

The Protective Role of Parent-Child Conversations During COVID-19 Lockdown: Predicting Children's Mental Health Two Years Later



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INTRODUCTION

- The COVID-19 pandemic was a large scale stressor; higher dose of exposure to pandemic-related stressors is linked to elevated mental health symptoms.
- Parent-child conversations help children regulate negative emotions during large scale stressors and build resilience during stressful events. Parents differ in the strategies they employ to help children cope with negative emotions:
 - **Emotion Coaching:** Acknowledging, validating, and encouraging expression of emotion.
 - **Emotion Dismissing:** Minimizing, discounting or punishing emotional expression.
- Parent Emotion Coaching / Dismissing strategies have not been observed behaviorally during large-scale stressors, and links with child outcomes have not been assessed.



THE PRESENT STUDY

- This study developed a novel behavioral observation protocol to assess maternal emotion coaching and dismissing strategies during COVID-19 conversations.
- We examined whether these strategies buffer the negative effects of pandemic-related stressors on child mental health outcomes measured during lockdown and two years post-COVID.



HYPOTHESES

- Higher dose of exposure to COVID-19 → greater child mental health symptoms.
- Maternal Emotion Coaching will buffer these effects, Maternal Emotion Dismissing will amplify these effects.

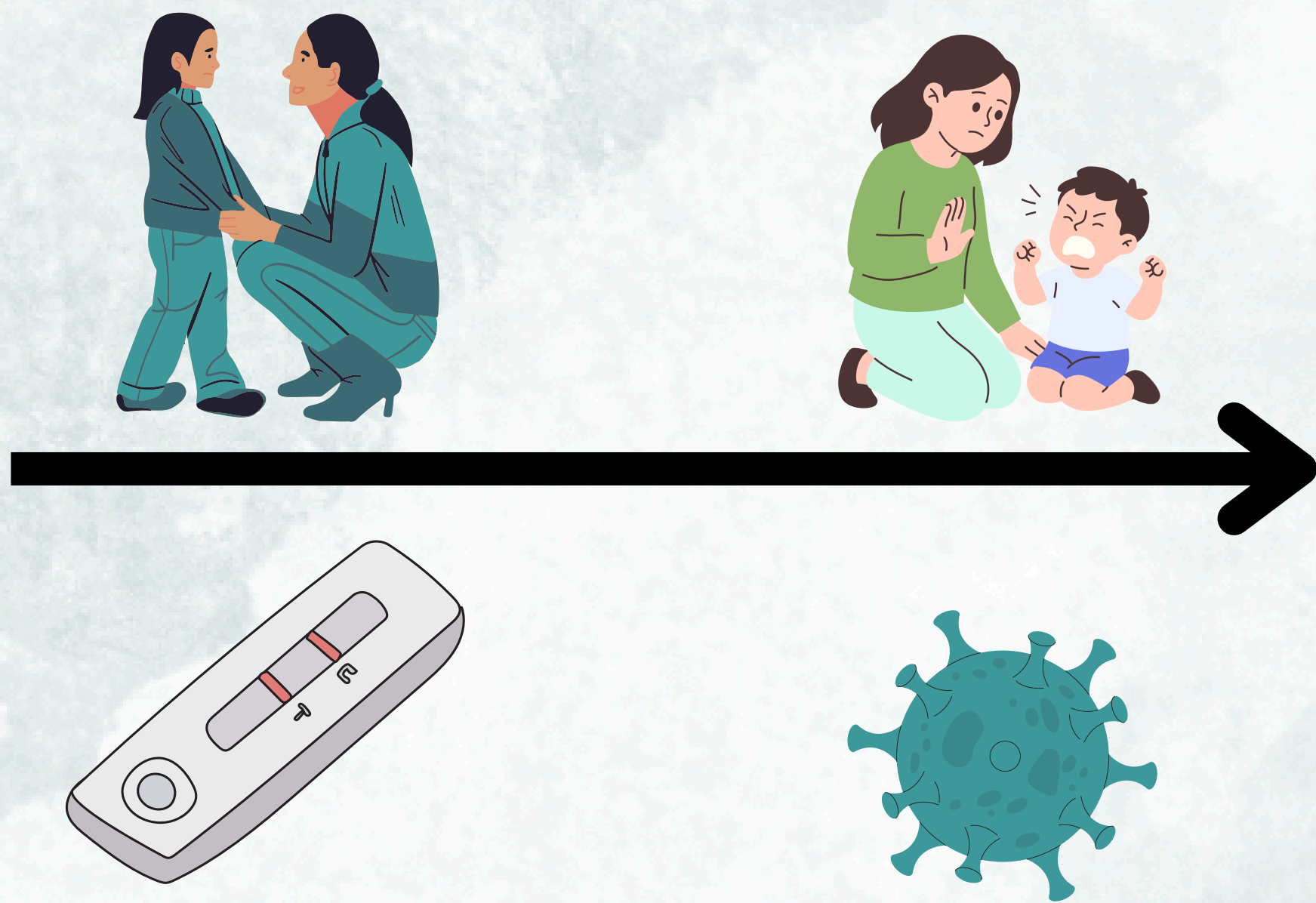
Time Point 1

During **LOCKDOWN**

Child's age~4 years old

- N=144
- **Children's Dose of Exposure** to COVID-19 Stressors
- **Children's Mental Health Symptoms** (Internalizing and Externalizing CBCL, Achenbach). (Maternal report, online)
- **Maternal Emotion Coaching Vs. Emotion Dismissing** (coded offline from video recorded mother-child conversations)

