

# Children's Maternal Support-Seeking: Relations to Maternal Emotion Socialization Responses and Children's Emotion Management

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**Abstract** The present study examined children's support-seeking of mothers (SSM) as a moderator of the association between maternal emotion socialization responses and children's emotion management. Participants included 119 mother-child dyads (63 boys,  $M$  age = 9.61 years, 73.1 % Caucasian). Maternal emotion socialization was assessed via observed mother-child interactions and child report. Analyses indicated several main effects such that child-reported maternal reward responses were associated with stronger child emotion management, whereas perceived maternal punishment and neglect were associated with poorer child emotion management. Regarding the significant interactions, observed maternal general unsupportive socialization responses were negatively associated with emotion management. Additionally, for children low in SSM, child-reported maternal overriding of children's emotions was positively associated with better emotion management. Support-seeking of mothers may mitigate the risk of some unsupportive maternal socialization responses and may be an adaptive strategy in middle childhood in particular contexts.

**Keywords** Maternal emotion socialization · Emotion regulation · Support-seeking

## Introduction

Children's emotional development in middle childhood is characterized by transition, as children begin to manage their emotions more independently rather than predominantly relying on mothers (and other parental figures) to modulate their emotional arousal (Thompson 1994). However, research indicates that parents continue to influence children's emotion management throughout childhood via emotion-related conversations with their children, as well as their responses to their children's emotions (Morris et al. 2007). These direct and indirect socialization messages provide children with information about the extent to which their emotional experiences and displays are valued and culturally appropriate (Gottman et al. 1997). During this developmental stage, children begin to display more independent emotion management skills (Morris et al. 2007). However, the degree to which children seek support, particularly from mothers, may affect children's emotion management skills positively or negatively. That is, seeking maternal support during times of emotional distress may reflect an emotion management strategy in which children actively and constructively use their mother as a means to help manage negative emotional arousal. Alternatively, seeking maternal support may signal that children have not learned how to manage their negative emotions independently and over-rely on their mother's guidance to modulate their emotional arousal (Desjardins and Leadbeater 2011; Vandevivere et al. 2014).

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Managing emotions requires that children learn a set of skills, termed emotion regulation, that are sensitive to situational demands and cultural norms (Campos et al. 1989; Thompson 1994). The development of emotion regulation builds upon other emotional competence skills, including emotional awareness, emotional understanding, emotion recognition, and knowledge of how emotions may affect others (Saarni 1999). As children develop, they begin to use this set of skills and knowledge in flexible, organized, and differentiated ways in order to meet the inter- and intra-personal demands of their environment (Cole 2014; Santostefano 1978). For example, by fifth grade, children are typically able to use culturally-sensitive emotional “display rules” to modulate their emotions in accordance with social expectations for specific contexts (Saarni 1999; Zeman and Garber 1996). Emotion regulation is an especially pertinent area of study in middle childhood because it is during this stage that children hone these skills, integrate them into their social functioning in a flexible manner, and take a more independent role in managing their own emotional experience and expression (Bariola et al. 2011; Cole 2014). Many researchers have conceptualized emotion regulation as a transdiagnostic factor relevant to child psychopathology (Kring and Sloan 2009), highlighting its central role in development and an important topic of research (Zeman et al. 2002).

Emotion management develops through early socialization experiences, such as interacting with parents, teachers, and other children (Eisenberg et al. 1998; Morris et al. 2007). Notably, the majority of research has examined the role of mothers in caregiver socialization of emotion (Zeman et al. 2006). Mothers are one of the initial primary socializing agents who help children co-regulate negative affect in early childhood and who continue to provide emotional guidance as children encounter increasingly more complex social and emotional demands in middle childhood (Zeman et al. 2013). There are three primary methods through which mothers guide the development of their children’s skills in identifying, understanding, and managing their emotional expressivity (Morris et al. 2007; Saarni et al. 2006). First, mothers’ own emotion expression serves as a model for children. By observing their mothers’ emotional responses within particular contexts, children can internalize the acceptability of expressing or suppressing emotions (Bariola et al. 2011). Second, mothers’ direct responses to children’s own expressivity provide feedback to children about their own emotional displays. For example, supportive responses may encourage children’s future emotional displays (Dunsmore and Halberstadt 1997; Morris et al. 2007). Lastly, mothers teach their children about emotions when reminiscing about past emotion-eliciting events (Gottman et al. 1997). Conversing with their children about such events may

foster adaptive coping skills by helping them recognize antecedents and consequences for these situations, as well as what constitutes context-appropriate emotional expressivity (Eisenberg et al. 2015; Morris et al. 2007).

Coding the responses observed in mother–child discussions has typically yielded two broad categories of maternal responses: supportive and unsupportive socialization responses to children’s emotions (Gottman et al. 1997). Research regards these two categories as independent constructs because they can co-occur within mother–child discourse (Lunkenheimer et al. 2007). Specific types of supportive (e.g., reward, magnify) and unsupportive (e.g., minimize, override, punish, neglect) responses have also been examined in maternal socialization literature, though this broad categorization is far more common (Fabes et al. 2002; Magai 1996). Examining the correlates of both general and specific forms of emotion socialization have yielded insights concerning these relations, although few, if any, studies have examined both forms in one study. Thus, the current study examines *global* observations of maternal supportive and unsupportive socialization responses during a mother–child discussion task in addition to *specific* child-reported maternal supportive (i.e., reward, magnify) and unsupportive socialization responses (i.e., neglect, punish, override) that are discussed below. This approach sheds light on how specific socialization responses may operate as risk or protective factors and general responses cumulatively impact children’s emotion management.

