

# Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy: A Review of the Past Decade of Research

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Parental meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP) is the concept that parents have thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their own emotions and their children's emotions. Since the introduction of this concept in 1996, many research studies have linked PMEP with children's psychosocial development. In 2012, a literature review was conducted of PMEP research published from 1996-2012 and a theoretical framework based on the findings from the review was proposed. The purpose of this article is to continue the review of PMEP literature by providing an explanation of the theoretical foundations of PMEP and examine the past decade of research and the impact of that research on our understanding of PMEP and child socialization. **Methods:** The researcher applied a narrative literature review methodology to examine PMEP literature published from 2012-2023. Utilizing the Columbia College online library database, *Google Scholar*, and *Academia*, the researcher found a total of 9 empirical articles about PMEP that were published in the last decade. **Results:** The results of this recent review further validated the theoretical framework presented in 2012, which claims that child emotional competence acts as a mediator between PMEP and child outcomes (child psychosocial adjustment and child peer relationships). Recent studies found that PMEP can act as a moderating variable (or protective factor) between challenging family circumstances (such as family stress or increased maternal symptomatology) and child internalizing behaviors (which are connected to child emotional competence). Additionally, researchers found that there may be a difference between the impacts of PMEP on child sadness versus child anger in families exposed to violence. Finally, researchers discovered that ethnicity could be a moderator between PMEP and child outcomes. The emergence of a new PMEP-focused program geared toward aiding parents in developing an emotion coaching approach with anxious children called tuning in to kids (TIKs) has been piloted with promising results. **Conclusion:** An expansion of the theoretical framework to include PMEP as a moderating

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variable may be considered if future research can further validate these findings. Additionally, continued research examining PMEP regarding child sadness versus child anger and the impact of ethnicity on PMEP and child socialization is needed. The important role of PMEP in children's development of emotional competence would indicate that the development of parenting programs promoting healthy PMEP (like TIK) is needed, particularly for families facing adversity. Further research on the TIK program with families from various contexts and cultural backgrounds must be conducted to test its effectiveness.

### Keywords

Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy, Emotion Socialization, Child Emotional Competence

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## 1. Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy

The concept of parental meta-emotion philosophy (PMEP) was first introduced by [Gottman et al. \(1996\)](#) as parents' thoughts and feelings about their own emotions and the emotions of their children. [Gottman et al. \(1996\)](#) proposed that there are two types of PMEP: emotion coaching and emotion dismissing. In the early research on PMEP, it was discovered that parents who exhibited an emotion coaching PMEP saw moments of child emotional expression (particularly negative emotion expression) as opportunities to connect with their children and teach them emotion regulation strategies. These parents validated, labeled, and sought to discuss their children's emotions with their children. Conversely, parents who exhibited an emotion dismissing PMEP sought to ignore or deny the presence of their child's negative emotional expression. They often attempted to alter their child's negative emotional state and tried to make their child's negative emotion go away as quickly as possible, indirectly communicating to the child that their negative feelings were invalid or unimportant. Through this research, it was discovered that a parent's style of PMEP (coaching versus dismissing) impacted the child's emotional development.

While the concept of parental behaviors impacting children's emotional development was nothing new, the focus on parent's underlying thoughts and feelings that fuel parental behaviors was revelatory. Prior to [Gottman et al.'s \(1996\)](#) research on PMEP, early childhood developmental researchers focused primarily on concepts like parental warmth, control, and responsiveness and how these factors impacted children's emotion-related skills (e.g. [Baumrind, 1971](#); [Grusec, 1997](#); [Eisenberg et al., 1998](#); [Halberstadt, 1991](#)). [Gottman et al. \(1996\)](#) introduced the idea that each parent has an organized set of feelings and thoughts about their own emotions, which impacts how they think and feel about their child's emotions. They proposed that PMEP informs the parent's behavioral response to their child's emotions. This advanced the research on parenting and child emotional

development from being solely focused on parental behaviors to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between parental attitudes regarding emotion and emotion coaching behaviors.

