results showed that mothers' and fathers' stress had a direct negative effect on their perceptions of children's emotion regulation (the actor effects), and mothers' stress had a direct negative effect on fathers' perceptions of children's emotion regulation (the partner effect). Also, the results of mediation analysis revealed that only in fathers' case, parental stress exerts an indirect actor effect on children's emotional regulation through their inconsistent discipline. Fathers' stress was positively related to fathers' inconsistent discipline, which, in turn, decreased levels of mothers' perception of children's emotional regulation. Future intervention programs should focus on parents' self-awareness regarding the damaging impact of inconsistent discipline. Also, reducing parents' stress should constitute one of the main goals of parental-based interventions.

Cuvinte-cheie: stres parental, inconsistența disciplinei parentale, reglarea emoțională.

Keywords: parental stress, parental inconsistent discipline, emotion regulation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research show that parenting is more stressful today than in prior decades (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). The day-to-day demands of caregiving and

*Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, Facultatea de Psihologie și Științe ale Educației, Departamentul de Psihologie, Strada Toma Cozma, nr. 3, 700554, Iași, România;
E-mail: turliuc@uaic.ro

raising children put pressure on caregivers, researchers indicating that parents frequently experience high levels of stress, which is relatively stable during the preschool period (Anthony *et al.*, 2005; Crnic *et al.*, 2005; Mak *et al.*, 2020). Research on the relationship between parental stress and children's emotion regulation is limited, and its explanatory variables are poorly investigated, especially at preschool age. Also, most studies evaluated only mothers and, less often, fathers. Therefore, studies analyzing data at dyadic levels are almost lacking, the previous research presenting data mainly at the individual level (Barry *et al.*, 2009; Bater & Jordan, 2017). Addressing these gaps in the literature, the objectives of this study are to investigate the relationship between parental stress and preschool children's emotion regulation at the parental dyadic level, and to test whether inconsistent discipline can explain the link between these variables. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study investigating the dyadic effects of parental stress and parental inconsistent discipline, on children's emotion regulation in parental dyads having at least one preschool child.

1.1. PARENTAL STRESS AND PARENTAL PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN'S EMOTION REGULATION

Parenting stress has been defined as a psychological reaction to discrepancy between parenthood demands and parents' expectations, to their perception that they do not have the resources to meet these demands, to the mismatch between their children's demands and their ability to meet them (Anthony *et al.*, 2005; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Holly *et al.*, 2019; Luster & Okagaki, 1993).

Parenting stress has a salient role in the development of regulatory abilities of young typically developing children (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Liu *et al.*, 2021). The development of effective emotion regulation is an important task for preschool children as they enter gradually into a social environment and they become more aware of cultural and social display rules (Carlson & Wang, 2007; Thompson, 1994). Even so, to date, most of the studies focused on investigating the relation between parental stress and children's socio-emotional adjustment, such as social skills, internalization problems and externalization problems (Carapito *et al.*, 2020; Cenușă & Turliuc, 2023; Crnic *et al.*, 2005; Mak *et al.*, 2020; Matalon *et al.*, 2022), and less on emotion regulation.

Emotion regulation explains the affective dimension of mental functioning and the strategies used in the emotion management process (Turliuc & Bujor, 2013). Considering that children's emotion regulation is a precursor of children's socio-emotional adjustment (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2010), investigating the relationship between parental stress and children's emotion regulation is required for preventing the development of socio-emotional problems (Carlson & Wang, 2007; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, the preschool period can be considered as a favourable time to

identify and address early signs of problems, before they transform into permanent problematic patterns (Poulou, 2015).

Family system theory (FST, Minuchin, 1974) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between parental variables and children behavior, including the emotional one, within the family system. In this perspective, family is composed of individual members and several subsystems, each of which being better understood in the context of the specific family system as a whole, and in the interactions between its subsystems (Matalon & Turliuc, 2023). Moreover, Tripartite Model of Family Impact on Children's Adjustment and Emotion Regulation (Morris *et al.*, 2007) indicates that parental characteristics influence children's socio-emotional outcomes, including their emotion regulation skills (Morris *et al.*, 2007).

Studies on the association between parental stress and children's emotion regulations are rare, especially for preschool children. Also, the associations between parenting stress and children's socio-emotional adjustment have been predominantly found across samples which included only mothers (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Neece *et al.*, 2012). The few studies that have explored this association have found a negative relationship between stress and emotion regulation in preschool children. For example, one longitudinal study found that higher levels of parenting stress when children were 14 months old predicted higher levels of emotional dysregulation in children four years later (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009). Previous research has suggested that the impact of parental stress on child outcomes is mediated by parenting behaviour, and that parental stress and parental practices might have a cumulative influence on child's emotion regulation (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Morris *et al.* 2007).