Maternal supportive socialization responses to children’s emotional expressivity are grounded in the belief that children’s emotions have value and should be expressed (Gottman et al. 1997). Cross-sectional and longitudinal data provide support for the link between maternal supportive emotion socialization responses—sometimes referred to in the literature as validation or acceptance—and adaptive emotion management in children. For example, supportive maternal responses to children’s emotions have been associated with adaptive emotion coping among third to sixth grade children (Eisenberg et al. 1996). Kliewer et al. (1996) reported similar findings, noting that maternal support of emotion expression in fourth and fifth grade children was linked to emotion management in children. Further, maternal acceptance of children’s emotions was found to be associated with emotion management abilities in fourth grade children (Ramsden and Hubbard 2002). For example, in a 2-year longitudinal study, Cunningham et al. (2009) reported that mothers’ supportive socialization responses to their children’s emotional expressivity predicted later emotion management. This convergence of findings across studies suggests that maternal supportive socialization responses promote children’s adaptive emotion management, most likely because this approach provides children

the opportunity to adequately process and respond to their own emotional displays, thus preparing them to respond constructively to emotional arousal in the future.

Unsupportive socialization responses to children's emotions have been linked to negative psychosocial outcomes. Mothers who respond unsupportively to children's emotions may be uncomfortable with emotions and subsequently seek to minimize or punish their children's emotions in order to decrease children's frequency and/or intensity of emotion expression (Gottman et al. 1997). Ironically, however, these maternal responses may actually serve to heighten children's negative affect. Eisenberg et al. (1998) argue that children who receive unsupportive (i.e., punitive) reactions in response to their expression of negative affect do not learn effective emotion management strategies and, therefore, may experience more intense emotions. Lunkenheimer et al. (2007, 2011) examined these associations in 8- to 11-year-old children and reported that maternal unsupportive socialization responses (i.e., minimization) of children's negative emotions were a risk factor for difficulty with emotion management or inflexible emotion management strategies. Similarly, maternal unsupportive socialization responses (i.e., minimization) of children's emotions have also been associated with poorer emotion management in third to sixth grade children (Eisenberg et al. 1996). Shaffer et al. (2012) provided converging evidence, indicating that maternal unsupportive socialization responses (i.e., minimization, punishment) were related to lower levels of emotion management in 7- to 12-year-old children. In sum, there is evidence to suggest that maternal emotion socialization is related to children's emotion management. However, the strength of this relation may depend on the number of opportunities the mother has to provide these socialization messages, such as when children solicit support from their mother.

An emerging body of literature has focused on how children's support-seeking of mothers (SSM) influences how children learn to cope effectively in emotion-eliciting situations (Desjardins and Leadbeater 2011; Vandevivere et al. 2014). Support-seeking is often considered an adaptive way to cope with stress and is positively linked to emotional adjustment (Dunkel-Schetter et al. 1987; Starr and Davila 2008). Another way to conceptualize children's SSM is to view it as an interpersonal emotion regulation strategy. Support-seeking of mothers differs from children's independent emotion regulation methods because it involves interaction with another person (the mother) to help actively support or manage the child's emotional arousal within a relational context. This conceptualization of SSM as an emotion regulation strategy is consistent with the functionalist approach to emotion (Campos et al. 1989) in which a variety of strategies are employed that are sensitive to the particular demands and available resources

in the social context. Approaching their mother when emotionally distressed may serve an adaptive function for children if the maternal response is supportive and constructive, although this outcome may change with respect to children's age or social context. For example, in infancy and early childhood, mothers assist their children in coping with negative situations by engaging in a variety of behaviors to co-regulate children's emotions, such as soothing them, distracting them from the upsetting situation, and introducing positive stimuli to help them feel better (Evans and Porter 2009). Children learn to manage their own emotions and demonstrate increasing levels of distress tolerance as they enter middle childhood (Morris et al. 2007). Thus, it may be the case that children who continually seek out maternal support have not sufficiently internalized mothers' emotional guidance on how to manage their emotions (Prinstein et al. 2005). However, children also face new social and emotional challenges in the later elementary school years, during which time mothers may remain an important source of guidance. Therefore, continuing to seek maternal support may also be conceptualized as a proactive use of resources (Morris et al. 2007). In sum, there is evidence to suggest that children's SSM as an emotion regulation strategy in middle childhood is still an appropriate and constructive way to reduce emotional arousal as well as to learn ways from their mothers to regulate emotion more independently. This perspective lends support to the notion that maternal emotion socialization would have a stronger impact on children's emotion management when children engage in more SSM.

Though children's SSM has been conceptualized as an emotion regulation strategy, it must also be understood within the interpersonal context in which it occurs. The nature of support differs as a function of the support provider and the relational history surrounding the emotionally evocative events they share with the child (Zeman et al. 2010a). For example, children who engage in more SSM consequently have more frequent opportunities to receive socialization messages from mothers, making their mothers a potent influence on children's emotion management. Examining this construct within the specific mother-child relationship employs a relational framework, rather than investigating support-seeking as a static, trait-like construct that generalizes across interpersonal contexts. Specifically, past studies have examined support-seeking by having participants rate the degree to which they can turn to others when upset, their ability to talk with others about their difficulties, and their perception of their support network (Sarason et al. 1983; Zimet et al. 1988). However, these research approaches pertain to the individuals' broad support network (family and friends), rather than a specific person, and also capture individuals' *perception* of rather than their *actual use* of their support network.