To encourage researchers to further explore PMEP and its impact on child emotional development, [Katz et al. \(2012\)](#) reviewed the research that had been conducted thus far. This article is intended to update and extend that research review by discussing PMEP research conducted from 2012-2024. [Katz et al.'s \(2012\)](#) research review will be summarized and their theoretical model explained. Through exploration of more recent research, their theoretical model will be further validated and expanded and some of their calls for further research will be answered. Additional implications for recent research findings and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

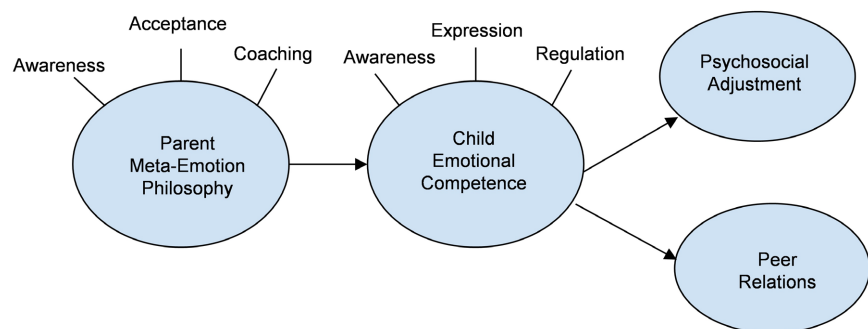
## 2. Theoretical Framework

[Katz et al. \(2012\)](#) summarized the findings of their research review with the following theoretical framework: child emotional competence acts as a mediator between PMEP and child psychosocial adjustment and child peer relations (see [Figure 1](#)). Awareness of emotion in self and child, acceptance of emotion in self and child, and coaching of emotion were recognized as three key elements to researching and understanding PMEP. Awareness of emotion, expression of emotion, and regulation of emotion were identified as the three core skills necessary to develop childhood emotional competence ([Halberstadt et al., 2001](#); [Mayer & Salovey, 1997](#); [Saarni, 1999](#)). The following paragraphs will summarize research conducted from 1996-2012 based on the research review published by [Katz et al. \(2012\)](#).

### 2.1. Outcome Variables

#### *Psychosocial Adjustment*

In their discussion of this framework, [Katz et al. \(2012\)](#) cited multiple studies indicating that PMEP impacts children's and adolescent's psychosocial development. In an effort to lay the foundation for their theoretical framework, they began the review with the seminal work of [Gottman et al. \(1996\)](#). Through this study, it was discovered that PMEP is related to increased ability to control



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework ([Katz et al., 2012](#)).

inhibitions, fewer behavioral problems, and increased academic achievement and physical health in children (Gottman et al., 1996). Later research revealed that emotion coaching behaviors in parents of adolescents were correlated with lower adolescent depressive symptoms, increased adolescent self-esteem, and decreased adolescent internalizing and externalizing problems (Katz & Hunter, 2007) all of which are related to psychosocial development (Katz et al., 2012). When emotion coaching was specifically focused on anger, adolescents showed an increased level of self-regulation and a decreased level of externalizing problems (Shortt et al., 2010) aiding the adolescents in their psychosocial development and adjustment (Katz et al., 2012). Researchers also indicated that parental emotion dismissing behaviors were related to children displaying increased externalizing problems in middle childhood (Lunkenheimer et al., 2007) negatively impacting their psychosocial adjustment (Katz et al., 2012). Overall, the theme of PMEP's impact on child psychosocial development led Katz et al. (2012) to include it as an outcome variable in their theoretical framework.

#### *Peer Relations*

In addition to the psychosocial adjustment variable, Katz et al. (2012) also discussed studies that linked emotion coaching with increased childhood social competence and better peer relationships than children of emotion dismissing parents even when the children had been exposed to inter-partner violence, community violence or had been identified as displaying conduct problems (Denham et al., 1997; Gottman et al., 1996; Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004; Katz & Hunter, 2007; Cunningham et al., 2009). These findings validated the inclusion of these two outcome variables (child psychosocial adjustment and child peer relationships) in the theoretical framework (Katz et al., 2012).

### **2.2. Mediating Variable: Child Emotional Competence**

There have been several studies conducted on the relationship between PMEP and child emotional competence. Emotion coaching has been linked to greater child awareness, acceptance (Denham et al., 1997), understanding (Denham & Auerbach, 1995; Fivush, 2007) and regulation of emotion (Gottman et al., 1996; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002; Lunkenheimer et al., 2007). However, there have only been two studies that directly tested the hypothesis that children's emotional competence acts as a mediator between PMEP and child psychosocial adjustment. Child emotional competence has been found to mediate the relationship between caregiver meta-emotion philosophy and academic performance, internalizing and externalizing behaviors and peer relationships (Cunningham et al., 2009). Child emotion regulation (which is a key component of emotional competence) has been found to mediate the relationship between PMEP and child psychosocial adjustment (Gottman et al., 1996).