1.2. INCONSISTENT DISCIPLINE AS A MEDIATOR

Inconsistent parental discipline is defined by some degree of control and responsiveness in following children's undesirable behaviors, which includes alternating parental reactions, in which parents may occasionally respond with high behavioral control, and other time they may not respond at all, depending on their moods; they can use the threat of punishment without doing so or waive it in the process of carrying out the punishment (Cheung *et al.*, 2018; Otto *et al.*, 2016).

Parental Stress Model (Abidin, 1992) indicated that parental stress is a key determinant of parenting practices, especially dysfunctional parenting. Research indicated that, of five parenting practice (e.g. poor monitoring, corporal punishment, positive parenting practices), only inconsistent discipline among mothers was significantly positively related to maternal distress, and partially mediates the relation between maternal distress and child aggression (Barry *et al.*, 2009). Further, the impact of inconsistent discipline on children's socio-emotional

adjustment, especially on children's emotion regulation, is less unclear than in the case of positive and negative parental practices, and calls for deeper investigation.

Regardless of the contribution of other parenting variables, inconsistent parental discipline was found to be a significant positive predictor of child negative behaviors and emotional dysregulation (Duncombe *et al.*, 2012). Previous studies showed that inconsistent parental discipline can facilitate children's emotion dysregulation, anxiety, sadness and depression (Laskey & Cartwright-Hatton, 2009; Otto *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, higher inconsistent and punitive discipline practices, predicted lower self-regulatory skills through less frequent child routines, structure and predictability (Bater & Jordan, 2017). Conversely, through consistent and positive parenting discipline, children internalize parental requests, and become more able to self-regulate emotional arousal (Liu *et al.*, 2021). A contradictory result suggested that, inconsistent parenting behavior is a positive predictor of children's self-regulatory emotion regulation (Kim & Holloway, 2018). Although inconsistent parenting appears to be a harmful practice due to the dysregulated behavior of parents (Elizur *et al.*, 2017), it could be adopted by parents driven by positive loving intentions, but facing levels of high stress resulting from the increased pressure of parental responsibility (Shirani *et al.*, 2012; Turner *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, although the parents' inconsistent discipline is intended to mitigate the consequences of their misbehavior in children and to avoid negative emotions resulting from punishment, ensuring positive emotions, it can also negatively reinforce children, showing them that they cannot regulate their negative emotions (Turner *et al.*, 2023). As such, these parents tend to perceive in their children lower levels of emotion regulation, their parental inconsistent discipline may encourage this negative perception toward children's emotion regulation. Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997), and fathering research (Phares & Compas, 1992), indicated that mothers' and fathers' behaviors make different contributions to child development. For example, mothers', but not fathers', discipline inconsistency was related to more externalizing behaviors in both boys and girls (Gryczkowski *et al.*, 2010). Also, previous studies showed that mothers', but not fathers' parental variables, were related to children's socio-emotional outcomes (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2013; Van Der Pol *et al.*, 2016). Thus, parenting stress influence negatively parenting behaviours (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996), parenting stress and child functioning, such as children's emotion regulation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), and parental behaviors (inconsistent discipline) is a mediator in the relationship between stress and child adjustment.

1.3. THE PRESENT STUDY

Previous studies indicated that parenting stress is associated with child functioning, such as children's emotion regulation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), that parenting stress is negatively associated with parenting behaviours (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996), and that parenting behaviors (inconsistent discipline) is a

mediator in the relationship between stress and child adjustment (Deater-Deckard, 1998).

This study aimed to investigate the dyadic effects of parental stress on children's emotion regulation, following the directions of previous studies using the both mothers and fathers, as participants (Barry *et al.*, 2009; Bater & Jordan, 2017). In addition, the inclusion of parental inconsistent discipline as explanatory mechanism of this link is important for providing an additional perspective that could draw intervention development for both parents individually, but also among dyads (Bater & Jordan, 2017; Tavassolie *et al.*, 2016).

