

# Tuning in to Kids: improving emotion socialization practices in parents of preschool children – findings from a community trial

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**Background:** This study evaluated a new prevention and early intervention parenting program: *Tuning in to Kids*. The program aims to improve emotion socialization practices in parents of preschool children and is based on research evidence that parents' responses to, and coaching of, their children's emotions influence emotional and behavioral functioning in children. **Methods:** Two hundred and sixteen primary caregiver parents of children aged 4.0–5.11 years were randomized into an intervention or waitlist control group. Parents in the intervention condition attended a 6-session group parenting program plus two booster sessions. Assessment occurred pre-intervention, post-intervention and at six-month follow-up. Questionnaires assessed parent emotion awareness and regulation, parent beliefs and practices of emotion socialization (emotion dismissing, emotion coaching, empathy) and child behavior (parent and teacher report). Observation of emotion socialization practices and child emotional knowledge was conducted pre-intervention and at follow-up with 161 parent-child dyads. **Results:** Parents in the intervention condition reported significant improvements in their own emotion awareness and regulation, increases in emotion coaching, and decreases in emotionally dismissive beliefs and behaviors. There were increases in parents' observed use of emotion labels and discussion of causes and consequences of emotions with their children. Child emotional knowledge improved, and reductions in child behavior problems were reported by parents and teachers. **Conclusions:** This study provides support for the efficacy of a parenting intervention targeting parent emotion socialization practices that lead to improved child emotional knowledge and behavior. This preventative intervention targeting parents' own emotion awareness and regulation, as well as emotional communication in parent-child relationships, is a promising addition to available parenting programs. **Keywords:** *Tuning in to Kids*, emotion coaching, emotion socialization, preschool children, intervention, prevention, behavior problems, parenting. **Abbreviations:** TIK: *Tuning in to Kids*.

A significant body of research now exists on the socialization of children's emotional competence and the influence that parent-child relationships have on children's emotional and social development. However, while evidence now links aspects of parenting around emotions to child outcomes, there are few if any published studies of parenting interventions which draw on this theory and apply it in practice. The current study reports on the outcomes of the *Tuning in to Kids* parenting program, a program designed to target emotion socialization practices.

## Theoretical base

Children's knowledge about emotions and the way they express and regulate their own emotions are key aspects of emotional competence (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Saarni, 1997), and provide some of the basic skills that assist children in developing prosocial behavior and social relationships (see Trentacosta & Fine, 2009; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009 for review). During the preschool years

children learn skills that assist them in expressing, moderating, and managing their own affect, while developing knowledge about how to respond to situations where emotions are involved (Saarni, 1997). While temperament plays a considerable role in influencing children's emotional expression, social relationships, particularly with parents, both contribute to emotions and provide the context within which children learn to understand and regulate emotion (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004).

Three distinct aspects of parenting contribute to children's emotional competence: parents' regulation and expression of their own emotions; parents' reactions to children's emotions; and parents' coaching and discussion of children's emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Parents' positive expressiveness, supportive reactions to children's negative emotion expression, and discussion of emotions (e.g., labeling, explaining causes and consequences) are linked to better socio-emotional competencies in children, including emotion understanding, emotion awareness and emotion regulation. In contrast, parent's negative, unsupportive practices (e.g., punitive or minimizing) in response to children's

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expression of negative emotions can have a negative effect on children's socio-emotional functioning and are linked to lower levels of emotional knowledge, and lower emotion regulation ability (2007).

Better awareness and regulation of emotions is important for empathic perspective taking and having close affectionate relationships (Schutte et al., 2001). A parent's own emotion regulation moderates the relationship between parenting and children's emotional and behavioral functioning. For example, in families where there is more expressed anger and parental hostility there are higher rates of externalizing behavior problems in children over time (Denham et al., 2000). This may be due to the way parents model and reinforce the expression of anger, which contributes to higher levels of emotional arousal for children, facilitating the rapid, reactive, and unregulated expression of anger when in situations of conflict (Katz, 2000).