### **2.3. Previous Recommendations for Future Research**

After discussing this theoretical framework, Katz et al. (2012) made the follow-

ing recommendations for future research:

- Larger sample sizes were needed to study the PMEP typologies and how each subtype impacts child adjustment.
- Explore if there are certain family contexts or subsets of youth that do not experience a relationship between PMEP and child adjustment.
- Explore if race or ethnicity acts as a moderator between PMEP and child adjustment.
- Examine the potential relationship between parent mental health and PMEP.
- Conduct longitudinal studies from preschool through adolescence to explore potential changes in PMEP throughout development. These longitudinal studies could also contribute to our understanding of age-appropriate strategies for emotion socialization.
- Examine potential bidirectional relationship between child characteristics (such as temperament) and parenting.
- Conduct studies that utilize perspectives of other socialization agents (such as teachers or peers) and how these agents may impact child emotional competencies.
- Utilize the research on PMEP to create parenting interventions that will promote emotion coaching parenting.

### 3. Current Research

#### 3.1. Validation of Theoretical Framework

Research conducted from 2012 to present day has further validated the theoretical framework originally proposed by [Katz et al. \(2012\)](#). These studies began to address some of the recommendations by [Katz et al. \(2012\)](#) for future research, specifically in the areas of the impact of ethnicity, parent mental health, and family context on the relationship between PMEP and child adjustment. In addition to exploring families from different cultural backgrounds and contexts, current research continues to explore the impact of PMEP on various aspects of child emotional competence, peer relationships, and psychosocial adjustment, all variables included in [Katz et al.'s \(2012\)](#) theoretical framework. In 2015, a study was conducted comparing 40 immigrant Asian Indian and 54 White American children (ranging in age from 8 to 16 years) and their mothers' PMEPs ([Daga et al., 2015](#)) to explore how different types of PMEP might impact child social competence and behavioral problems. These outcome variables (particularly child social competence) can be connected to the peer relationships variable found in [Katz et al.'s \(2012\)](#) theoretical framework. The Parental Meta-Emotion Interview ([Katz & Gottman, 1996](#)) was utilized to assess PMEP, The Child Behavioral Checklist was utilized to assess internalized and externalized child behaviors, and the Home and Community Social Behavior Scale (which was administered to both child and mother) was utilized to assess child social competence.

The results of this study indicated a difference between the two ethnic groups

with White American mothers scoring significantly higher in emotion coaching than Asian Indian mothers. In these White American families, maternal emotion coaching was found to be positively related to social competence and negatively related to externalizing behaviors. Interestingly, researchers found no significant relationship between Asian Indian mothers' level of emotion coaching and child outcomes. However, they did find that high levels of emotion regulation in Asian Indian mothers significantly predicted low levels of child behavioral problems. Exploratory analysis revealed that ethnicity moderated the relationship between parent regulation and child externalizing behaviors. In White American mother-child dyads, parent regulation was not significantly related to child behaviors (Daga et al., 2015). Comparing these findings to the results of Katz et al.'s (2012) literature review and theoretical framework, the framework is validated in White American families but not in Asian Indian families. Indicating that culture may need to be considered and included in an updated theoretical framework.

The researchers proposed that these differences between White American mother-child dyads and Asian Indian mother-child dyads could be due to the cultural norm of interdependence that can be central to ethnic minorities in America. For individuals who are part of collectivistic cultures, negative emotions (like anger or sadness) may not be freely expressed among family in an effort to not distress or harm loved ones. The researchers also discussed that Asian Indian mothers utilized spirituality and meditation to manage negative emotions, two coping strategies that are not accounted for when scoring Katz and Gottman's (1997) measurement of PMEP (Daga et al., 2015).

The impact of PMEP on child emotional competence was further validated in a study conducted with adoptive families, expanding the PMEP research to another familial context (Merchant et al., 2019). Research was conducted with 115 adoptive mothers analyzing the relationships between their levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance (as measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures questionnaire), their PMEP (utilizing the Emotion Related Parenting Styles Self-Test—Likert measurement), and their adopted child's ability to effectively regulate emotion (utilizing the Emotion Regulation Checklist), which has been identified as a key component to child emotional competence (Katz et al., 2012). Adoptive mothers who reported higher levels of emotion coaching were more likely to have adopted children with high levels of emotion regulation skills than their emotion dismissing counterparts. Adoptive mothers who reported insecure attachment (being high in attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, or both) were found to be less likely to ascribe to an emotion coaching PMEP. However, emotion coaching was found to mediate the relationship between parent attachment and adopted child emotion regulation, indicating that if adoptive mothers with insecure attachment could learn emotion coaching skills they may be able to aid in their adopted child's emotion regulation development.