Based on previously mentioned studies, we hypothesize that mothers' and fathers' parental stress would be negatively and directly related with their, as well as, with their partner's perception of children's emotion regulation (H1). Specifically, mothers' parental stress and fathers' stress would be negatively associated with their own perception of children's emotion regulation – actor effect (H1a) and, mothers' parental stress and fathers' parental stress would be negatively associated with their partner perception of children's emotion regulation – partner effect (H1b). In addition, parents' stress would be negatively and indirectly related to their own and to their partner's perception of children's emotion regulation through parental inconsistent discipline (H2). Specifically, mothers' parental stress would be negatively and indirectly related to their perception of children's emotion regulation through maternal, respectively paternal inconsistent discipline (H2a), mother's parental stress would be negatively and indirectly related to fathers' perception of children's emotion regulation through maternal, respectively paternal inconsistent discipline (H2b). Further, fathers' parental stress would be negatively and indirectly related to their children's emotion regulation through maternal, respectively paternal inconsistent discipline (H3a). Finally, fathers' parental stress would be negatively and indirectly related to mothers' perception of children's emotion regulation through maternal, respectively paternal inconsistent discipline (H3b).

2. METHOD

2.1. PARTICIPANTS

Our sample comprises 103 dyads of married parents, residents in the northeastern Romania city of Suceava, who completed the questionnaire. The mothers had a mean age of 34.93 years ($SD = 4.7$) and the fathers had a mean age of 37.53 ($SD = 4.53$). The ages of each couple's child ranged from 3 years to 6 years ($M=4.72$, $SD=1.22$). Regarding the child's gender, 56% are female and 44% male. The average number of children per household was 1.55 ($SD=0.6$; range 1-4). The total monthly household income was assessed by the following item: "The total household income of your family is: (a) <2,500 lei; (b) between 2,500 and

5,000 lei; (c) between 5,000 and 10,000 lei; (d) more than 10,000 lei.” Nearly half of the families (48%) reported a monthly household income between 5,000 and 10,000 lei.

2.2. MEASURES

Mothers’ and fathers’ parental stress were measured using the Parental Stress Scale (Berry & Jones, 1995). The scale includes 18 items, 10 direct items (e.g., “Caring for my child(ren) sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give.”) and 8 items (1,2,5,6,7,8,17,18) reversed scored items (e.g., “*I am happy in my role as a parent.*”). Parental Stress Scale is appropriate for parents of children with and without special needs. Parents’ responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1= totally disagree, 5= strongly agree) and scores range from 18 to 90, higher scores reflect higher parental stress. The internal consistency of the scale in this study was 0.95 for mothers and 0.96 for fathers.

Inconsistent discipline was measured using the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire Short Form for parents (APQ-9; Elgar *et al.*, 2007). It includes 9 items that measure positive parenting (3 items; e.g., “*You let your child know when he/she is doing a good job with something.*”), poor monitoring (3 items; e.g., “*Your child stays out in the evening after the time he/she is supposed to be home.*” and inconsistent discipline (3 items; e.g., “*You let your child out of a punishment early (like lift restrictions earlier than you originally said).*”) The 9-item APQ subscales assesses how often situations described are typically occurs in their home, using a 5 point Likert scale (1 =never, 5= always). In this study, only the inconsistent discipline subscale was used. The internal consistency of the subscale in this study was 0.87 for mothers and 0.78 for fathers.

Mothers and fathers filled out *The Emotion Questionnaire for parents* (EQP; Rydell *et al.*, 2003) which measures the parental perception of children’s ability to regulate their emotions. Parents assessed children’s ability to regulate themselves or with the help of others different emotions, such as sadness, anger, fear, and exuberance. The scale contains 20 items aimed at measuring emotion regulation (e.g., “*He/she has difficulties finding something to make him/herself feel better*”; “*It is easy for others, for instance a parent, to make him/her feel better (e.g., by comforting, distracting or talking things through)*”) and 20 items aimed at measuring emotionality. In this present study only the emotion regulation subscale was used. The parents rated the statements on a scale from 1 = does not apply at all to my child to 5 = applies very well to my child. The internal consistency of the subscale in this study was 0.92 for mothers and 0.93 for fathers.

Additionally, we assessed the following socio-demographic variables: parent’s age, monthly household income, number of children, child’s age and gender.

2.3. PROCEDURE

Before conducting the study, the Ethics Committee of the authors' University approved the study protocol (no. 1013/17.05.2022). After that, the informed consent was received and signed by all the participants. The data were collected using a self-reporting questionnaire addressed to the parents of the children. The questionnaire was disseminated through the parents' kindergarten and social-media (WhatsApp and Facebook personal pages), and then completed anonymously through Google Forms software. Participation was voluntary and the parents could withdraw from the study anytime. The parents were told to fill the questionnaire independently. They only had to agree on reporting on the same child if they had more than one child. The participants were asked to fill in a password (city/town and day/month/year of marriage) to identify dyads. As for the inclusion criteria to participate in the study, we used the following: be married and have a minimum of one child typically developed between the ages of 3 and 6.