Parents who hold attitudes and beliefs consistent with an emotion coaching philosophy are less derogatory in their parenting and respond to and coach positive and negative emotions in a way that assists the child to learn skills in emotion regulation, such as emotionally self-soothing, inhibiting negative affect, and focusing attention (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). According to Gottman and colleagues, optimal emotion coaching requires parents to: be aware of the child's emotion; view the child's display of emotions as a time for intimacy and teaching; help the child to verbally label their emotions; empathize or validate the child's emotions; and help the child to problem solve (and if necessary, set limits). Children who experience this style of parenting have fewer behavior problems, stronger social skills, and fewer physical illnesses (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Gottman et al.).

Evidence demonstrating the positive effects of parent emotion socialization practices on children's emotional competence and behavior has emerged; however, application of these ideas in interventions has been limited. Recent pilot studies addressing aspects of emotion socialization show promise. For example, a program teaching mindfulness in parenting led to an increase in mindful parenting practices (including parents' emotion awareness and regulation), enhanced parent-child relationships and better child management practices (Coatsworth, Duncan, Greenberg, & Nix, 2009); and Salmon and colleagues reported more parent-child emotion discussion immediately following an intervention that taught parents to talk about emotions with their children (Salmon, Dadds, Allen, & Hawes, 2009). Attachment-based interventions often include elements of emotional attunement (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003) but these predominantly focus on clinical samples of mother-infant dyads with insecure attachment relationships. To our knowledge, none of these programs have been evaluated as community-based

approaches that improve parent-child relationships to promote children's emotional competence and to prevent or reduce behavior problems.

It is desirable that a range of evidence-based parenting programs are available to provide program choices for both professionals and parents and to meet different needs and service requirements, and there are currently many different parenting programs in use, each differing in emphasis as well as content. However, the dominant approach to preventative interventions in the early years are programs based on social learning theory, for example Triple P (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Tully, & Bor, 2000), Parent Management Training (Pearl, 2009), and The Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton, Jamila Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). These aim to increase positive reinforcement of desired behaviors and to reduce negative reinforcement, or to provide more appropriate punishment, for undesirable behavior; this is anticipated to lead to improvements in children's behavior, less aggression, and improved social skills. Evaluations of these programs show good outcomes and they are widely available in the community (Dretzke et al., 2009; Nowak & Heinrichs, 2008). However, behaviorally focused interventions do not address the emotional responsiveness of the parent to the child, may not impact on children's emotional competence, and may not address problems with parents' emotion regulation. Indeed, a meta-analysis of the components of highly effective parent training programs found that those that included a component teaching emotional communication skills resulted in larger effects (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008).

In light of the above we drew on the emotion socialization literature to develop the *Tuning in to Kids* (TIK) parenting program. The program focuses on parental emotion socialization practices with the expectation that improving these will lead to improvements in children's emotional competence and behavior. An earlier report (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009) provided a preliminary evaluation of TIK in which, immediately post-program, parents reported reductions in emotion-dismissing attitudes and increases in emotion coaching. These changes were associated with parent-reported reductions in children's behavior problems. The present paper evaluates those outcomes again for the same sample at six-month follow-up, plus examines changes in observed parent emotion socialization and child emotional knowledge.

The current study had four aims. The first was to assess whether parents' awareness and regulation of their own emotions improved after participation in TIK. The second aim was to investigate how successful the program was in decreasing emotion-dismissive and disapproving parenting practices. The third aim was to examine changes in emotion coaching practices, including parents' capacity to use emotion labels and discuss emotional experi-

ences with their child, and parents' capacity to empathize with children around positive and negative emotions. Our final aim was to consider whether there were any resulting improvements in children's emotional competence and behavior.

## Method

### *Participants and procedures*

Participants were 216 parents of a target child (113 boys, 103 girls) aged 46 to 68 months ( $M = 56.28$ ,  $SD = 4.59$ ) at time of first assessment. Parents were recruited from 61 preschools in lower to middle class socio-economic regions in Melbourne. Preschool directors distributed information about the study to parents and interested parents were then contacted by the researchers. Parents were excluded from the research if they did not have sufficient English language skills to complete the assessment tasks and understand the content of the intervention, or if the target child had a primary diagnosis of a communication or pervasive developmental disorder. The study conformed to all ethical requirements for research (University of Melbourne Human Ethics Committee) and all parents participating gave informed consent for themselves and their children.

Preschools were grouped into 12 clusters based on proximity to program venues and then randomized by an independent statistician using a computerized random-number generator into intervention (30 preschools) and waitlist control (31 preschools) conditions. Programs were delivered in community settings during 2006–2008. Parents ( $n = 106$ ) with children at intervention preschools attended an immediate start program; parents ( $n = 110$ ) from waitlist preschools were offered a 10-month delayed start program.

Questionnaire data were collected from parents pre-intervention (Time 1), post-intervention (Time 2) and at follow-up six months later (Time 3), and from preschool teachers at Times 1 and 3. A videotaped home observation of parent-child interaction assessing parent-child emotion talk and parent emotion-coaching skills was conducted with a sub-sample of 161 (76 intervention) parents at Times 1 and 3 (restricted funding precluded including the whole sample). For the sub-sample, child emotion knowledge was also assessed at each home observation (Times 1 and 3). All parents from both conditions completed measures at the same time points.

Participants were primary caregivers (207 mothers, 9 fathers;  $M$  age in years = 36.57,  $SD = 4.97$ ). At the time of initial data collection, 193 (88.5%) of these parents were in intact families; 24 (11%) were single mothers, and one mother had re-partnered. More than one-fifth (21.8%) had not completed high school, 25.2% had no post school education, 29.8% had completed a non-university qualification and 44.9% had completed a bachelor degree or higher. Most parents (77.3%) spoke English as their first language, with 15.7% first speaking a European language, and the remainder a variety of Asian languages (6.9%). Parents reported gross annual family incomes of less than \$AU40,000 (19.8%), \$AU40,000–99,999 (62.8%), and \$AU100,000 or more (14.2%). Seven parents (3.2%) declined to report their income.

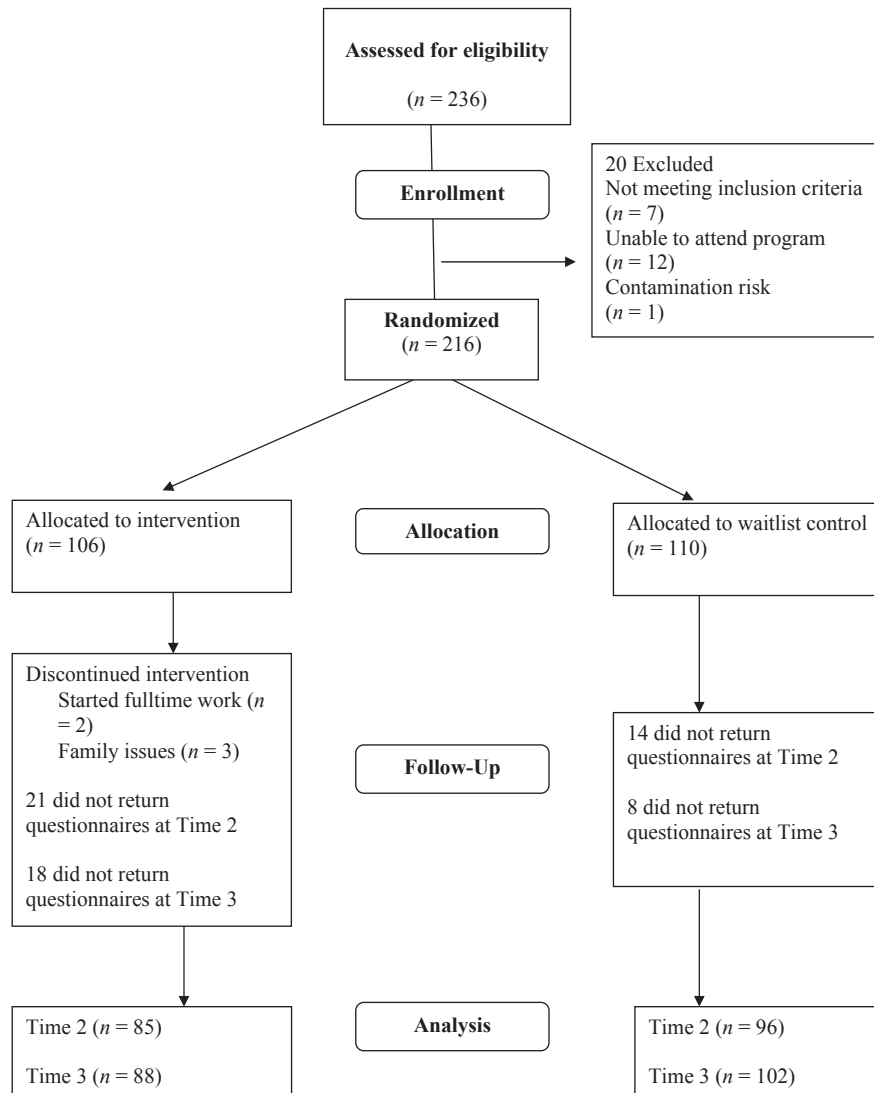
Intervention groups averaged ten parents (range 7–15); 95% of the sample attended at least three of the six sessions, 78% of parents attended five or six, and 63% of parents attended at least one booster session. Post-intervention questionnaire measures were collected from 83.8% (intervention = 85; waitlist control = 96) of the sample immediately after the six sessions, and 88% of the sample at six-month follow-up (intervention = 88; waitlist control = 102). See Figure 1 for participant flow.

### *Intervention: Tuning in to Kids parenting program*

The intervention has been described in greater detail in Havighurst et al. (2009). In brief, the program was delivered in a group format, for two hours a week for six weeks with two facilitators (one of whom was Havighurst, Harley, or Wilson). Two booster sessions were held at bimonthly intervals after the initial six weeks. A structured manual was used (Havighurst & Harley, 2007) and fidelity checklists completed by facilitators after each session showed that 100% of the compulsory content was delivered. The program encouraged changes in parenting beliefs and behaviors while increasing the emotional connection between parent and child. Parents were taught the five steps of *emotion coaching* (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997) via a series of exercises, role plays, DVD materials and psycho-education. Group facilitators also gave role-play demonstrations of emotion coaching using examples parents brought from home. Emphasis was placed on parents becoming aware of their own emotions as well as their children's emotions, including at a physiological level. In the first three sessions, parents were taught to attend to children's lower-intensity emotions, and how to reflect, label and empathize with the child's emotion. The fourth session attended to anxiety and problem solving; and the last two focused on more intense emotions, particularly anger, and included emotion regulation strategies such as slow breathing, relaxation, self-control using the turtle technique from Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995), and safe expression of anger. Parents were also taught skills in understanding and regulating their own emotions, and reflected on the influence of family of origin experiences on their beliefs and responses to emotions.

### *Parent measures*

*Parent reported emotion awareness and regulation.* This was assessed with the *Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale* (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), a 36-item self-report questionnaire measuring difficulties with various dimensions of emotion awareness, expression and regulation. Components measured include: acceptance of emotions, ability to engage in goal-directed behavior when distressed, impulse control, awareness of emotions, access to strategies for regulation, and clarity of emotions. Respondents rate how often the emotion-related items apply to themselves using a 5-point scale. High scores indicate greater difficulties in emotion regulation. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the total scale were .80 (Time 1), .78 (Time 2), and .80 (Time 3).



**Figure 1** Participant flow

*Parent reported beliefs about children’s emotions and emotion coaching.* The instrument used to assess parents’ report of emotion socialization beliefs and behaviors was adapted from the 14-item *Maternal Emotional Style Questionnaire* (MESQ; Lagacé-Séguin & Coplan, 2005). The MESQ asks mothers to rate how they cope with their child’s emotions of sadness and anger using a 7-point Likert scale. Exemplar items are: *Childhood is a happy-go-lucky time, not a time for feeling sad or angry* (Emotion Dismissing) and *Anger is an emotion worth exploring* (Emotion Coaching). For the present study, we also examined parents’ responses to children’s fears and worries, and added seven further items to assess this (e.g., *I try to change my child’s worried moods into cheerful ones* [Emotion Dismissing, ED]; *When my child is worried I want to know what he/she is thinking* [Emotion Coaching, EC]). We refer to this 21-item measure as the *Parent Emotional Style Questionnaire* (PESQ). Cronbach’s alphas at Times 1, 2 and 3 were .82, .87 and .86 for ED (10 items); and .78, .82 and .84 for EC (11 items).