As such, there is a dearth of research regarding whether children's SSM moderates the relation between maternal emotion socialization responses and child emotion management, which will be addressed in this present study. Maternal emotion socialization responses were assessed in two ways using their interaction in mother-child discussion about historical emotionally evocative events. First, the responses were evaluated by global observations of maternal supportive (i.e., compilation of problem focused, expressive encouragement, emotion focused responses) and unsupportive socialization responses (i.e., compilation of punishment, distress reaction, minimization, neglect) responses during a mother-child discussion task about historical emotionally evocative events. Second, the responses were assessed by specific child-reported supportive (i.e., reward, magnify) and unsupportive (i.e., minimize, override, punish, neglect) maternal socialization responses. This approach not only yielded multiple perspectives of maternal emotion socialization but also allowed for both global and finer-grained examination of maternal emotion socialization. Further, child report of maternal socialization responses is likely to yield less biased reports of maternal practices than solely using maternal report (Sanders et al. 2015). Although we acknowledge the importance of fathers in emotion socialization processes (e.g., Cassano and Zeman 2010), we chose to focus first on maternal emotion socialization processes because research suggests that children may seek out mothers more than fathers when distressed (Stocker et al. 2007). Moreover, we chose to explore support-seeking in a novel manner, examining this construct as it occurs in a specific relationship (mother-child) rather than broadly-based support-seeking behaviors.

Based on the aforementioned literature, the following hypotheses are offered: (1a) Maternal emotion supportive socialization responses will be positively related to children's emotion management (Cunningham et al. 2009; Eisenberg et al. 1996; Kliewer et al. 1996). (1b) Children's SSM will moderate the association between maternal supportive socialization responses and emotion management. Specifically, it is expected that supportive socialization responses will be associated with better emotion management for children higher in SSM. (2a) Consistent with prior research (Eisenberg et al. 1998; Lunkenheimer et al. 2007, 2011; Shaffer et al. 2012), maternal unsupportive socialization responses will be inversely related to children's emotion management. (2b) Children's SSM will also moderate the association between maternal unsupportive socialization responses and children's emotion management. Unsupportive socialization responses will be associated with poorer emotion management for children higher in SSM.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 117 mothers ( $M$  age = 40.69,  $SD$  6.94) and their children (63 boys), ranging from 8–11 years ( $M$  age = 9.61 years,  $SD$  .96). The child sample was 74.3 % Caucasian, 13.7 % African-American, 7.7 % Mixed race, 2.6 % Asian, and 1.7 % Hispanic. The ethnic composition of the maternal sample was similar to that of the child sample. The majority of mothers (94.8 %) were biological parents, with 3.5 % adoptive mothers and 1.7 % stepmothers. Regarding marital status, 70.9 % of mothers were married to the child's biological father, 16.2 % were separated or divorced, 7.7 % had never married, 1.7 % had remarried, 2.6 % were cohabitating, and .9 % were widowed. The majority of the sample was of middle to upper socioeconomic status ( $M$  = 47.06,  $SD$  13.78, range 14–66; Hollingshead 1975).

### Procedure

Participating families were recruited through five local elementary schools in one public school district of southeastern Virginia. Principals provided permission to send letters home with children in grades three to five, which described the study and provided contact information. Participating families completed the study in a university lab, where mothers and children provided informed consent and assent, respectively. Mothers completed questionnaires independently while a research assistant read questionnaires aloud to the child in a separate room and recorded the answers. Mothers and children completed the discussion task prior to answering the questionnaires, in which they discussed times that the child felt sad and mad. Prior to this discussion, a research assistant met with the child to determine these sad and mad events using a 10-point rating scale to help the child choose an event of moderate emotional intensity. Order of discussion of emotion type was counterbalanced across the sample. At the end of the study, families were compensated with a \$25 gift card and a small toy.

### Measures

*Children's SSM* Mothers were asked three questions regarding the frequency with which their child approaches them when feeling sad ("How often does your child turn to you when sad or upset?") and angry ("How often does your child turn to you when angry?"), and how often their child asks them for advice when having a problem ("How often does your child turn to you for advice when having a

problem?"). Mothers responded on a 5-point Likert scale for all three items (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Very Often*). Based on a pattern of significant correlations ( $r = .61-.72$ ), responses from all three items were summed to create a composite variable of children's SSM with strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### Maternal Emotion Socialization

**Emotion Discussion Task** Both mother and child completed two semi-structured emotion discussion tasks in which the mother and child were asked to discuss a recent (i.e., within the past 6 months) time the child felt sad and a time the child felt angry. Mothers were asked to leave the room while the research assistant asked the child to provide these two emotionally arousing situations. Children were asked to rate their sadness and anger during the event on an "emotion thermometer" scale ranging from 0 (*not sad/mad at all*) to 10 (*the most sad/mad you've ever been*) and were guided to choose an event within a range of 5–7 in order to provide an emotionally arousing discussion topic that was of moderate intensity to the child. Upon determining the topic of discussion (i.e., the sadness/anger event), mothers were asked to return to the room and to discuss the topic with their child as they normally would in the context of a typical day. Mothers were instructed to allow the child to describe the topic first, after which they could discuss the topic until they felt they were done. Although a specific time limit was not imposed in order to simulate natural conversation, research assistants concluded the discussion at 10 min. These conversations were videotaped and transcribed by research assistants. This discussion task has successfully been utilized in previous studies to assess for parent–child interactions in the context of emotion discussions (Baker et al. 2011; Cassano and Zeman 2010; Dunsmore et al. 2013; Suveg et al. 2008).

Mothers' responses to children's emotional disclosures during both emotion narratives were coded by three research assistants for a variety of emotion socialization behaviors, based on the subscales of the *Children's Coping with Negative Events Scale* (CCNES; Fabes et al. 2002) and the *EAC* (Magai 1996). Mothers' responses were coded for the extent to which they responded with suggestions to solve the child's problem (*Problem Focused Reactions*), encouraged and validated the children's emotions (*Expressive Encouragement*), responded with strategies to alleviate the child's distress (*Emotion Focused Reactions*), responded punitively towards the child for exhibiting emotions (*Punish*), demonstrated emotional distress to the child's emotions (*Distress Reactions*), minimized the child's emotions (*Minimization Reactions*), or neglected the child's emotions (*Neglect*). Videotapes were viewed twice by research assistants. These behaviors were coded

on a 5-point scale (0 = *behavior did not occur* to 4 = *behavior occurred often*). Coders overlapped on one-third of the videotaped interactions. Inter-rater reliability across categories ranged from .90 to .95. Disagreements were resolved through discussion at group consensus meetings.

To meet study goals, the observational codes were then assigned to supportive and unsupportive socialization categories based on the significant pattern of correlations (see Table 1) and similar categorization in extant literature (Cassano et al. 2014; Spinrad et al. 2007). Specifically, *Problem Focused Reactions* and *Expressive Encouragement* responses were significantly positively correlated and thus, were combined for both anger and sadness, standardized, and averaged to create a supportive socialization response category that reflected mothers' range of supportive socialization responses. *Emotion Focused Reactions* were not significantly correlated with *Problem Focused Reactions* and *Expressive Encouragement* responses and thus was not included in the composite variable. *Punish*, *Minimization Reactions*, *Distress Reactions*, and *Neglect* responses were combined for anger and sadness, standardized, and averaged to comprise the unsupportive socialization response category to reflect mothers' range of unsupportive socialization responses.

**Emotions as a Child Scale: Child Report (EAC; Magai 1996)** The EAC evaluates children's perceptions of maternal emotion socialization responses to their anger and sadness displays in the past six months. The 15 items are rated on a 5-point Likert-style scale (1 = *not at all like my mother*, 5 = *a lot like my mother*). Five types of perceived maternal responses to children's expressions of anger and sadness were assessed. Supportive socialization responses included the degree to which their mothers acknowledge and validate their child's emotions (*Reward*) or match their emotions (*Magnify*). Unsupportive socialization responses included the degree to which their mothers minimize or distract them from their emotions (*Override*), punish their emotional displays (*Punish*), or ignore their emotions (*Neglect*). Research indicates this measure to be reliable and valid (Magai 1997). To meet the goals of the present study and based on a significant pattern of correlations between the anger and sadness scales ( $r = .48-.77$ ), the aforementioned subscales were combined for anger and sadness. These five composite scales had adequate internal consistency in the present study ( $\alpha = .68-.87$ ).

### Children's Emotion Management

**The Children's Anger and Sadness Management Scales: Parent Report (P-CAMS, P-CSMS; Cassano et al. 2007)** The P-CAMS and P-CSMS measure parents'

perceptions of their children's ability to manage their anger and sadness, respectively. Using a 3-point scale (1 = *Hardly Ever*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Often*), mothers responded to the 11-item P-CAMS and 12-item P-CSMS, which is comprised of three subscales (i.e., Emotion Regulation Coping, Inhibition, and Dysregulated Expression). For the purposes of the present study, only the Regulation Coping scale was used in analyses as a measure of children's emotion management. Emotion Regulation Coping represents constructive ways of responding to anger and sadness (i.e., "My child tries to calmly deal with what is making him/her mad"). Given the significant correlations between the anger and sadness Emotion Regulation Coping scale ( $r = .61$ ), the scales were combined. The P-CAMS and P-CSMS have exhibited adequate reliability (Zeman et al. 2010b) that also was present in the Regulation Coping scale in the current study ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### Data Analyses

Regarding missing data, there were complete data for 99 of the 117 mother–child dyads (85 % complete). No demographic differences (i.e., gender, parent education, family structure, ethnic background) were present between those with complete and incomplete data. Thus, missing data was considered to be at random and expectation maximization, a widely used statistical method to address missing data, was implemented to provide complete data for all families (Gold and Bentler 2000; Tabachnick and Fidell 2012). All model variables (observed maternal emotion socialization responses, child-reported maternal emotion socialization responses, children's SSM, children's emotion management) were then examined for skewness and kurtosis. Observed unsupportive socialization responses were positively skewed and kurtotic (see Table 2). This indicated

relatively low levels of unsupportive socialization responses, which is consistent with previous literature (Jobe-Shields et al. 2014). Thus, observed unsupportive socialization responses did not undergo data transformation.

Next, all model variables were examined for demographic differences. There were no differences based on ethnicity or child gender. There was a significant association between family socioeconomic status (SES) and observed supportive socialization responses ( $r = .26$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Accordingly, SES was entered as a covariate in the model with observed supportive socialization responses. See Table 2 for correlations of all model variables.

## Results

### Maternal Supportive Socialization Responses

Using hierarchical regressions, we first examined the main effects of maternal supportive socialization responses (observations, child report) on children's emotion management. We then explored whether children's SSM was a moderator of this link. Based on the distribution of the SSM variable (range 6–15,  $M = 12.63$ , skewness = .74), children's SSM was re-coded into three levels (low, moderate, high). All variables were standardized prior to analysis.