METHODOLOGY



Time Point 2

2 years Post COVID-19
Child's age~6 years old

- N= 133
- Measured outcome: **Children's Mental Health Symptoms** (Internalizing and Externalizing CBCL, Achenbach). (Maternal report, collected online)



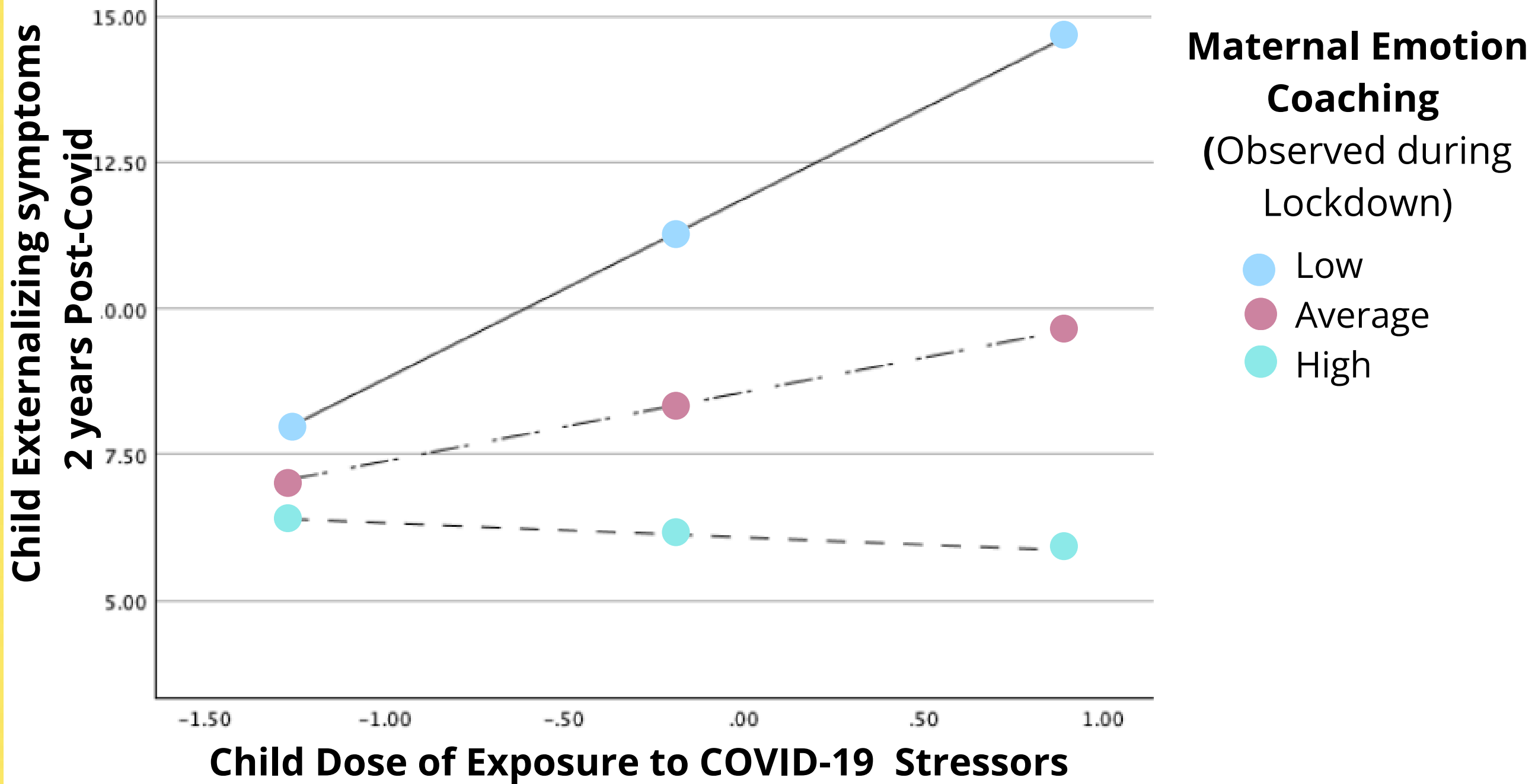
MAIN RESULTS

Maternal emotion coaching significantly buffered the effect of exposure to pandemic-related stressors on children's Externalizing behavior two years post-COVID, controlling for symptoms assessed during lockdown. ($\Delta R^2 = .026$, $F(5, 127) = 27.861$, $p = 0.010$; $\beta = -.163$, 95% BC CI [-2.286, -.408])

Specificity: No significant interaction effects were found for internalizing problems, Emotion Dismissing strategies, or Time 1 outcomes (Lockdown).



Maternal Emotion Coaching Moderates the Link Between Exposure to Pandemic-Related Stressors and Child Externalizing Problems



DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- Novel use of observational coding to assess maternal emotion coaching/dismissing during conversations about COVID-19, providing objective measurement beyond self-report.
- Findings suggest that parental emotion coaching during conversations about stressful events can buffer future exposure effects, identifying a promising target for preventive interventions.

(1) Achenbach, T. M., & Rescorla, L. A. (2001). Child Behavior Checklist for Ages 6-18

(2) King, G. L., Kehoe, C. E., Havighurst, S. S., Youssef, G. J., Macdonald, J. A., Dunsmore, J. C., Berkowitz, T. S., & Westrupp, E. M. (2023). "Creation of a short-form and brief short-form version of the Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale."

(3) Schlesinger, Y., Paz, Y., Rousseau, S., Atzaba-Poria, N., & Frenkel, T. I. (2025). The Emotional Vaccine: Maternal Caregiving in Infancy Shaped Future Preschoolers' Internalizing Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic.