Fostering Empathy in Children: The Role of Maternal Supportive Response to Child Distress and Child Attachment Security

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Background

- Early attachment security contributes to the foundation for socio-emotional development (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969).
- Empathy may be partly fostered through having one's needs frequently met, which also promotes secure attachment.
- Indeed, maternal response to child distress has been linked with both child empathy (Lam et al., 2012) and child attachment security (Isabella et al., 1989), and attachment security has been associated with higher child empathy (Xu et al., 2022).

The present study examines whether child attachment security is a mechanism for the association between maternal responses to child distress and child empathy.

Hypotheses:

1. Mother's unsupportive responses to child distress will relate to lower child attachment security, which in turn associates to lower child empathy.

2. Mother's supportive responses to child distress will relate to higher child attachment security, which in turn associates to higher child empathy.

Method

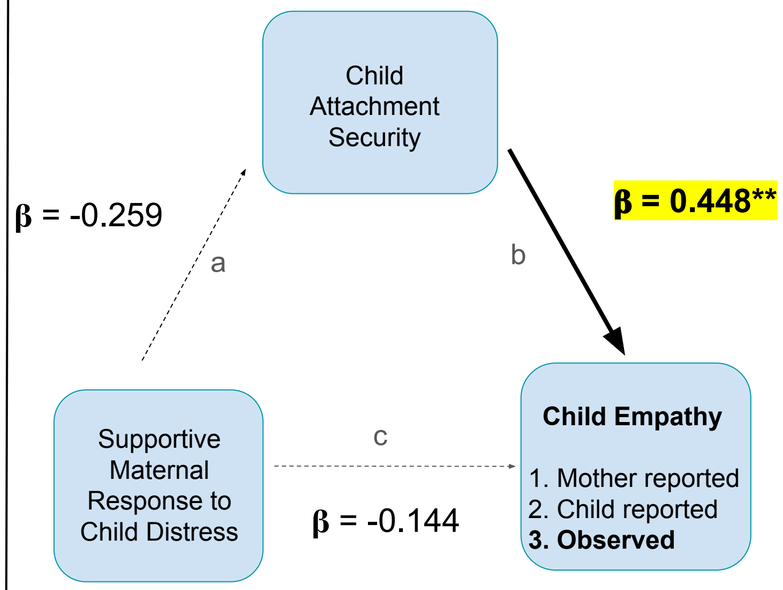
- **Participants**: N=95 mothers and young children (M_{age}= 4.5 years; 53.7% White, 23.2% Black, 23.2% Other).
- **Coping with Toddler's Negative Emotion Scale (**CTNES; 6 items; 7-point scale; Fabes, 1990): Mothers completed a questionnaire to rate their likelihood of responding to child distress in supportive and unsupportive ways.
- **MacArthur Attachment Story** (Bretherton et al., 1990): A 20-minute doll-story assessment measured child attachment security and assigned each child a security score ranging from 1 (highly insecure) to 5 (highly secure).

<u>Child Empathy was measure in three different ways:</u>

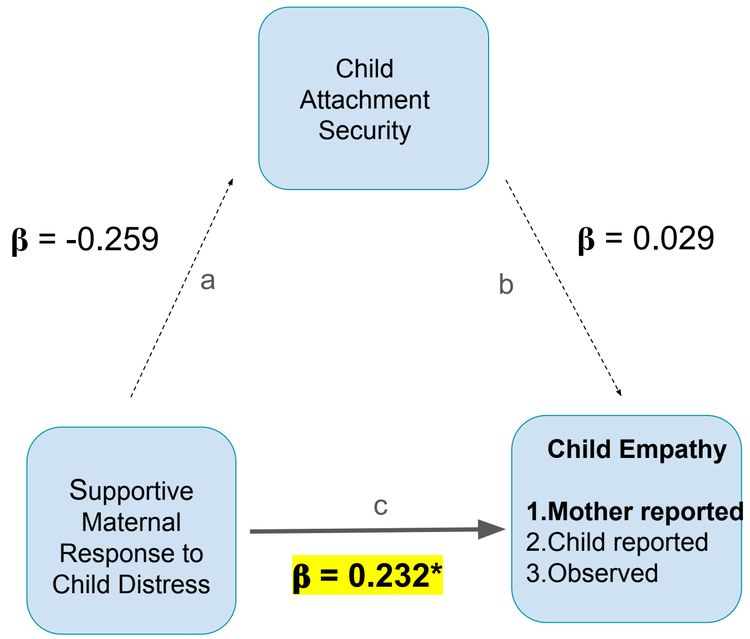
1/ **My Child – Empathy subscale**; (13-items; 7-point scale; Kochanska, et al., 1994): *Mother-reported* questionnaire assessing children's empathy.
2/ **Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents** (IECA; 22 items; 9-point scale; Bryant, 1982): *Child-reported* questionnaire assessing empathy to aggressiveness and acceptance of individual differences.
3/ **Naturalistic observation**; (4 tasks; Schrandt et.al, 2009): *Observed* child empathy tasks coded on a scale from 1 (no empathy) to 5 (high empathy).

Main Findings

*significant findings emerged only for mother's supportive response to child distress



Path values indicate unstandardized beta-weights; *p < .05, **p < .01.
Bold indicates significant finding for that path & measure.



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Results

A biased-corrected bootstrapped mediation analysis was conducted in R, controlling for SES, mothers' race, and children's gender.

- Path a: Mother's supportive response to distress was not a significant predictor of attachment security (β = -0.259, p > 0.05).

- Path c: Mother's supportive response to child distress predicted **mother-reported** child empathy (β = 0.232, p = 0.026).

- Path b: Attachment security was a significant predictor for **observed** child empathy (β = 0.448, p = 0.001).

- Mother's unsupportive response to child distress did not predict child attachment security (path a) or any measure of child empathy (path c) (ps > 0.05).

- Child attachment security was not a significant mechanism between maternal response to child distress (unsupportive/supportive) and any child empathy measures (ps > 0.05).

Discussion

- Results highlight the importance of supportive (but not unsupportive) maternal response and child attachment security for development of child empathy.

- Findings also underscore the importance of considering method variance, as mother's self-reported supportive response to child distress was associated with mother reported child empathy, and observed attachment security was associated with observed child empathy.

- Future research should examine this model further, paying careful attention to how constructs are measured.

References available upon request
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