Regarding analyses with observational data, family SES, observed supportive socialization responses, and children's SSM were entered into the first step as standardized variables. The observed supportive socialization responses variable was multiplied by children's SSM to create the interaction variable, which was entered into the second step of the regression. The model was not significant.

**Table 1** Correlations of observed maternal emotion socialization

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Expressive encouragement	1						
2. Emotion-focused	-.08	1					
3. Problem-focused	.22*	.10	1				
4. Minimize	-.33**	-.05	-.18	1			
5. Punitive	-.22*	-.19	-.32**	.29**	1		
6. Distress	-.06	.14	.04	.16	.03	1	
7. Neglect	-.38**	-.05	-.18	.23*	.27**	.47**	1

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

**Table 2** Correlations of primary variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Observed SR	1									1.89	.544	.17	.70
2. Observed UR	-.38**	1								.25	.30	2.14	5.99
3. EAC reward	.17	-.16	1							4.10	.74	-.84	.02
4. EAC magnify	.17	-.05	.03	1						1.93	.73	1.20	2.93
5. EAC override	.21*	-.10	.59**	.23*	1					2.95	.81	-.12	-.28
6. EAC neglect	-.25**	.12	-.65**	-.05	-.48**	1				1.96	.77	.72	-.05
7. EAC punish	.03	.09	-.13	.33**	.13	.23*	1			2.21	.80	.65	.34
8. CEMS cope	.21*	-.14	.19*	-.03	.22*	-.30**	-.23*	1		2.07	.43	-.29	-.22
9. Children's SSM	.18*	.03	.29**	.12	.16*	-.22*	-.12	.05	1	12.60	2.42	-.78	-.28

*SR* supportive response, *UR* unsupportive response, *EAC* Emotions as Child Scale, *CEMS* Children's Emotion Management Scales, *SSM* support seeking of mothers

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

For the hierarchical regressions with child-report data, the supportive socialization responses (reward or magnify) and support-seeking were entered into the first step as standardized variables. Each supportive response was multiplied by children's SSM to create the individual interaction variables, which were entered into the second step of the corresponding regression model.

Regarding children's report on their mother's reward of their negative emotions, the model was significant,  $R^2 = .08$ ,  $F(3, 113) = 3.12$ ,  $p = .029$ , with a significant main effect of maternal reward of children's emotion management,  $b = .21$ ,  $t(116) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .030$ . Maternal reward was associated with higher children's emotion management. That is, the more that children perceived that their mother would respond with validation to their displays of negative emotion, the higher the children's emotion management skills, as rated by mothers. There was not a significant interaction with children's SSM. Regarding children's report of their mother's magnification of their negative emotions, the model was not significant.

**Maternal Unsupportive Socialization Responses**

Regarding Hypothesis 2, hierarchical regressions were used to examine the main effects of maternal unsupportive socialization responses on children's emotion management, and then whether children's SSM (low, moderate, high) moderated the link between these two constructs.

For analyses with observational data, observed unsupportive socialization responses and SSM were entered into the first step as standardized variables. The observed unsupportive socialization responses variable was multiplied by children's SSM to create the interaction variable, which was entered into the second step of the regression. The model was significant, with a significant main effect of maternal unsupportive socialization responses on

children's emotion management and a significant interaction between maternal unsupportive socialization responses and children's SSM (see Table 3). Using regression analyses, we probed the interaction to examine the relation between unsupportive socialization responses and coping at three levels of children's SSM (see Fig. 1). As noted above, three levels of children's SSM were determined based on the distribution, resulting in low (-1 SD), moderate (M), and high levels of support-seeking (+1 SD) (Hayes and Matthes 2009). The model was significant for children low in SSM,  $R^2 = .23$ ,  $F(1, 34) = 11.61$ ,  $p = .002$ . Maternal unsupportive socialization responses were inversely associated with emotion management in children who engaged in low levels of support-seeking,  $b = -.50$ ,  $p = .002$ . That is, for children who turned to their mothers for support at a lower frequency, their ability to cope constructively with negative emotions was poor when their mothers responded to their emotions with unsupportive reactions. The simple slopes for those who engaged in moderate and high levels of SSM were not significant ( $p > .05$ ).

Regarding child-report data, the model-building and interaction term process described with child-reported supportive socialization responses was repeated with respect to child-reported unsupportive socialization responses.

