

High Self-Blame for Mother's Happiness and Low Self-Blame for Mother's Sadness are Associated with Healthy Psychological Functioning in Children

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Introduction:

- The ability to understand others' emotions and respond prosocially is critical for healthy psychological and social functioning in children (Saarni, 1992).
- Children first learn about others' emotions through interactions with their mothers (Eisenberg et al., 1992). However, they are also prone to making errors in interpreting the causes of their mothers' emotions (Donohue, Tully & Goodman, 2017).
- Adolescents' attributions that they are the cause of their mother's depression have been linked with higher levels of their self-reported depression and anxiety (Goodman, Tully et al., 2011).
- Few studies have investigated children's perceptions of personal responsibility for mother's emotions, especially her happiness, even though children typically display positive emotion processing biases (Boseovski, 2010; Donohue, Goodman & Tully, 2017).
- This study aimed to investigate associations between children's attributions of personal responsibility (i.e., self-blame) for mother's happiness and sadness and their social morality and psychological functioning.

Hypotheses:

- We hypothesized that higher self-blame for mother's happiness and lower self-blame for mother's sadness would be associated with higher levels of empathy and prosocial behaviors and lower levels of internalizing problems.

Methods:

Sample:

- 117 children (49.6% female) between the ages of 7 and 12 ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.8$ years, $SD = 1.1$ years) and their mothers participated.
- Children's race/ethnicity: 56.4% White, 36.8% Black of African-American, 6.8% Other.
- Participants were recruited from the Georgia State Infant and Child Subject Pool and online postings.
- Children had either elevated internalizing problems (83% of sample) or low internalizing problems as indicated through parent-ratings.

Measures:

- A self-report instrument for adolescents, the *Children's Perceptions of Others' Depression- Mother's Version* (CPOD-MV; Goodman, Tully et al., 2011), was modified for administration to children in an interview format to assess self-blame for mother's sadness (CPOD, 5 items, $\alpha = .73$) and her happiness (Children's Perceptions of Others' Happiness- Mother's Version, CPOH, 5 items, $\alpha = .63$).
 - A double binary interview rating scale was used. Children first answered questions with *yes/no* and then *yes always/yes sometimes* or *no always/no sometimes*
 - Sample item CPOD: *Even if she doesn't say it, is it because of you that your mother gets happy?*
 - Sample item CPOH: *Do the things that make your mother happy have something to do with you?*
- Children completed self-report rating scales assessing aspects of children's psychological and social-emotional functioning, including the:
 - Bryant's Empathy Index for Children (IECA)
 - Children's Depression Inventory-Version 2, shortened form (CDI-2)

- Penn State Worry Questionnaire- Child Version (PSWQ-C)
- Children's Hope Scale (CHS)
- Mothers completed parent-report rating scales assessing aspects of children's social-emotional functioning, including the:
 - Griffith Empathy Measure (GEM)
 - My Child - Version 2, Prosocial Reparation Scale (My Child-2)

Results:

- Multiple linear regression analyses with age, gender and race as statistical controls were used to test the association between children's self-blame for mother's positive and negative emotions and their psychological and social-emotional functioning (see Table 1).
- Children's higher self-blame for mother's happiness was related to children's greater use of prosocial behaviors to repair transgressions, more empathic thoughts and emotions in various situations, higher hopefulness about the future, lower depression symptoms, and lower worry.
- Conversely, greater self-blame for mother's sadness was related to lower levels of empathic behavior, lesser use of reparative behaviors, and more behavior problems.

Discussion:

- Consistent with our hypotheses, more persistent self-blame for mother's happiness across contexts was associated with greater use of prosocial behaviors, stronger experiences of empathic emotions, more persistent hopefulness, lower depression and lower anxiety, while more persistent self-blame for mother's sadness was associated with lesser use of prosocial behaviors and less intense empathic emotions.
- Attributing high personal responsibility for mother's happiness and low personal responsibility for her sadness were associated with more developed social emotions.
- Further, attributions of personal responsibility for mother's happiness, though not attributions of responsibility for mother's sadness, may be protective against internalizing problems.
- While attributions of personal responsibility for negative events are a well-established correlate of internalizing problems in children, self-blame for mother's sadness may be more of a marker of poor emotional development rather than internalizing problems.
- Interventions aimed at increasing children's awareness of mother's positive emotions and decreasing children's self-blame for mother's sadness may be effective for supporting children's healthy social, emotional, and psychological functioning.
- One limitation to the study is low reliability of CDI ($\alpha = .44$) and CPOH ($\alpha = .63$).

