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# Parenting Styles and Children's Emotional Intelligence: What do We Know?

Alberto Alegre<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The theory of emotional intelligence has elicited great interest both in the academic and the nonacademic world. Therapists, educators, and parents want to know what they can do to help children develop their emotional intelligence. However, most of the research in this field has investigated adults' emotional intelligence. This study reviews the scarce research literature in the area of children's emotional intelligence. It also reviews the way in which parenting styles and practices predict children's emotional intelligence in similar or different ways that they predict other developmental outcomes. Based on the parenting literature, four main dimensions of parenting are identified that are relevant to the study of emotional intelligence: parental responsiveness, parental positive demandingness, parental negative demandingness, and parental emotion-related coaching. Parental responsiveness, parental emotion-related coaching, and parental positive demandingness are related to children's higher emotional intelligence, while parental negative demandingness is related to children's lower emotional intelligence. Additionally, social-emotional intervention programs used in schools have succeeded in improving children's emotional skills. Implications for practitioners are discussed.

## Keywords

parenting styles, emotional intelligence, parental demandingness, parental coaching

For a long time, many human beings shared the intuition that intelligent behavior does not always correlate with high intelligence quotient (IQ). This intuition received scientific support when Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposed and scientifically supported the existence of an emotional intelligence. The interest in this new concept skyrocketed when Daniel Goleman published his famous book *Emotional Intelligence*. The fascination is not limited to the general society. It has also awakened in the academic community.

Goleman (1995) proposed emotional intelligence as a predictor of future success. Although his claim may be exaggerated, research is confirming the relation between emotional intelligence and some positive developmental outcomes such as subjective well-being (Gallagher & Vella-Brodrick, 2008), adaptive coping styles and mental health (Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007), mental ability and positive personality traits (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004), academic achievement (Schute et al., 1998), and physical and psychological health (Tsaousis & Nikolaou, 2005).

Initially, emotional intelligence was defined as the ability to attend to, understand, and regulate emotions to guide thought and behavior (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This definition emphasizes the processing of emotional information. However, Goleman (1995) proposed a somehow different definition in which processing abilities were mixed with natural or learned tendencies to react to emotional situations in positive and

efficient ways. Therefore, almost from the beginning, there was a double conceptualization of the term. The situation worsened because of problems in the measurement of the construct.

According to Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004), for emotional intelligence to be considered a form of intelligence, its measurement has to show a modest correlation with general intelligence. However, most if not all the measurement tools developed in the first years of study (including one developed by Mayer and Salovey themselves) showed very low correlations with general intelligence and instead showed moderate-to-strong correlations with personality measures (for a review see Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2004). All of these measurement tools were based on self-report questionnaires. A few years later, Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso developed an initial ability measure of emotional intelligence called the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS; Mayer & Salovey, 1999), and later, another more complex ability measure called the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MESCEIT; reviewed in Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003), which to an extent solved

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the problems presented by the previous measures. In these new ability tests, respondents are required to give answers to different emotional tasks. Examples of such tasks are: identifying emotions in pictures of faces or in photographs, and showing capacity to reason with emotions when confronted with certain stories/vignettes. The MEIS and the MESCEIT are tests of maximum performance where responses are later evaluated as right or wrong according to their correspondence with the answers of a panel of emotion experts or a normative sample of the general population. Congruent with Mayer and Salovey's theory, these tests show modest correlations with general intelligence, and show weak correlations with personality measures. However, they also show weak correlations with the self-report measures of emotional intelligence.

Because of these results, Petrides and Furnham (2003) have proposed two different conceptualizations of emotional intelligence: ability emotional intelligence and trait emotional intelligence. Ability emotional intelligence refers to the specific emotional abilities measured with ability tests. The concept is based on Mayer and Salovey's definition of emotional intelligence as a group of emotional information processing abilities. Ability emotional intelligence supports its claim of being a form of intelligence in the relatively moderate correlations with general intelligence obtained in different studies.

Trait emotional intelligence refers to emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions that are assessed with self-report questionnaires. These questionnaires let the respondents evaluate their own emotional abilities. Trait emotional intelligence is considered a personality dimension mainly because of its relatively high correlations with other personality measures (Pérez, Petrides, & Furnham, 2005).

Emotional intelligence is a conjoint of different abilities, and therefore, it has been presumed that it can be trained and perfected (Goleman, 1995). Through training, individuals are expected to develop positive behaviors and establish positive social relationships (Asher & Rose, 1997; Baron & Parker, 2000). Indeed, evidence that intervention positively influences emotional intelligence has appeared already. Bernet (1996) and Guastello, Guastello, and Hanson (2004) found higher levels of emotional intelligence-related abilities in people who had completed psychotherapy. Furthermore, van Dierendonck, Garssen, and Visser (2005) significantly enhanced emotional intelligence in subjects that participated in a psychosynthesis-based prevention program when compared to a control group.

Because emotional intelligence seems to have positive effects and because it seems to be sensitive to environmental influences, it is important to study how children can develop greater emotional intelligence. While abilities can be trained, personality dispositions may need more subtle nurturing through human interaction. For children the most important human interactions happen with their parents.

## Parenting Styles

Since Baumrind's (1966, 1967, 1971) and Maccoby and Martin's (1983) seminal work, four styles of parenting have

been identified: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Authoritative parents use developmentally appropriate demands, maintain control of children when needed, yet they are responsive, affectionate, and communicate effectively with their children. Authoritarian parents are highly demanding, exercise strong control, and show little affection and do not communicate often. Permissive parents make few demands, exercise little control, and are very responsive and affectionate (Walker, 2008). Neglectful or uninvolved parents make few demands, exercise little control, show little affection, and do not communicate often.

Children of authoritative parents have been found to score better than children of authoritarian, uninvolved, and permissive parents in measures of adjustment (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, & Mounts, 1994), attachment (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003), resilience (Kritzas & Grobler, 2005), school achievement (Boon, 2007), social and school competence (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991), and prosocial behavior (Hastings, McShane, & Parker, 2007).

Another way in which researchers have been studying the art of parenting is through the basic dimensions that compose parenting styles: responsiveness and demandingness (Baumrind, 1995; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The term responsiveness basically refers to a combination of parental warmth, nurturance, and support. Sometimes the term positive parenting has been used to describe this same group of responsive parenting practices (Jouriles et al., 2008; Tildesley & Andrews, 2008). Parental responsiveness is associated with positive outcomes in children's development such as higher child self-regulation and lower externalizing behavior (Eiden, Edwards, & Leonard, 2007), higher self-esteem (Rohner, 1990), and better psychological adjustment (Khaleque, Rohner, & Riaz, 2007).

Parental demandingness seems to be a more complex dimension. Some of the parenting practices that integrate this construct show correlations with positive developmental outcomes, while other parental demanding practices typically show correlations with negative or undesirable developmental outcomes. Positive responsiveness includes parental practices such as monitoring and supervision, behavioral control, autonomy granting, appropriate maturity demands and expectations, and inductive discipline (De Clercq, Van Leeuwen, De Fruyt, Van Hiel, & Mervielde, 2008; Sanders, 2008). Those parental practices have been found to correlate with reduced alcohol consumption (Mogro-Wilson, 2008), higher academic functioning (Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007), less exposure to situations of sexual risk (Baptiste, Tolou-Shams, Miller, McBride, & Paikoff, 2007), higher life satisfaction (Suldo & Huebner, 2004), higher prosocial behavior (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996), and higher confidence (Collins & Barber, 2005).

Negative demandingness includes parenting practices such as psychological control, inconsistent and punitive discipline, and harsh disciplining (Barnett, Deng, Mills-Koonce, Willoughby, & Cox, 2008; Barry, Frick, Adler, & Grafeman, 2007; Lim, Wood, & Miller, 2008; Shelton & Harold, 2008). Those practices have been found to correlate with internalizing

and externalizing problems, lower emotional well-being, personality disorders, lower prosocial behavior, and cognitive anxiety (Collins & Barber, 2005; Johnson, Cohen, Chen, Kasen, & Brook, 2006; Knafo & Plomin, 2006; Lengua, 2006; Van Leeuwen & Vermulst, 2004; Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007).