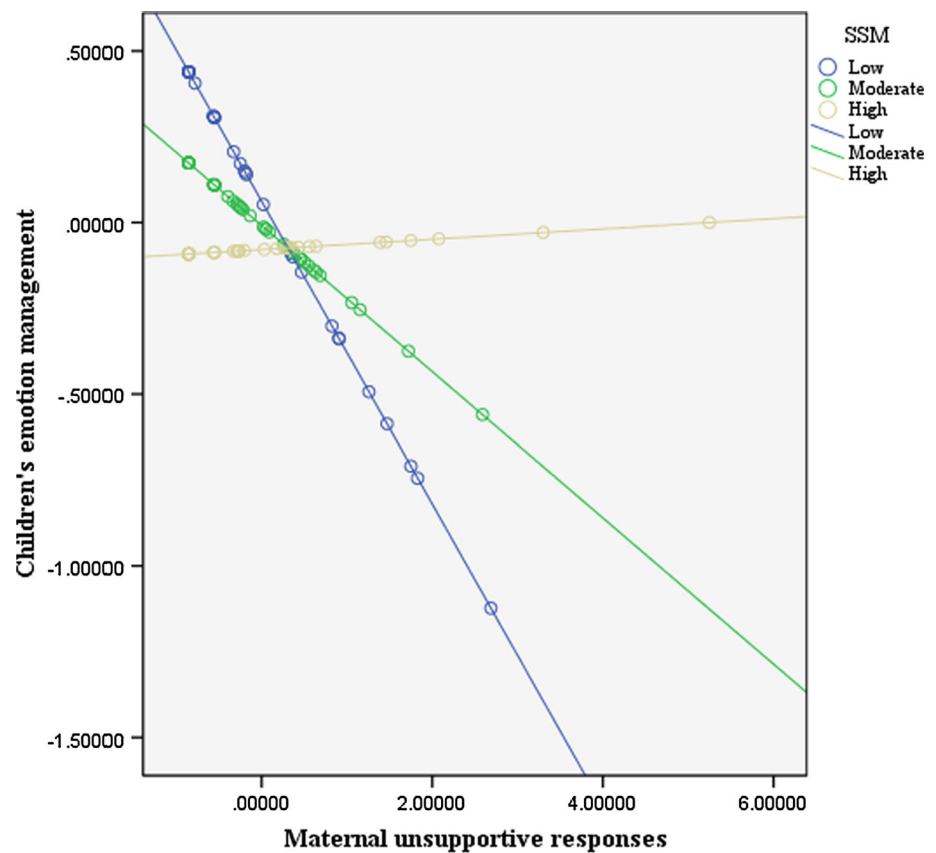
The model with children's report of maternal neglect (i.e., ignoring) of their emotions was significant,  $R^2 = .10$ ,  $F(3, 113) = 5.05$ ,  $p = .003$ , with a significant main effect of maternal neglect,  $b = -.31$ ,  $t(116) = -3.41$ ,  $p = .001$ . Children's perception that their mothers ignored their negative emotionality was associated with children's poorer emotion management. There was not a significant interaction with children's SSM.

Regarding maternal punishment of children's emotions, the model was marginally significant,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(3, 115) = 2.64$ ,  $p = .052$ . The significant main effect,

**Table 3** Children's SSM as a moderator of maternal observed unsupportive socialization responses and children's emotion management

	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$F_{\text{model}}$
Observed unsupportive socialization responses	-.14	.01		1.37
Children's SSM	-.05			
		.04	.03	2.69*
Observed unsupportive socialization responses	-.19*			
Children's SSM	-.04			
Unsupportive socialization responses $\times$ SSM	.21*			

SSM support seeking of mothers

\*  $p < .05$ **Fig. 1** Children's SSM moderates observed unsupportive socialization responses and emotion management. SSM support seeking of mothers

$b = -.24$ ,  $t(118) = -2.69$ ,  $p = .008$  indicated that children's report of maternal punishment of their emotions was associated with poorer emotion management. There was not a significant interaction with children's SSM.

Regarding maternal override of children's emotions, there was evidence for moderation by children's SSM. The model was significant, with a main effect of maternal override responses on children's emotion management and a significant interaction between perceived maternal override of children's emotions and children's SSM (Table 4). Regression analyses were used to probe the interaction, examining the relation between maternal override and

children's emotion management at low, moderate, and high levels of children's SSM (see Fig. 2). The model was significant for children low in SSM,  $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F(1, 34) = 15.16$ ,  $p = .001$ . Maternal override was associated with higher emotion management in children low in SSM,  $b = .55$ ,  $p = .001$ . That is, for those children who did not seek out their mother when experiencing a problem, their ability to cope with negative emotions was stronger when their mother attempted to distract them from their negative emotions or minimize their distress. The simple slopes for those who engaged in moderate and high levels of SSM were not significant.

**Table 4** Children’s SSM as a moderator of maternal override responses and children’s emotion management

	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	F <sub>model</sub>
Override responses (EAC)	.23*	.04		3.46*
Children’s SSM	-.09			
		.10	.06*	5.08*
Override responses (EAC)	.25*			
Children’s SSM	-.09			
Override × SSM	-.25*			