A new area of interest in current PMEP research is the impact of PMEP on

children who have been exposed to violence, continuing the expansion of the PMEP literature to another familial circumstance. Researchers have found that children exposed to domestic violence on average have lower IQ scores and lower levels of verbal performance (Koenen et al., 2003; Ybarra et al., 2007) and that research conducted with children exposed to community violence showed similar trends (Delaney-Black et al., 2002). In a study conducted with 79 children (aged 2 to 6 years) exposed to domestic violence and their mothers, researchers found that maternal meta-emotion philosophy (MMEP) regarding sadness (as measured by Gottman's Meta-Emotion Interview) significantly predicted children's verbal intelligence (Cohodes et al., 2016). However, there was no significant relationship between MMEP regarding anger and child verbal intelligence. Children's verbal abilities impact their level of understanding and awareness of emotion (De Stasio et al., 2014). Emotional awareness is a key component of child emotional competence (Katz et al., 2012). Therefore, the findings in Cohodes et al.'s (2016) study further validate the relationship between PMEP and child emotional competence proposed in Katz et al.'s (2012) theoretical model, which claims that awareness of emotion is a key component of child emotional competence. These findings indicate that for parents of children who have witnessed domestic violence, engaging in emotion coaching behaviors regarding their child's feelings of sadness is of particular importance to their level of verbal intelligence.

### **3.2. PMEP as a Moderating Variable**

Thus far, the literature presented has validated the theoretical framework proposed by Katz et al. (2012). The following literature could indicate a need to expand the framework, reflecting the findings that PMEP could be a moderating variable between parent and child variables. In a study conducted with 95 mother-child dyads who had exposure to domestic violence, researchers (Cohodes et al., 2017) found that maternal symptomatology (as measured by the Symptoms Checklist-90 Revised) was positively associated with child internalizing behaviors (as measured by the Child Behavioral Checklist) but, that MMEP served as a moderator between these two variables. In a two-part study conducted with children, adolescents and their parents found that the positive relationship between family stress (as measured by the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale) and youth internalizing symptoms (as measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale) was moderated by parental emotion coaching behaviors (as measured by the Maternal Emotional Styles Questionnaire) (Lobo et al., 2021). In a recent study, Maternal Meta-Emotion Philosophy was found to be a moderating variable between the relationship of Maternal Reflective Function (a mother's ability to understand her child's underlying thoughts, feelings, and mental states that fuel their behavior) and child emotion regulation (an aspect of child emotional competence (Shao et al., 2023). Effective child emotion regulation (one of the dimensions of child emotional competence) has been associated with few-

er child internalizing behavioral issues, which indicates that the findings in [Cohodes et al.'s \(2017\)](#) study and [Lobo et al.'s \(2021\)](#) study continue to confirm the theoretical framework and the relationship between PMEP and child emotional competence.

The results from these studies indicate that even when families are experiencing difficult circumstances or when mothers are struggling to understand their children's emotions, PMEP (specifically emotion coaching) can act as a protective factor, encouraging the development of child emotion regulation. The discovery of PMEP as a moderating variable could add a new element to the theoretical framework proposed by [Katz et al. \(2012\)](#). However, more research is needed to see if these findings can be replicated.

### 3.3. PMEP Parenting Program

Given all the research indicating the positive impact of emotion coaching behaviors on child emotional competence, it would appear that a parenting program promoting emotion coaching behaviors could be beneficial for parents seeking to help their children gain emotional awareness, expression, and regulation skills. In answer to this need, clinicians developed tuning in to kids (TIKs), a program designed to improve parents' emotion coaching skills ([Pezeshki et al., 2020](#)). Parents enrolled in TIK participate in six group sessions (each two hours long) and are encouraged to take part in two "booster" sessions to help them maintain their emotion coaching skills. The program follows the five steps of emotion coaching ([Gottman et al., 1998](#)): 1) become aware of the child's emotion; 2) view the child's emotional expression as an opportunity for connection and teaching; 3) communicate acceptance of the child's emotion; 4) help the child increase their ability to communicate emotion; 5) when necessary, help the child with problem-solving while maintaining healthy limits. Throughout the program, parents engage in exercises to practice the skills associated with each step.