## Emotional Intelligence and Parenting

Because parenting styles and practices predict so many developmental outcomes, it makes sense to believe that they may also predict children's emotional intelligence. Despite the extensive research on parenting styles, no study has yet investigated their relation to children's emotional intelligence. However, there is some research on the relation between parenting practices and children's emotional intelligence. Additionally, there are three emotional constructs that have been extensively studied (though separately) in relation to those parenting practices and that can be considered some of the most important dimensions of emotional intelligence: children's emotion knowledge, children's emotion understanding, and children's emotion regulation. Emotion knowledge refers to the ability to accurately perceive and label emotional expressions and situational and behavioral emotion cues. Emotion understanding refers to the individual's awareness and identification of one's and others' emotions. Emotion regulation refers to the ability to handle frustrating, stressful, or harmful emotional arousal. Those studies are discussed hereafter.

### Responsiveness

Bennett, Bendersky, and Lewis (2005), in a study of the recognition of facial expression, found that parental warmth is positively related to children's emotion knowledge. Parental warmth has also been found to be linked to children's emotion understanding (Alegre & Benson, 2007; Dunn & Brown, 1994; Steele, Steele, Croft, & Fonagy, 1999). And a big group of studies investigating parental expression of and reactions to children's expression of emotions have found consistent relations between parental warmth and emotion regulation (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinard, 1998; Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Eisenberg et al., 1991; Eisenberg et al., 1999). Finally, in a study of early adolescents, Alegre and Perez (2009) found a positive correlation between parental warmth as reported by the early adolescents and the early adolescents' emotional intelligence.

### Parental Positive Demandingness

In a study of 203 Malaysian secondary school students, Liao, Liao, Teoh, and Liao (2003) found a positive correlation between parental monitoring and emotional intelligence. Adolescents with higher levels of emotional intelligence, in turn, showed lower internalizing and externalizing problems.

There are no studies of other parental positive demanding practices such as behavioral control, autonomy granting, or appropriate expectations, and children's emotional intelligence.

### Negative Parental Demandingness

Punitive discipline has also been found to correlate to children's lower level of emotional understanding (Pears & Moses, 2003) and to lower emotional regulation (for a review see, Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). No other studies have addressed the relation between other negative parental demanding practices such as psychological control, or harsh punishment and children's emotional intelligence.

### Parental Emotional Training

Confirming the effects of emotional training on adults' emotional intelligence, parental emotion-related practices have been found to relate to higher emotional intelligence as well. Martinez-Pons (1999) showed that parental promotion, training, and rewarding of emotionally intelligent behavior, as perceived by their young adult children, related to the young adults' higher emotional intelligence. In addition, Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1997) found that when parents accept children's displays of emotionality and help children to understand them and to use the information of those emotions to behave in positive and efficient ways, a group of parental practices that has been termed emotional coaching, children show a higher ability to regulate their emotions. Additionally, parental emotion dismissing practices, including minimization, punitive, and distress parental reactions to children's display of negative emotions, have also been negatively related to children's emotion knowledge (Perlman, Camras, & Pelphrey, 2008). Denham and colleagues have also shown that when parents are emotionally expressive and responsive, their children understand their emotions better. When, additionally, parents encourage children to express their own emotions and discuss emotional events with them, children develop higher emotional competence (Denham & Grout, 1994; Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997).

## Implications for Practitioners

Research indicates that children's emotional abilities can be improved using specific emotion-related training. Research also indicates the importance of emotional intelligence as a predictor of an array of positive developmental outcomes. To date, no clinical interventions have been devised based on emotional intelligence theory. However, different socioemotional intervention programs used in schools have already shown positive effects. Bierman et al. (2010) studied the *Fast Track PATHS* (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), a social-emotional learning program that teaches self-control, emotional awareness and understanding, peer-related social skills, and social problem solving in order to promote social and emotional competence. It is delivered by teachers with

support from project staff. They found that the program is effective in reducing aggressive behavior and increasing prosocial behavior, especially for boys.