EAC Emotions as Child Questionnaire, SSM support seeking of mothers

\*  $p < .05$

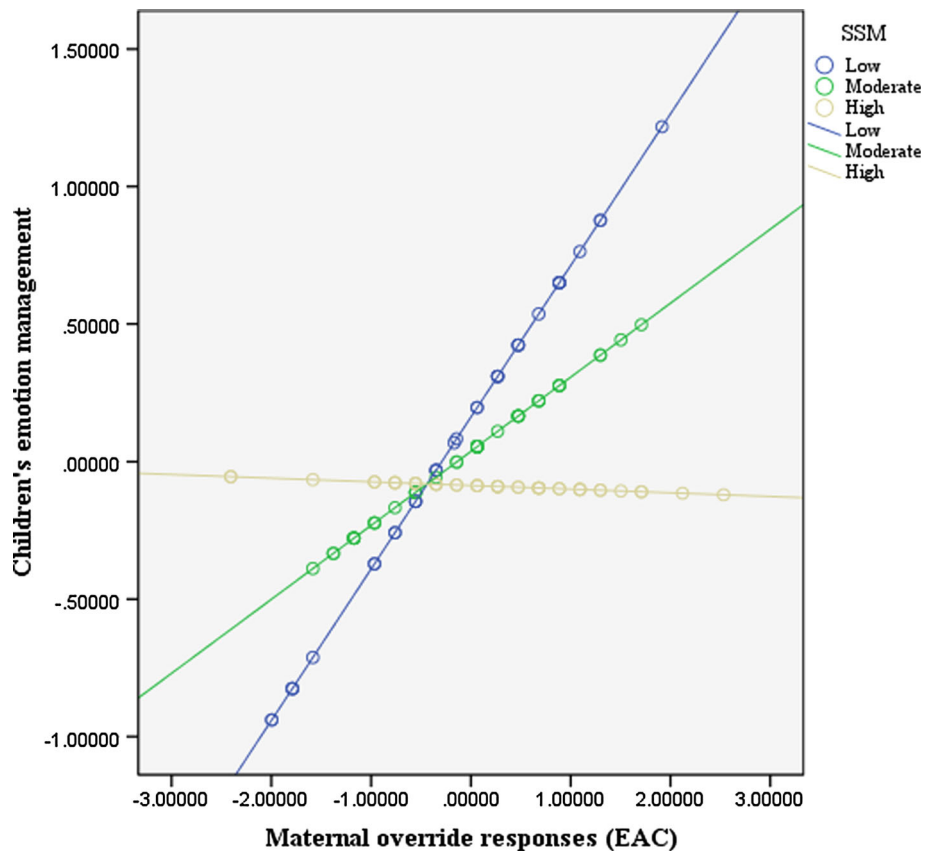
**Discussion**

Research has consistently documented that mothers’ utilization of supportive emotion socialization responses is positively associated with children’s ability to manage their emotions, whereas the inverse relation is present with mothers’ use of unsupportive socialization responses (Cunningham et al. 2009; Eisenberg et al. 1998; Lunkenheimer et al. 2007, 2011; Zeman et al. 2013). However, there is a dearth of research examining this relation as it

pertains to the global and specific maternal emotion socialization responses to children’s emotional expressivity as children engage in more independent efforts at emotion management. Further, few studies have investigated the degree to which children’s SSM in middle childhood is adaptive or maladaptive. Thus, the present study sought to examine how mothers’ emotion socialization responses and the degree to which children seek out their mothers’ emotional support is associated with children’s emotion management.

Our first hypothesis stated that mothers’ supportive emotional socialization responses would be positively related to children’s emotion management and that this association would be moderated by children’s SSM. Consistent with extant research (Cunningham et al. 2009; Eisenberg et al. 1996; Kliewer et al. 1996), results of the current study indicated that child-report of mothers’ reward responses, such as acceptance and validation of their children’s negative emotions, was positively associated with children’s emotion management. Interestingly, children’s SSM did not moderate this association. It is possible that in the context of a supportive maternal environment, the degree to which children seek additional support may be superfluous because children are ostensibly already receiving the emotional support they require when experiencing heightened levels of negative affect.

**Fig. 2** Children’s SSM moderates child-reported override responses and emotion management. EAC Emotions as Child Scale, SSM support seeking of mothers



It is also interesting that children's perceptions of maternal support—but not mothers' actual observed supportiveness during mother–child discussions—were associated with children's emotion management. This suggests that children's *perception* of specific supportive socialization responses may be more salient than their mothers' actual responses with respect to children's emotion management. However, the discrepancy between children's perceptions and observation of supportiveness may also be due to the way in which these constructs were assessed. That is, the observations of maternal emotion socialization behaviors in a laboratory setting may not be an accurate reflection of the socialization behaviors that typically occur in more private contexts, which may be captured more accurately via child-report. This consideration is especially relevant in light of the positively skewed observed maternal un-supportiveness variable, which may indicate a social desirability bias by mothers. The present findings highlight the importance of incorporating data from multiple reporters in order to better understand characteristics of the mother–child relationship. Interestingly, recent research suggests that the most reliable reporter of a parent's behavior is the other spouse, in that their perceptions are more consistent with those of behavioral observations (Cassano et al. 2014).

Regarding our second hypothesis, we expected that mothers' un-supportive socialization responses would be negatively associated with children's emotion management and that children's SSM would moderate this relation. The results indicated that there was a significant interaction between mothers' observed un-supportive socialization responses and mothers' perceptions of children's SSM. Specifically, compared to those who engaged in medium or high levels of SSM, children who engaged in low levels of SSM espoused less adaptive emotion management responses when exposed to greater un-supportive socialization responses from mothers. In other words, when children seek less maternal support, the negative impact of maternal un-supportiveness on their emotion management was more powerful than if they sought more maternal support. It may be that maternal un-supportiveness is more salient for children who do not frequently seek out their mothers, given the child's limited attempts to elicit this form of attention. Alternatively, it may be that children who are stronger in emotional management skills may be better than those with poorer emotion management at navigating their mothers' un-supportive socialization responses to their emotional expressivity and advocating for the support they need. Longitudinal designs would help to clarify the directionality of these effects.

It may also be that children's continued pursuit of maternal support may lead to other maternal socialization responses (e.g., begrudging attention) that confer less risk for emotion management difficulties. That is, by routinely

seeking additional support in emotion-eliciting situations, even when their mothers are initially un-supportive, children may inadvertently facilitate an increase in maternal attention that buffers the negative effects of their un-supportive socialization responses. In this sense, it is possible that children's SSM may act as a protective factor, especially in contexts in which children are not receiving the emotional support they need in order to learn how to adaptively regulate their negative affect.