2.4. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

First, we performed the descriptive statistics and Paired-Sample *T*-tests to examine the mean differences between mothers and fathers related to parental stress, inconsistent discipline and children's emotion regulation. Then, Pearson and Spearman correlation analysis were performed. Further, we used Amos 26.0 programs (Arbuckle, 2019) to compute a series of direct and indirect effects of mediation at the dyadic level, The Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM) (Kenny *et al.*, 2006) being conducted to test the hypotheses. Mediation effects were performed using 5000 bootstrapping samples with 95% confidence interval.

3. RESULTS

3.1. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Our findings show that there were no significant differences between the mothers' and fathers' reports on their stress and on perception of children's emotion regulation. Although previous studies showed that due to the existence of traditional roles, mothers' stress is higher than fathers' stress (Crnic *et al.*, 2005; Oyarzún-Farías *et al.*, 2021), studies that investigated parenting stress in both parents, besides the fact that both parents levels of parental stress among mothers and fathers were correlated, mothers and fathers are quite similar in their levels of parenting stress within each family (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Neece *et al.*, 2012). However, the fathers reported higher levels of parental inconsistent discipline compared to the mothers (see Table no.1).

Table no. 1

Means, standard deviations, and paired-samples t-test

Variables	Mothers		Fathers			
	M	SD	M	SD	T	d
1. Parental stress	38.33	14.45	38.41	15.98	-.07	-.01
2. Inconsistent discipline	8.51	3.49	9.24	3.00	-2.23*	-.22
3. Parent's report of child's ER	3.19	.71	3.13	.76	.99	.09

Note: * $p < .05$. ER-emotion regulation

Further correlations among the study variables and the intercorrelations between the mothers' and fathers' reports were computed. The results (Table 2) show mothers' and fathers' parental stress was positively correlated with their own parental inconsistent discipline (mothers: $r=0.66$, $p < 0.001$; fathers: $r=0.50$, $p < 0.001$) and their partners' parental inconsistent discipline (mothers: $r=0.39$, $p < 0.001$; fathers: $r=0.55$, $p < 0.001$), and negatively correlated with their own perception of children's emotion regulation (mothers: $r=-0.60$, $p < 0.001$; fathers: $r=-0.70$, $p < 0.001$) and their partners' perception of children's emotion regulation (mothers: $r=-0.62$, $p < 0.001$; fathers: $r=-0.50$, $p < 0.001$). Mothers' and fathers' parental inconsistent discipline was negatively related to own's perception of children's emotion regulation (mothers: $r=-0.43$, $p < 0.001$; fathers: $r=-0.54$, $p < 0.001$) and their partner's perception of children's emotion regulation (mothers: $r=-0.45$, $p < 0.001$; fathers: $r=-0.43$, $p < 0.001$).

To control for the socio-demographic variables, we conducted analyses using Pearson and Spearman's correlations. We found that only the child's gender is significantly correlated with the mothers' report of children's emotion regulation ($r=-0.20$, $p < 0.05$), the mothers indicating less emotion regulation among girls, compared to boys. Further, Pearson's correlations revealed that, for the mothers, the children's number is significantly correlated with their stress ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$), with children's emotion regulation ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). Regarding the fathers, the children's number is significantly correlated with their stress ($r = .27$, $p < .01$). The child's age was not significantly correlated with the main variables of the study. The total monthly household income was significantly correlated with mothers' parental stress ($r = .24$, $p < .05$), fathers' parental stress ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and with fathers' perception of children's emotion regulation ($r = -.22$, $p < .05$). Thus, the child's gender, number of children, and the total monthly household income were included in the model as covariates.

Table no. 2

Bivariate Coefficients among study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Maternal stress									
2. Paternal stress	.72***								
3. Maternal inconsistent discipline	.66***	.55***							
4. Paternal inconsistent discipline	.39***	.50***	.49***						
5. Mother's report of child's ER	-.60***	-.50***	-.43***	-.43***					
6. Father's report of child's ER	-.62***	-.70***	-.45***	-.54***	.67***				
7. Number of children	-.27**	-.17	-.15	-.09	.32***	.27**			
8. Child's age	.15	.11	.15	-.10	.04	.04	.09		
9. Child's gender ^a	.19	.11	.13	.03	-.20*	-.10	-.09	-.15	
10. The total household income	.24*	.27**	.14	.07	-.12	-.22*	-.20*	.08	.14

Note: ^a Gender, 1- male, 2 – female; *p < .050, **p < .010, ***p < .001.

