Parents’ emotion-related reactions and children’s coping with everyday peer stressors
Alison E. Parker, Julie A. Thompson, and Amy G. Halberstadt

North Carolina State University

INTRODUCTION
Major life stressors are known for their negative impact; however, minor daily stressors also affect children’s lives (Repetti, et al., 1999). One type of everyday stressor for middle school-aged children is peers (Spinar, et al., 1991). Experiences in middle school, such as making new friends, changing classrooms, and peer harassment, may increase children’s exposure to stress. Cumulative effects of everyday stressors may, over time, drain the intrapersonal resources that children rely on to succeed in school.

Children develop a repertoire of coping strategies by middle childhood. These strategies may be context-specific (Casey & Dubow, 1993). Examples of strategies that children use are (Casey & Dubow, 1993; Washburn-Ott, et al., 2004):
- Active/Approach
- Avoidance
- Emotion-focused
- Acceptance

Parents’ cultivation of positive emotions in the family may help children develop effective coping strategies. Children may then be able to build their coping strategies by generating positive emotions on their own (Fredrickson, 1998).

GOAL OF THE STUDY
To examine if parents’ reactions to children’s positive emotions influence children’s coping with everyday peer stressors.

HYPOTHESES
- Parents’ encouraging reactions: positively relate to children’s support-seeking and active coping
- Parents’ teaching/controlling reactions: positively relate to children’s support-seeking and active coping, and use of humor
- Parents’ reprimand and discomfort: positively relate to children’s avoidant coping, negatively relate to children’s support-seeking and active coping

METHOD
Participants
N = 83 children (38 girls & 45 boys) and their parents (66 mothers and 17 fathers).
Child age: M = 11.55 yrs, SD = .64
Parents were primarily:
- of European American ethnicity (71%)
- married (65%)
- educated; the majority had completed high school with some college (63%)

Procedure
Children participated in a Science Day at their middle school. Children with consent participated in the Research Center. Trained interviewers asked children to discuss their peer stressors and report their use of coping strategies. Parents completed questionnaires at home.

MEASURES
Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE; Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989)
- Children thought of a recent stressful situation with a peer, occurring in the past 2 months.
- They rated their use of each possible coping behavior in that event on a 4-point scale (1 = didn’t do this at all; 4 = did this a lot).
- They also indicated on a 4-point scale (1 = very little; 4 = a great deal):
  - how much the situation mattered to them
  - how much control they felt they had over the situation.

COPE factors:
- Support-seeking (ct = .73) “I got help and advice from other people”
- Active (ct = .61) “I took action to try to make the situation better”
- Acceptance (ct = .60) “I learned to live with it”
- Avoidance (ct = .73) “I refused to believe that it had happened”
- Humor (ct = .71) “I made jokes about it”

Parental Reactions to Children’s Expression of Positive Emotions questionnaire (PRCEP; Ladouceur, Reid & Jacques, 2002)
- Parents responded to 12 scenarios and then reported the likelihood that they would use each of four types of reactions in the scenario on a 7-point scale:
  - Teach/Control
  - Encourage
  - Reprimand
  - Show discomfort

FUTURE RESEARCH
To further uncover how positive emotions in the family may influence children’s development of effective coping strategies, future research should include observations of parent-child interactions. Additionally, future research should explore reciprocal effects and how children’s behaviors may influence parents’ emotion-related socialization behaviors.

REFERENCES
Research funded by Oliver Cook Dissertation Grant awarded to first and second authors.