Regarding the findings for specific un-supportive socialization responses, children who perceived their mothers as being neglectful or punitive of their negative emotional expressions exhibited more difficulty managing their anger and sadness. This set of findings mirrors those found in the broader emotion socialization literature demonstrating that children whose mothers engage in un-supportive socialization responses are less adept at coping with their negative emotions (Eisenberg et al. 1998; Shaffer et al. 2012).

Contrary to the finding regarding mothers' overall observed un-supportiveness, a crossover effect for children's perceptions of maternal override responses was found. More specifically, children who engaged in low SSM, relative to children with high and average SSM, reported more adaptive emotion management in the context of greater maternal override responses but less adaptive emotion management in the context of fewer maternal override responses. These findings suggest that children who seek out less support from their mothers may benefit more from their mother's use of overriding responses compared to children who exhibit greater support-seeking behavior. Of note, this maternal override category has yielded mixed results in the literature regarding whether it is perceived as a negative or positive response (Brand and Klimes-Dugan 2010). In this study, override was significantly positively correlated with reward responses and negatively correlated with neglect responses. It may be that maternal override responses, in conjunction with greater use of reward and less use of neglect responses, provide gentle corrections in an emotional conversation (e.g., "When I was sad, my mother told me not to worry"), and children who engage in less support-seeking behavior may differentially benefit from this gentle yet direct socialization response.

Across both of the significant interactions (i.e., child-reported override and observed un-supportive with children's support-seeking), children who engage in less SSM appear to be more sensitive to their mothers' emotion socialization responses. Lower levels of child SSM naturally afford fewer learning opportunities from mothers. These socialization opportunities may increase the salience of these mother–child interactions, particularly in the context of more aversive (i.e., un-supportive) or directive (e.g., override) maternal emotion socialization efforts. Thus, less SSM may be beneficial in the context of

unsupportive parenting, particularly with mothers who attempt to reduce their child's emotional responses. In contrast, children who seek out maternal support frequently may be relatively resilient to both the positive and negative effects of maternal emotion socialization in contexts of unsupportive and overriding responses. For these children, it may be easier to "weather the storm" from maternal unsupportive socialization responses, and the direct nature of overriding responses may not provide the same utility for children who more frequently seek out maternal support. Overall, the present findings suggest that SSM in childhood may affect how maternal emotion socialization responses relate to child adjustment.

Although this study contributes to the maternal emotion socialization literature in important ways, the findings must be interpreted with its limitations in mind. First, the use of a cross-sectional design precludes any conclusions on the directionality of effects. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs in order to determine whether children's support-seeking leads to or evokes maternal responses to children's emotional expressivity or whether the nature of maternal responses elicits more or less support-seeking by the child. This aspect of the mother-child interaction is dynamic and bidirectional in nature, thus directionality should also be explored. Second, the evaluation of support-seeking in this study, although novel, was limited to three questions, based solely on maternal perceptions, and lacked formal evidence of construct validity. The results may have been influenced by shared method variance given that mothers responded to the support-seeking questions, in addition to evaluating their child's emotion management skills. Use of a multi-reporter assessment of this construct may provide a more nuanced understanding of how maternal support-seeking occurs in middle childhood. Third, the findings from this sample cannot be generalized to a more economically and racially diverse population. Children's support-seeking and maternal emotion socialization responses may differ widely as a function of specific cultural norms regarding child and mother emotional expressivity. Fourth, research on parental socialization should also include fathers' perceptions, in addition to maternal report (Cassano et al. 2006). It would be valuable to know whether children's emotion management skills and psychosocial functioning is improved if both parents provide supportive socialization responses to children's negative emotions, or if having only one supportive parent is sufficient to provide positive socio-emotional outcomes. Further, future research should examine whether the effects of emotion socialization on emotion management are further moderated by parent gender, meaning that these messages may be interpreted differently when delivered by a child's mother or father. Finally, it would be interesting to understand how emotion

socialization processes operate in high-risk families (e.g., living in high violence neighborhoods, children whose mothers are incarcerated). In the current sample, children viewed their mothers as primarily supportive (i.e., high mean reward score) and low in unsupportive behaviors, however, effects of these socialization behaviors may differ for minority or lower class families (Zeman et al. 2014).

The results of the current study suggest that children's SSM in middle childhood serves unique functions. For children who seek less maternal support, their mothers' emotionally unsupportive socialization responses are more salient and contribute to poorer emotion management. However, in contexts in which children perceive their mothers to be overriding or mildly dismissive of their emotional needs, this directive socialization response may be beneficial. In contrast, children who seek higher levels of maternal support may be somewhat less responsive to both mothers' unsupportive and directive (overriding) socialization responses. Thus, children's SSM may allow them to balance both their mothers' supportive and unsupportive socialization responses to their emotion, allowing for greater resilience in the development of emotion management in childhood. Although arguments for child contributions to mother-child interactions and child adjustment are not new (Bell 1968), there is still much work to be done in this area. The present findings add to a growing literature, which suggests that examining contributions of the child when studying effects of maternal socialization is critical to understanding the nuances in the mother-child relationship (Hastings and De 2008; Kim et al. 2001; Mirabile et al. 2009; Pluess and Belsky 2010). Indeed, just as support-seeking was found to contribute to the mother-child relationship in the present study, future research may benefit from including components of child regulation, including child psychophysiology and temperament, in order to fully elucidate associations between the parent-child relationship and psychosocial outcomes. Further, it will be important for future studies to expand upon these findings by incorporating both parents in order to better understand how each may contribute to these outcomes. In order to fully capture the essence of both mother- and father-child relationships, the study of *both* parent and child contributions is critical.

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