3.2. ACTOR-PARTNER INTERDEPENDENCE MEDIATION MODEL ANALYSIS

The APIMeM revealed the dyadic effects of parental stress, parental inconsistent discipline on parental perception of children's emotion regulation, the model showed good fit to the data ($\chi^2(6) = 1.82$; $p = 0.93$; GFI = 0.99; AGFI = 0.97; NFI = 0.99; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.000).

3.2.1. DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF PARENTAL STRESS ON CHILDREN'S EMOTION REGULATION

Regarding direct effects of parental stress on children's emotion regulation, the results showed that for mothers, there was a significant actor effect of maternal stress on maternal perception of children's emotion regulation, indicating that a higher level of maternal stress is related to lower level of maternal perception of children's emotion regulation ($B = -0.022$; $p = 0.001$; CI: -0.034; -0.010). Also, among fathers, the actor effect between parental stress and perception of children's emotion regulation was significant, meaning that a higher level of paternal stress is related to lower levels of paternal perception of children's emotion regulation ($B = -0.021$; $p = 0.000$; CI: -0.029; -0.012). Regarding partner effect, among fathers, there was a significant direct partner effect of maternal stress on paternal perception of children's emotion regulation ($B = -0.013$; $p = 0.021$; CI: -0.023; -0.003). Among mothers, there was not a significant direct partner effect of paternal stress on maternal perception of children's emotion regulation ($B = -0.002$; $p = 0.673$; CI: -0.012; 0.008) (see Figure 1 and Table no.3).

Regarding indirect effects of parental stress on children's emotion regulation, the results showed that both mothers' and fathers' actor effects of stress on inconsistent discipline were significantly positive, which revealed that their

stress positively predicted their inconsistent discipline (mothers: $B=0.134$; $p<0.001$; CI: 0.084; 0.181; fathers: $B=0.089$; $p<0.001$; CI: 0.041; 0.137). No significant partner effects of stress on inconsistent discipline were obtained for mothers and fathers (mothers: $B=0.033$; $p=0.165$; CI: -0.013; 0.076; fathers: $B=0.009$; $p=0.712$; CI: -0.038; 0.058). Further, only father's inconsistent discipline predicted directly and negatively their own paternal children's emotion regulation ($B= -0.068$; $p=0.008$; CI: -0.114; -0.017). It was also a significant partner effect for mothers, as fathers' inconsistent discipline was negatively related to mother's perception of children's emotion regulation ($B= -0.058$; $p=0.009$; CI: -0.101; -0.016). The partner effect of inconsistent discipline on children's emotion regulation, for fathers, was not significant ($B= 0.020$; $p=0.275$; CI: -0.017; 0.056).

The mediation analysis found a significant actor-actor effect only on fathers ($B=-0.006$; $p=0.004$; CI: -0.014; -0.002). Specifically, fathers' stress was associated with more fathers' inconsistent discipline, which in turn is associated with lower levels of children's emotion regulation. Moreover, there was a significant actor-partner for mothers, indicating that fathers' stress had a negative effect on mothers' perception of children emotion regulation due to higher levels of father's inconsistent discipline ($B=-0.005$; $p=0.005$; CI: -0.012; -0.002) (see Figure 1 and Table no.3).