*Parent reported empathy and emotional connection.* To assess parents’ connection and empathy with their child we identified five relevant items in the PESQ

and created a new subscale which we named the *Empathy/Connection* scale. Items were: *when my child is scared, it’s an opportunity for getting close*; *when my child is angry, it’s an opportunity for getting close*; *when my child is scared, I take some time to try to experience this feeling with him/her*; *when my child is angry, I take some time to try to experience this feeling with him/her*; and *when my child gets sad, it’s a time to get close*. Reliability for this subscale was satisfactory, with Cronbach’s alpha: .67 (Time 1); .82 (Time 2); and .80 (Time 3).

*Observed emotion coaching.* Parent and child were videotaped at home during a structured parent–child story-telling task (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998). Parents set up a dolls’ house using toy furniture, a toy car, a dog and six doll house figures (four adult and two child figures). Parent and child were given ten minutes in free play to familiarize themselves with the equipment. The examiner then re-entered the room and gave instructions for the task. Parents were asked to act out four emotional events in a story designed to be relevant for preschool children and intended to elicit emotional responses of fear, anger, sadness, and happiness. The events were: 1) pretend parents leave their child to go on

an overnight trip; 2) the children have an argument over a toy; 3) the family dog runs away; 4) the parents return the next day. Participants could add whatever details they liked to the events, including what the characters were saying, doing and feeling. Participants took an average of 13.8 minutes to complete the task at T1 and 12.6 minutes at T3. Parent-child interaction was transcribed verbatim and coded to identify parent-emotion socialization language and behavior. The transcript was coded for frequency of parent use of *emotion labels* (emotion state words, e.g., pleasure, fear, and frustration). Frequencies were also calculated for parents' asking their child: to label emotions, what caused emotions, and what happened/resulted during an emotional event. These were summed to create a score for *emotion exploration*; these components comprise critical skills in emotion coaching (i.e., questioning and enquiring about emotions and discussing causes and consequences of a mentioned emotion) (see Cervantes & Callanan, 1998).

Transcripts were coded independently by four trained coders blind to experimental condition. Coders were trained with the first author over 20 hours in use of Cervantes and Callanan's coding procedure in order to reach reliability. Inter-rater reliability was carried out on 20% of the assessments with an intraclass correlation score of between .80 and .97 for emotion labels and between .77 and .99 for emotion exploration.

### Child measures

**Receptive language.** Children were administered The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – Third Edition (PPVT-III; Dunn & Dunn, 1997), a widely used individually administered, norm-referenced verbal ability test, with good psychometric properties. This measure was included because language skills are known to influence child emotion knowledge.

**Emotional knowledge.** The *Emotion Skills Task* (Denham, 1986) assessed child emotional knowledge. This well-established task (e.g., Denham et al., 1997) measures: emotion labeling, causal knowledge, emotional identification and knowledge about situational resolution, and perspective-taking skills. Due to ceiling effects on the emotion labeling and perspective-taking sub-tests, only two sub-tests were used in analyses for the current study: 1) causal knowledge (e.g., 'What made the puppet feel sad/angry/happy/afraid?'); and 2) eight emotion scenarios assessing accuracy of emotion identification and knowledge about situational resolution (e.g., Pushed over by another child; What is the feeling? What does s/he do?). A composite emotional knowledge score (possible score range 0–36) was created by adding the two sub-test scores. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for 20% of assessments using bivariate correlations (due to the data being non-symmetrical) and was .92 at Time 1 and .79 at Time 3.