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Table 1

Betas for Associations between Self-Blame for Mother's Emotions and Children's Social-Emotional and Psychological Outcomes in Regressions

	Self-Blame for Mother's Emotions	
	Mother's Sadness	Mother's Happiness
<i>Psychological Functioning</i>		
Depression (CDI-2)	$\beta = .14, p = .13$	$\beta = -.26, p = .005$
Worry (PSWQ-C)	$\beta = .04, p = .68$	$\beta = -.21, p = .03$
Hopefulness (CHS)	$\beta = -.15, p = .10$	$\beta = .32, p < .001$
<i>Social-Emotional Functioning</i>		
Parent-Reported Empathy (GEM)	$\beta = -.25, p = .01$	$\beta = .25, p = .007$
Child-Reported Empathy (IECA)	$\beta = .00, p = .98$	$\beta = .24, p = .01$
Prosocial Behavior (My Child-2)	$\beta = -.24, p = .01$	$\beta = .19, p = .04$

Note. Age, gender and race were included as covariates.

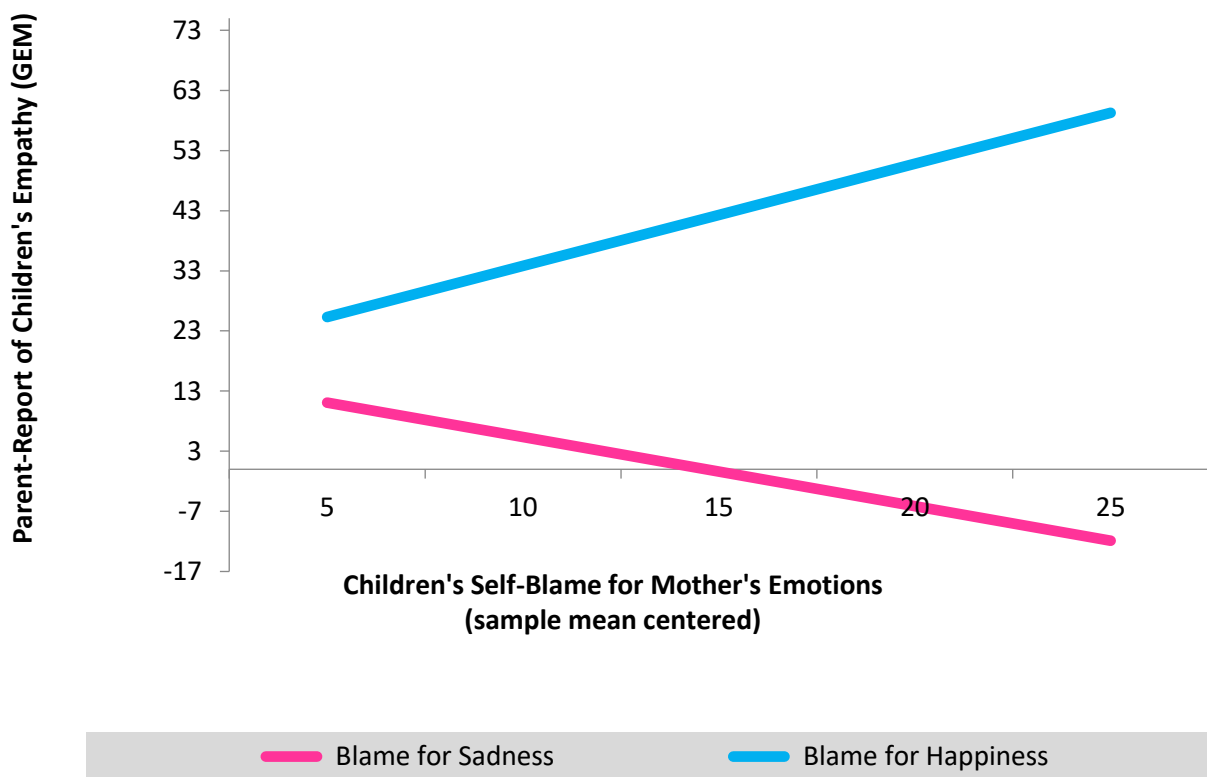


Figure 1. Example of higher self-blame for mother's happiness and lower self-blame for mother's sadness being associated with better social-emotional functioning, i.e., empathic thoughts and emotions as reported by the mother on the GEM.

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