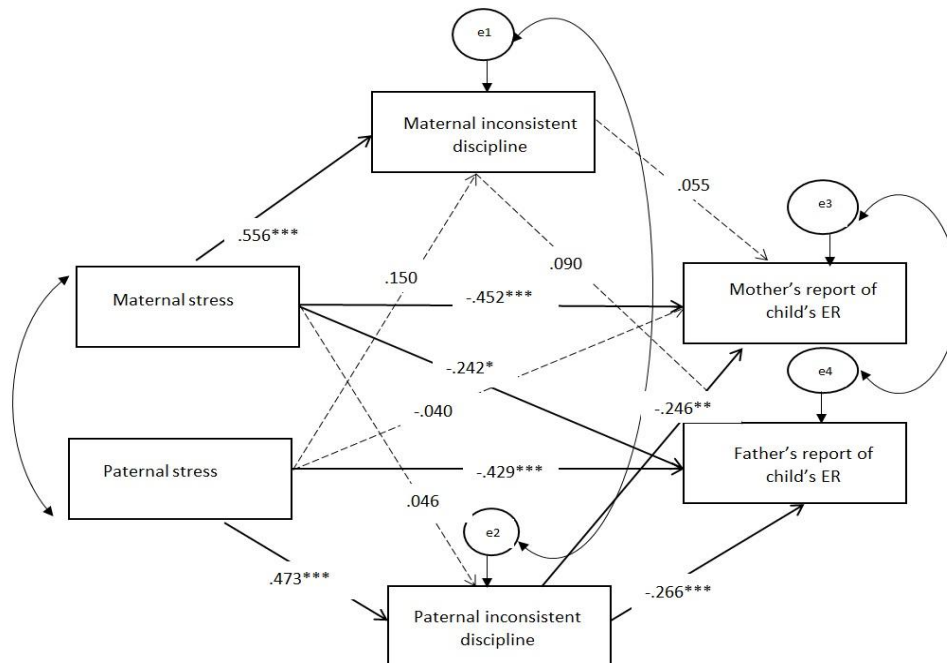


Figure 1. APIMeM results of mothers' and fathers' stress, parental inconsistency discipline on parent's report of child's emotion regulation.

Note: Values are standardized coefficients. Solid lines indicate significant paths, and dashed lines indicate non-significant paths. Child's gender and number of children, the total monthly household income, were controlled. *p < .050. **p < .010. ***p < .001

Table no.3

Unstandardized Total effects, Indirect effects, and direct effects of mothers' and fathers' parental stress on perception of children's emotion regulation through inconsistent discipline in the APIMeM

Effect			Estimate	P	95% CI
Actor effect (Individual's parental stress → Individual Report of Child's ER)					
M	Total effect		-0.021	0.000	[-0.032; -0.011]
	Total IE		0.001	0.710	[-0.006; 0.008]
	Actor-actor simple IE	M stress →M inconsistent discipline→M report of child's ER	0.002	0.572	[-0.005; 0.008]
	Partner – partner simple IE	M stress →F inconsistent discipline→M report of child's ER	-0.001	0.602	[-0.004; 0.002]
	Direct effect	M stress →M report of child's ER	-0.022	0.001	[-0.034; -0.010]
F	Total effect		-0.026	0.000	[-0.035; -0.018]
	Total IE		-0.005	0.013	[-0.013; -0.001]
	Actor-actor simple IE	F stress →F inconsistent discipline→F report of child's ER	-0.006	0.004	[-0.014; -0.002]
	Partner – partner simple IE	F stress →M inconsistent discipline→F report of child's ER	0.001	0.184	[0.000; 0.003]
	Direct effect	F stress →F report of child's ER	-0.021	0.000	[-0.029; -0.012]
Partner effect (Individual's parental stress → Partner's Report of Child's ER)					
M	Total effect		-0.007	0.142	[-0.017; 0.002]
	Total IE		-0.005	0.021	[-0.011; -0.001]
	Actor- partner simple IE	F stress →F inconsistent discipline→M report of child's ER	-0.005	0.005	[-0.012; -0.002]
	Partner – actor simple IE	F stress →M inconsistent discipline→M report of child's ER	0.000	0.401	[-0.001; 0.004]
	Direct effect	F stress →M report of child's ER	-0.002	0.673	[-0.012; 0.008]
F	Total effect		-0.011	0.029	[-0.020; -0.002]
	Total IE		0.002	0.459	[-0.004; 0.009]
	Actor- partner simple IE	M stress →M inconsistent discipline→F report of child's ER	0.003	0.249	[-0.002; 0.008]
	Partner – actor simple IE	M stress →F inconsistent discipline→F report of child's ER	-0.001	0.608	[-0.005; 0.003]
	Direct effect	M stress →F report of child's ER	-0.013	0.021	[-0.023; -0.003]

Note: APIMeM: Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation Model; IE: indirect effect; CI: confidence interval; ER – emotion regulation; M-mothers'; F-fathers'.