**Behavior.** Parents and teachers completed questionnaires about children's behavior. The *Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory 6* (ECBI; Eyberg & Pincus, 1999) is a psychometrically strong and widely used 36-item parent report scale of conduct problem behaviors. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 =

*never to 7 = always* and summed to create an *Intensity Scale* score. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the Intensity scale ranged from .90 to .93 (Times 1–3). Teachers completed the Sutter-Eyberg Student Behavior Inventory, a teacher-version of the ECBI (SESBI; Eyberg & Pincus, 1999), with reliability coefficients of .97 (Time 1) and .97 (six-month follow-up) for the *Intensity Scale*.

## Results

Sample characteristics were first assessed for comparability between intervention and waitlist control groups at Time 1. A Chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated a significant association between condition and marital status,  $\chi^2(1, N = 216) = 5.29, p = .015, \phi = -.17$ , with more sole parents in the intervention group ( $n = 17$ ) than in the waitlist control group ( $n = 6$ ). There were no significant differences in group characteristics on any of the other socio-demographic, observation, parent-report or teacher-report variables. Parents failing to return questionnaires at Time 3 did not significantly differ from the rest of the sample on any of the measures; and there was no significant difference in return rate between the intervention ( $n = 87, 82.1\%$ ) and waitlist groups ( $n = 101, 91.8\%$ ),  $\chi^2(1, n = 216) = 3.72, p = .054, \phi = .15$ , nor between intervention and waitlist control participants taking part in the follow-up home observation,  $\chi^2(1, n = 161) = .55, p = .46, \phi = .34$ .

Preschools were nested within clusters, and so intra-class correlations were computed to test for any design effect on outcome variables. Results revealed a design effect of 1.07 to 1.10. Therefore, cluster and marital status were both covaried in all analyses. General Linear Modeling (GLM) repeated measures analyses assessed the impact of condition (intervention, control) across Times 1, 2 and 3, on parent and child outcome variables. Results, including effect sizes, are presented in Tables 1 (parent outcomes) and 2 (child outcomes).

### Parent outcomes

A significant quadratic interaction was found for parents' emotion awareness and regulation. Parents in the intervention group reported a slight but non-significant worsening in emotion awareness and regulation at Time 2. However, there was significant improvement at Time 3, whereas parents from the waitlist control group reported no significant changes. Parents in the intervention group reported being less dismissive, more emotion coaching, and more empathic at Times 2 and 3, whereas control group parents did not change. Parents in the intervention group were also observed to use a greater number of emotion labels and to engage in more emotion exploration at Time 3, when compared with parents from the waitlist control group.

**Table 1** Parent outcomes

	Adjusted mean <sup>a</sup>						n	Analysis (F)		
	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention		Six-month follow-up			Group-by-Time Interaction	df	Effect size <sup>c</sup>
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE				
Parent-reported										
Emotion awareness and regulation										
Intervention	67.17	2.20	67.38	2.17	61.72	2.12	78	10.52** <sup>b</sup>	1, 167	.29
Waitlist control	72.65	2.01	69.34	1.98	69.41	1.94	93			
Emotion dismissing										
Intervention	34.36	.65	29.24	.73	29.31	.68	78	52.83***	1, 168	.86
Waitlist control	33.49	.59	34.41	.66	34.06	.62	94			
Emotion coaching										
Intervention	41.09	.60	45.10	.61	44.50	.60	78	12.97***	1, 168	.64
Waitlist control	40.63	.54	41.06	.55	41.13	.55	94			
Empathy/connection										
Intervention	17.23	.35	20.53	.35	20.43	.32	78	24.44***	1, 168	1.08
Waitlist control	16.90	.32	17.38	.32	17.77	.30	94			
Observed										
Emotion labels										
Intervention	7.38	.78	-	-	10.88	.80	61	19.30***	1, 130	.57
Waitlist control	8.79	.71	-	-	6.34	.73	73			
Emotion exploration										
Intervention	5.08	.57	-	-	8.39	.71	61	10.47***	1, 130	.66
Waitlist control	4.85	.52	-	-	4.66	.64	73			

Note: <sup>a</sup> Analyses controlled for cluster and marital status. <sup>b</sup> Quadratic interaction. <sup>c</sup> Cohen's *d*: .2 = small, .5 = medium, .8 = large effect.