Results of a pilot study in Iran indicate that this is an effective program for families who have children with high levels of anxiety ([Edrissi et al., 2019](#)). Participants included 56 mother-child dyads. All child participants scored one standard deviation above the mean on the Preschool Anxiety Scale ([Spence et al., 2001](#)). 30 of these dyads were assigned to the intervention group and participated in the TIK program while 26 of the dyads were assigned to the control group. In addition to the mothers completing the PAS prior to the onset of the study, the PAS was readministered post-intervention and 6 months post-intervention. Results indicated that 69% of parents in the intervention group (as opposed to 18% of parents in the control group) reported that their child's PAS score had decreased and that their children experienced a normal range of anxiety symptoms. While it is exciting to see a PMEP parenting emerge with promising results of positive child outcomes, more research needs to be conducted to test the TIK's effectiveness.



## 4. Discussion

Many of Katz et al.'s recommendations for future research are still relevant and still need to be addressed. Based on the research reviewed in this article, the following recommendations can be added to Katz et al.'s previous list. As a result of the findings from Daga et al.'s (2015) study, further research on the impact of PMEP on families of other ethnicities and cultural backgrounds needs to be conducted to see if ethnicity continues to moderate the relationship between PMEP and child behavioral outcomes. In addition to this, an examination of the Parental Meta-Emotion Interview (Katz & Gottman, 1996) and its relevance to non-Western cultures should be conducted.

The concept of emotion coaching is valuable for parents from individualistic cultures that encourage the individual to express emotion openly to trusted family members and friends. Unfortunately, in defining emotion coaching through this individualistic lens, researchers miss the nuances of collectivistic cultures, which typically discourage displays of emotional expression that may distress members of their community. Instead of openly expressing emotion, people from collectivistic cultures may be more likely to express and regulate their emotion through spiritual practices (such as prayer or meditation) where the individual can process difficult emotion and seek comfort without upsetting their loved ones (Daga et al., 2015). Currently, the Parental Meta-Emotion Interview (Katz & Gottman, 1996) does not have a dimension for spirituality-based emotion regulation. Because of this omission, this measurement may not accurately assess parents from cultures that utilize spiritual practices to regulate difficult emotions. Future research should be conducted exploring the possibility that the current definition of emotion coaching might exclude parents from collectivistic cultures, which can lead to an inaccurate understanding of how PMEP impacts non-White families. It could be beneficial for researchers to explore the possibility of expanding the definition of emotion coaching to include spiritual practices as a means of emotional expression and regulation. More research needs to be conducted to better understand how non-Western cultures define ideal PMEP behaviors.

When researching mother-child dyads exposed to violence, Cohodes et al. (2016) found that PMEP regarding sadness was more important to increasing child verbal intelligence than PMEP regarding anger. This could indicate that when researching PMEP in families exposed to violence, it may be beneficial to analyze the importance of sadness versus anger to see if these findings can be replicated. Additionally, it could be beneficial for researchers to replicate this study with families who have experienced other forms of trauma to determine if PMEP related to sadness had a similar impact on child outcomes.

Further research needs to be conducted to explore PMEP as a protective factor for children in adverse environments or circumstances (such as witnessing domestic violence). The findings from Cohodes et al.'s (2017) study indicated that mothers who are struggling with their mental health (specifically related to trauma) may need additional support to help alleviate their symptoms and increase

their ability to engage in emotion coaching behaviors. If this study can be replicated with similar results or if other researchers can find that PMEP is a moderator between similar adverse child experiences and child outcomes, this would indicate that there is a need for the development of a program geared toward parents and children post-violent exposure that specifically provides mental health support and training regarding emotion coaching strategies.

Continued research on the impact of PMEP with different types of families and family contexts will continue to build a theoretical framework that helps researchers and clinicians understand the connection between PMEP and child adjustment. Similarly, more experimental research with TIK needs to be conducted with larger sample sizes from different cultural backgrounds and contexts, testing its effectiveness with a variety of child outcomes (including child emotional competence).

## 5. Conclusion

The past decade of research has given clinicians and researchers further insight into the powerful impact of PMEP on child emotional socialization and competence and has shed light on the potential expansion of the theoretical framework proposed by Katz et al. (2012). The application of these findings by the development of PMEP parenting programs (like TIK) is a natural next step in the literature. Based on the preliminary findings in the TIK pilot study, it is possible that a parent can learn an emotion coaching PMEP and that this change can produce meaningful results for their children. Continuing down this path of developing PMEP parent training programs will progress the topic of PMEP from theoretical knowledge to practical application. With more extensive research, this progression from theory to intervention could provide parents with new ways to connect emotionally with their children and opportunities to teach their children valuable skills to improve their emotional awareness, regulation, and expression.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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