4. DISCUSSION

Previous few studies focused mainly on the actor effect between parental stress and parent's perception of children's emotion regulation (e.g., Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009). The correlation analysis revealed the dynamic associations between parental stress, parental inconsistent discipline, and parents' report of children's emotion regulation. Specifically, mothers' and fathers' parental stress was positively correlated with their own and their partners' parental inconsistent discipline and negatively correlated with their own and their partner's perception of children's emotion regulation. Also, the mothers' and fathers' parental inconsistent discipline was negatively related to their and their partner's perception of children's emotion regulation. Therefore, considering these significative correlational results, the present study further explored the dynamic interaction of parental stress on children's emotion regulation, the actor and the partner effects, through the mediating role of parental inconsistent discipline.

First, we tested the actor and partner effects. Mothers' and fathers' stress had negative direct effects on their perception of children's emotion regulation (the actor effects). These results support previous research showing that higher levels of parental stress predicted lower levels of children's emotion regulation (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009), that a higher parental stress leads to a more negative evaluation of children's socio-emotional outcomes (Beckerman *et al.*, 2020; Mouton *et al.*, 2022; Nelson *et al.*, 2013). Our findings also give a new empirical validation of the Tripartite Model of Family (Morris *et al.*, 2007), which indicate that parent's characteristics, such as parental stress, influence children's socio-emotional outcomes, including their emotion regulation. If previous studies insisted on parental stress in low-income parents (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Masarik & Conger, 2017; Ward & Lee, 2020), we have controlled for the influence of household income on parents' perception of children's emotion regulation.

Further, mothers' stress had a negative partner direct effect on fathers' perception of children's emotion regulation. This partner direct effect suggest that higher mothers' stress is associated with fathers' more negative perception of children's emotion regulation. This result is in line with the process of emotions' transmissions, which showed evidence regarding the contagion of negative emotions and distress from one family member to the other (Larson & Almeida, 1999). Also, this result support previous research which found that mothers' parental stress is negatively related to father-children interaction (e.g., fathers' engagement with children, father sharing in child – related chores) (Nomaguchi *et al.*, 2017).

Further, we tested the mediating role of inconsistent discipline. First, our findings indicate that mothers' and fathers' stress were directly and positively associated with their inconsistent discipline. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Faith *et al.*, 2023; Rodgers, 1998), suggesting that parents'

discipline practices are shaped by parenting stress. Also, parental stress could be amplified toward preschool young children who are perceived more vulnerable by parents (Mullins *et al.*, 2007; Thomasgard, 1998). Therefore, parents could become overprotective, a behavior associated with parental inconsistent discipline (Faith *et al.*, 2023; Turner *et al.*, 2023). Although the parental stress had a positive actor effect on mothers' and fathers' parental inconsistent discipline, the partner effect of parental stress on parental inconsistent discipline was not statistically significant in our study. Further, contrary to the results of previous studies, which found that inconsistency in mothers' discipline, but not fathers', was related to more behavioral problems in children (Gryczkowski *et al.*, 2010), this study found the parental inconsistent discipline had a negative actor effect only on fathers' perception of children's emotion regulation. Paired samples t-test result showed significant difference between mothers and fathers regarding their inconsistent discipline, with fathers exercising more inconsistent discipline on their children. In addition, fathers' inconsistent discipline has a strong impact on fathers' perception of children's emotion regulation. Still, this result need deeper investigation, previous studies exploring the inconsistent discipline predominantly among mothers (e.g., Bater & Jordan, 2017). In addition, fathers' inconsistent discipline negatively predicted maternal children's emotion regulation (partner negative effect), but not vice versa, meaning the maternal inconsistent discipline did not predict paternal children's emotion regulation. This result could be explain through the framework of Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997), which underlines the interdependence between family members and the mutual influence between them regarding family members' outcomes. Specifically, according to this theory the extent to which fathers are consistent in discipline toward their children is salient for the way in which mothers perceive children's emotion regulation.

The results of mediation analysis revealed that only for fathers, parental stress has an indirect actor effect on children's emotion regulation, through their parental inconsistent. Further, it is noteworthy that fathers' stress was positively related to fathers' inconsistent discipline, which in turn, decreases levels of mothers' perception of children's emotion regulation. Previous finding test showed that fathers' stress it is more strongly related to satisfaction in the marital relationship, whereas mothers' parental stress is more strongly related to attributes of the children. Therefore, fathers, but not mothers reported they were more inconsistent as parents when they were less satisfied with their marital relationships (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Stoneman *et al.*, 1989). Also, the fathering vulnerability hypothesis (Cummings *et al.*, 2004) showed the fathers, comparative with mothers are less able to separate the marital subsystem form the parental subsystem (Stover *et al.*, 2016). Further, the negative impact of fathers' inconsistent discipline on both paternal and maternal perception of children's emotion regulation through is explainable if we take into account the results of a recent systematic review of the differences between mothers and fathers in parenting practices which showed that

