

Family Boundary Dysregulation and Parent-Child Relationship Quality: Emotion Socialization as a Moderating Factor

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ABSTRACT

Family relationships have immediate and long-lasting impacts on the entire family unit.⁵ Previous research has identified dysregulated family boundaries as a factor that causes negative consequences on the parent-child relationship but neglected to identify buffers for these consequences.^{2, 8, 13} This study seeks to explore the associations between family boundary and relationship quality through emotion socialization as a moderating factor. We hypothesized boundary dysregulation will be negatively associated with relationship quality, where those reporting high emotion socialization will have a weak association, and those reporting low emotion socialization will show a strong association. The sample consisted of 517 college students reflecting on their adolescence. Data was analyzed using multiple regression. Family boundary dysregulation was negatively related to parent-child relationship quality. Emotion socialization appears to act as a buffer against the negative impact of family boundary dysregulation on parent-child relationship quality. Although not entirely moderating the relationship, emotion socialization decreases the negative association between family boundary dysregulation and parent-child relationship quality. These results can be utilized to develop family intervention programs. Future studies should explore these findings among a diverse sample and investigate individual types of boundary dysregulation.

INTRODUCTION

- **Boundaries** are defined as the rules delineating who participates in a subsystem and how they participate.¹¹ In families, the boundary should be balanced between rigidity and diffuseness. The types of boundary dysregulation include triangulation, parentification, psychological control, guilt induction, and blurring of psychological boundaries.⁹ Children in families with boundary dysregulation have higher rates of emotional insecurity, internalizing symptoms, externalizing behaviors, somatic symptoms, and academic issues.^{2, 6, 8, 9} The impacts of family boundary dysregulation are significant and long-lasting, persisting into adulthood.¹⁴ Healthy family boundaries lead to more positive outcomes for the whole system.¹⁰
- Therefore, if families can improve their boundaries, their outcomes would improve. However, family structural theory suggests that once family patterns are defined, they will resist change.¹¹ A potential solution is to identify factors that moderate the negative outcomes of family boundaries.
- Positive **parent-child relationship quality** leads to better all-around outcomes for the family.^{1, 4, 7, 12}
- One process which improves parent-child relationship quality is emotion socialization.³ **Emotion socialization** is the process in which individuals learn to understand, experience, express, and regulate emotions through others.
- The present study seeks to identify emotion socialization as a potential moderating factor that can buffer the detrimental effects of family boundary dysregulation on parent-child relationship quality.

METHODS

- This study has a cross-sectional, between-subjects design.
- The data in this study comes from the Family Enhancing Emotion and Interpersonal Competence and Strengths for Adolescent Well-Being study.
- Participants completed the study online through Qualtrics. Demographic information was collected and then participants completed numerous surveys on aspects of their family relationship. Participants were instructed to answer questions thinking back to their adolescence.
- The final sample was 517 participants.

RESULTS

- A simple correlation was calculated to determine the relationship between family boundary dysregulation and parent-child relationship quality. Pearson correlations revealed a negative and significant association ($r = -.555, p < .001$) between family boundary dysregulation and parent-child relationship quality.
- Family boundary dysregulation and parent-child emotion socialization interact to influence family relationship quality, $b = 0.107, SE = 0.027, t(516) = 3.976, p < 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.016$.
- A linear regression revealed main effects of family boundary dysregulation $b = -0.412, t(516) = -11.263, p < 0.001$, and emotion socialization, $b = 0.305, t(516) = 12.496, p < 0.001$.
- A median split was used to calculate low and high parent-child emotion socialization. The slope of high emotion socialization is -0.2955 . The slope of low emotion socialization is -0.6309 .

CONCLUSIONS/SIGNIFICANCE

- Family boundary dysregulation was negatively correlated with parent-child relationship quality. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1. These results are in line with past research.⁴
- Emotion socialization appears to act as a buffer against the negative impact of family boundary dysregulation on parent-child relationship quality. Although, not entirely moderating the relationship, emotion socialization decreases the negative association between family boundary dysregulation and parent-child relationship quality. These findings are consistent with Hypothesis 2.
- To our knowledge, no previous studies have investigated the impact of emotion socialization as a moderating factor on parental boundaries and parent-child relationship quality. The results of this study open up a new area of inquiry.
- The results of this study can be used to develop parental and familial intervention programs. Structural family theory suggests that it is exceptionally difficult to alter family boundary patterns once they are set.¹¹ However, utilizing emotion socialization, programs can improve outcomes for families with dysregulated boundaries.
- Future research should explore these findings among a racially and ethnically diverse population. Future research such also consider investigating each type of boundary dysregulation (guilt induction, blurring of psychological boundaries, parentification, triangulation, and psychological control) on an individual scale.

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