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UGA Libraries Undergraduate Research Award

My mother has humbly served as a social worker for 15 years. For as long as I can remember, she would recount the stories of different children who were placed in state custody under her purview. Some were stories of success, but most were poignant reminders of the adversity that faces so many children in our state—harsh accounts of children never able to break loose from hopeless beginnings out of broken homes, harsh disadvantages associated with poverty, and even shocking difficulties brought about by abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Being greatly impacted by the disheartening realities of many children in state custody, I knew that my research interests would in some fashion pertain to children and to furthering their well being.

My honors thesis is entitled *Emotion Regulation in Children: Implications for Affect and Childhood Psychopathology*. This project materialized when I considered the different and varied measures of psychological constructs used in the *UGA Child and Family Emotions Lab*—measures of *emotion regulation* (ER), *affect*, and *psychopathology*. I also used *PsycINFO* to conduct a rough literature search for studies which generally related these three constructs. With that, I formulated potential research questions, and subsequently met with my research mentor, Dr. Suveg, to discuss my considerations. Succinctly, the purpose of this empirical study was to examine the specific role of positive emotions, i.e., *positive affect*, in relation to *ER* and the presence of *psychopathology* in children aged 7-12. I used mediational and correlational analyses to investigate what relationships, if any, existed.

The next phase of my research initiative consisted of an in-depth review of relevant literature which would validate my tripartite model. My mentor suggested five important

articles—one of which was Barbara Frederickson’s *The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions*—that were critical in framing my introduction section. To be thorough, I continued my investigation with a piecemeal approach in which I searched for articles pertaining to one element of my model at a time, e.g., I began with studies that specified *positive affect* (PA) as a key point of interest. To embark upon this leg of my research journey, I reverted back to familiar search tools such as *Google Scholar*, *PsycINFO*, *PsycArticles*, and *ScienceDirect*. In retrospect, this was like being lost a forest full of brush and thicket with no beaten or traveled paths, seemingly ill equipped to move forward. My research mentor gave me timely counsel when she advised that one of the greatest challenges of writing a meaningful introduction is to remain focused on literature that is specific to one’s hypotheses. I found this to be the case when my search on PA led me to articles which for my purposes were rather irrelevant. For example, articles such as *The effect of low versus high approach-motivated positive affect on memory for peripherally versus centrally presented information*, had little to do with my research question.

I found this initial approach considerably ineffective, therefore I arranged for a librarian conference in hopes of becoming more proficient in my utilization of online databases such as *EBSCO Host*. This appointment truly revolutionized my research approach; it was as if the librarian came into my labyrinth of trees with a bulldozer and cut a path that would ultimately lead to my destination. I learned how to truncate search results by using advanced search options and how to conduct more all-inclusive, (and thus, more relevant) searches. As an example, I was able to search for studies that focused on PA */and/* psychopathology. Another means by which I was able to conduct more comprehensive searches was the *|CHOOSE DATABASES/* tab. The librarian made me aware of additional databases that proved to be quite helpful in finding relevant

articles, e.g., *ERIC* and *Health and Psychosocial Instruments*. Instead of searching one database at a time, I was able to save time and search several simultaneously. Implementing the *EBSCO Host* thesaurus was also advantageous. I inserted the search term, “emotion regulation” to see what synonymous terms would surface. There were no results for “emotion regulation” per se, but my search yielded a concise definition for “emotional regulation,” which I found to be extremely useful. Also very valuable was the “related terms” function of the search, which led me to associated terms such as “emotional control”, “self regulation”, and “affect regulation.” For instance, by searching “affect regulation” and “psychopathology,” I uncovered relevant literature such as Bradley’s *Affect regulation and the development of psychopathology*.

Another facet of my research experience involved using the footnotes and references of various peer reviewed articles cited in my study. This proved to be an invaluable source of information and raised the qualitative level of my research paper overall. By referencing the way in which studies applied various citations, I was able to identify much of the “classical” literature on *emotion regulation*, *affect*, and *psychopathology*. One of the challenges, however, was sorting through this great body of literature to identify the studies which would most greatly contribute to my project. That is, even after truncating my research findings and discarding the studies which had little to no applicability, there remained many resources which could be used in my introduction. (I felt like a small child in a candy store wanting to leave with the entire inventory in hand.) A subsequent challenge was to cite the literature as elegantly as possible, so that the literature fit within the framework of my project *specifically*—and not mimicking the text’s original application in the original source. In the face of these challenges, I developed a great appreciation for the collaboration and peer review processes in which researchers engage on a regular basis. With these considerations (and others) in mind, I asked my research mentor a host

of questions relating to citation issues and article selection. In the near future, I will also meet with Dr. Suveg and Dr. McDowell to discuss a draft of my honors thesis. This will be a great opportunity to receive further input and advice from two professionals within the field of psychology.

Another avenue of research included my use of *Galileo Interconnected Libraries* (GIL) to find books and journals available in print at UGA. I compiled my list of sought-after literature and was able to locate these with ease at the UGA Main Library and Science Library. Occasionally I encountered a resource that was not available at UGA. In that case I was able to use ILLiad, the Interlibrary Loan service. I simply registered and submitted an online request form. To my surprise, within a few days, I had an electronic copy of the requested articles at my disposal. Specifically, this was the case with Koole's *The Self Regulation of Emotion*, a book chapter that helped me to gain a foundational knowledge of the science behind *emotion regulation*.

Research, in and of itself, is enthralling. It is dynamic in nature, influenced by many factors, and ever changing. When I decided to engage in the research initiative described here, I was rather intimidated and did not even have a framework around which to build. However, the burden of carrying out the research for my chosen project is one that I have not carried individually. With the help of my research mentor and the UGA librarians, the initial pieces are certainly in place, and the process no longer feels so daunting. I feel that I have traversed a broad portion of the learning curve over the course of one short semester. I find it extremely rewarding to have gained much knowledge and insight regarding the research process, and I am excited to move forward. I have started on a path that I will most definitely continue on in the future as I sharpen my research skills and move further along the "researcher continuum."

## **Emotion Regulation in Children: Implications for Affect and Childhood Psychopathology**

### **ABSTRACT**

Much attention has been paid to the role of negative emotions in youth psychological functioning, but only a scant amount to the role of positive emotions. Yet, theory and preliminary empirical research with adults suggests that positive emotions can facilitate cognitive and psychological functioning. The purpose of this study was to examine the specific role of positive emotions in relation to emotion regulation (ER) and the presence of psychopathology in children ages 7-12. Fifty-four children (*M* age = 9.13; 50% males) and their parents (54 mothers, *M* age = 39.8; 54 fathers, *M* age = 42.6) independently completed measures of the child's ER and symptoms of psychopathology. The family also participated in an emotion discussion task in which the family talked about a time when the child felt angry, anxious, happy and sad. It was expected that situationally appropriate displays of positive affect during the negative emotion tasks would positively correlate with ER. Second, it was hypothesized that displays of negative affect in the positive emotion task would negatively correlate with ER. Third, ER was expected to be negatively correlated with symptoms of psychopathology. It was also anticipated that ER would function as a mediator between affect and psychopathology. Data were analyzed with correlational and mediational analyses. Results showed that positive affect significantly correlated with parent report of child ER and that ER fully mediated the relationship between positive affect and psychopathology. Findings suggest that positive emotions are important in adaptive emotion regulation and provide preliminary support for the need to further study the role of positive emotions in children's functioning.

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