fathers show less concern regarding children than mothers (Yaffe, 2023). Although, from a traditional viewpoint, fathers were considered to exert more discipline toward their children, recent study showed that mothers disciplined their children more frequently than fathers (Hallers-Haalboom *et al.*, 2016). As such, mothers are expected to play an active role in raising their children, being more responsible for children's socio-emotional outcomes, the paternal role in children rearing being less prescribed (McBride *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, for mothers, fathers' inconsistent discipline, means what fathers do or not do (Nomaguchi *et al.*, 2017), could be more salient, leading to negative perception of children's emotion regulation. Conversely, fathers' inconsistent discipline has a strong negative impact on mothers' perception on children's emotion regulation (partner effect), fathers' perception of children's emotion regulation being negatively influence by their own parental stress and their own parental inconsistent discipline (actor effect).

4.1. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study's findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, all data were collected from both parents through Google Forms software. Therefore, we could not control the conditions under which the participants filled the questionnaire. Although the results provide many complex findings, future studies should include onsite assessments, and obtaining data also from teacher, given that children behave differently depending on their setting (Bater & Jordan, 2017; Lanza & Drabick, 2011). In addition, including direct external observation of parent-child interaction could better confirm the findings of this study. Second, the cross-sectional study design does not allow for establishing causal relationships between variables. Therefore, future studies with longitudinal design are required to draw causal relationships. Third, based on the fact marital satisfaction is an important variable in the association between parental stress and children's outcomes (Liu & Wang, 2015; Robinson & Neece, 2015), futures studies could investigate the mediator, respectively the moderator role of marital satisfaction toward parental dyads.

5. CONCLUSION

Considering the interdependence in parental dyads, our findings indicate that greater mothers' and fathers' parental stress is associated with their perception of children's lower emotion regulation (the actor effects). Also, higher maternal stress is associated with fathers' perceptions of children's lower emotion regulation (the partner effect). Moreover, our results indicate that only in fathers' case, their parental stress has an indirect actor effect on children's emotional regulation, through their inconsistent discipline. Thus, greater fathers' stress was associated with increased fathers' inconsistent discipline, which in turn was associated with mothers' perceptions of children's lower emotional regulation. Consequently,

within parental intervention programs, parents should learn new positive parenting skills, become more aware of the negative impact of inconsistent discipline on children's emotional adjustment, and different types of techniques to reduce parental stress.

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REZUMAT

Perioada preșcolară este una în care părinții experimentează niveluri ridicate de stres, una dintre principalele sarcini ale părinților, referitoare la parenting, fiind aceea de susținere a reglării emoționale a copiilor, prin practici parentale adecvate. Studiile anterioare (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Neece *et al.*, 2012) s-au axat în principal pe investigarea efectelor stresului parental asupra dezvoltării socio-emoționale, în general. Prezenta studiu își propune să investigheze asocierea dintre stresul parental și reglarea emoțională a copiilor, la nivel diadic, colectându-se date de la ambii părinți. Acest studiu transversal a inclus 103 diade parentale, cu cel puțin un copil preșcolar, tipic dezvoltat, cu vârsta cuprinsă între 3 și 6 ani. Părinții au completat scale de auto-raportare referitoare la stresul parental, inconsistența disciplinei ca practică parentală și reglarea emoțională a copiilor. Analizele diadice au fost realizate utilizându-se Modelul interdependenței actor-partener prin mediere (Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model, APIMeM). Rezultatele au arătat că stresul mamelor și al taților are un efect direct negativ asupra propriilor percepții privind reglarea emoțională a copiilor (efectul actor) și stresul mamelor are un efect direct, negativ asupra percepției de către tați a reglării emoționale a copiilor (efectul partener). De asemenea, rezultatele analizei de mediere au arătat că numai în cazul taților, stresul parental exercită un efect indirect, de tip actor, asupra reglării emoționale a copiilor prin inconsistența disciplinei a taților. Stresul taților coreează pozitiv cu inconsistența disciplinei taților, care, mai departe, influențează negativ percepția mamelor asupra reglării emoționale a copiilor. Viitoare programe de intervenție ar trebui să se axeze pe susținerea părinților în forul lor de a conștientiza impactul dăunător al inconsistenței parentale. De asemenea, reducerea stresului, ar trebui să constituie unul dintre principalele obiective ale programelor de intervenție parentală.