Webster-Stratton and Herman (2010) studied the *Incredible Years Series*, a set of programs based on social cognitive theory that uses an intervention consisting of 60 socioemotional lessons for children from kindergarten to second grade. They also found improvements in children's problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. When the program was combined with socioemotional lessons for parents and teachers, the effects were stronger and children also showed less aggressive behavior, had fewer conduct problems, and had better prosocial skills. The *Strong Kids Social Emotional Learning Programs*, another series of programs devoted to teach children from kindergarten to eighth grade social-emotional skills, have also shown improvements in emotional knowledge, self-management strategies, and coping strategies. Therefore, we know that certain emotional abilities can be trained, that those emotional abilities result in more positive outcomes for children, and that appropriate social-emotional training results in improvement both of emotional abilities and of adaptive behavior. All this accumulated evidence can help practitioners to introduce systematic social-emotional training in their practice with children.

Unfortunately, there is still very little research on emotional intelligence and parenting. The literature does not reveal studies that have examined the relation between authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved parenting styles and children's emotional intelligence. Nor are there studies that investigate the relation between parenting styles and specific emotional abilities such as emotion knowledge, emotion understanding, attention to emotions, or emotion regulation. It is difficult to explain the reasons for the lack of research in this area. Because the main proponents of emotional intelligence believe that emotional intelligence can improve with the appropriate training, most authors may have been more interested in finding methods that can directly train a specific emotional ability. In addition, because the concept itself is still in its infancy there may just not have been enough time for this kind of study.

However, some results have started to appear and some conclusions can be reached. For example, the following parental practices, parental warmth, parental monitoring, and parental emotional coaching, which seem to promote higher child self-regulation, lower externalizing behavior, higher self-esteem, and better psychological adjustment, also correlate positively with emotional intelligence or with emotional intelligence dimensions such as children's emotion knowledge, children's emotion understanding, and emotion regulation.

On the other hand, one negative parental practice, punitive discipline, that is associated with internalizing and externalizing problems, lower emotional well-being, personality disorders, lower prosocial behavior, and cognitive anxiety, is also associated with lower emotional understanding and lower emotional regulation. Therefore, interventions that target parental socioemotional education could be extremely useful for children's well-being. The above mentioned study

by Webster-Stratton and Herman (2010) shows the positive effects of parental training on children's social and emotional skills and behavior. Recently, Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, and Kupzyk (2010), in a study of 200 children and their parents participating in the *Getting Ready* parental engagement program have shown that intervention targeting parents can indeed improve children's socioemotional competencies.

## Future Directions

Clearly, the research on parenting and emotional intelligence is still very limited. There is an urgent need for addressing the relation between parenting styles and emotional intelligence. There is a need to study other parental practices that have been shown to be important in children's development but that have not been studied in relation to emotional intelligence. For instance, parental psychological control has been shown to relate to negative outcomes such as emotional eating (van Strien, Snoek, van der Zwaluw, & Engels, 2010), anxiety symptoms (El-Sheikh, Hinnant, Kelly, & Erath, 2010), and depression and delinquency (Barber, 1996). Similarly, harsh disciplining, parental expectations, inductive discipline, or parent-child joint activity have also been associated to children's developmental outcomes, but none of those parental practices have been studied in relation to emotional intelligence. Additionally, most of the few studies addressing parenting and emotional intelligence or emotional intelligence dimensions are of correlational nature. We need more studies of an experimental or longitudinal nature that investigate the effects of interventions targeting specific parenting practices on children's emotional intelligence.

In conclusion, very little research in the field of parenting and emotional intelligence has been done to date. Further research in this area is urgently needed. However, the review of the available literature already suggests directions that therapist, educators, and parents may want to follow to promote children's emotional intelligence.

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