\*\**p* < .002 \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2** Child outcomes

	Adjusted mean <sup>a</sup>						n	Analysis (F)		
	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention		Six-month follow-up			Group-by-Time Interaction	df	Effect size <sup>c</sup>
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE				
Emotion Knowledge										
Intervention	25.48	.75	-	-	30.53	.56	57	4.47* <sup>b</sup>	1, 122	1.00
Waitlist control	26.23	.67	-	-	29.22	.50	70			
Behavior										
ECBI intensity scale										
Intervention	119.90	2.82	108.93	2.75	105.16	2.99	79	11.14***	1, 169	.57
Waitlist control	118.76	2.59	118.76	2.52	114.19	2.74	94			
SESBI intensity scale <sup>c</sup>										
Intervention	90.22	4.44	-	-	81.22	4.23	79	6.87*	1, 150	.23
Waitlist control	91.82	4.55	-	-	90.86	4.35	75			

Note: ECBI = Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (parent report); SESBI = Sutter-Eyberg Student Behavior Inventory (teacher report).

<sup>a</sup> Analyses controlled for cluster and marital status. <sup>b</sup> Analyses controlled for cluster, marital status and verbal ability. <sup>c</sup> Means given are untransformed means.

\**p* < .02; \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Child outcomes**

Child emotion knowledge was assessed with receptive language entered as an additional covariate. There was a significant main effect for time ( $F(1, 124) = 17.33; p = .000$ ), indicating that all children improved over the duration of the study. However, there was also a significant interaction between time and condition, indicating that children whose parents were in the intervention group showed better emotional knowledge on the emotion skills puppet task at Time 3, compared with children

whose parents were in the waitlist control group. There was also a significant interaction between condition and time for parent-reported behavior problems, with a reduction for children in the intervention group. Teacher data was severely positively skewed and a logarithm transformation was conducted on the data. Teachers reported significantly lower intensity of behavior problems for children in the intervention group at Time 3. For ease of interpretation, the teacher-reported child behavior problem means shown in Table 2 are the untransformed means.

### *Intention to treat analyses*

Finally, intention to treat analyses were conducted using missing participants' last available data and these indicated that the significant differences between the intervention and waitlist control group held for all variables at  $p < .02$  except for child emotional knowledge ( $p = .097$ ).

### **Discussion**

The *Tuning in to Kids* program focused on parent emotion socialization practices. Six months after the program, parents in the intervention condition showed improvements on targeted aspects of parenting, and their children had better emotional knowledge and fewer behavior problems.

The first aim of the study was to improve parent awareness and regulation of their own emotions. Better skills in awareness and regulation are related to closer and more affectionate relationships (Schutte et al., 2001). The TIK program taught parents a philosophy where emotions were recognized and valued, with exercises addressing parent emotion awareness and regulation gradually introduced over the six sessions. Parents were also encouraged to discover how their own family of origin experiences had shaped the way they viewed and dealt with emotions, including during parent-child interactions, with increased emphasis on family of origin in later sessions once parents were engaged and felt supported. Gaining increased knowledge about one's family of origin experiences may assist in breaking intergenerational patterns of negative parenting (Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2006). As predicted, parents in the intervention group reported increases in awareness and regulation of their own emotions, with these changes occurring over time rather than immediately. This change over time may have been due to the gradual pacing of the program, or that these skills simply take time to develop.

The second aim of the study was to decrease dismissive and disapproving parenting practices by moderating beliefs about children's emotions. Many parents in this sample were initially dismissive of emotions. Those who were in the intervention group explored new ideas about viewing emotions as a time for closeness and teaching (rather than avoiding, suppressing or controlling emotions). Parents were taught to validate and acknowledge their child's emotions before problem solving, key features of what Gottman and colleagues (1997) define as emotion-coaching parenting. This program content seems to have been successful in shifting ideas about responding to children's emotions. Following the program, parents were more likely to endorse questionnaire items about trying to understand and connect when children experienced emotions.

The third aim was to increase emotion-coaching practices. Parents in the intervention group were

found to make significant observed increases in their use of emotion labels and in discussion with their child of causes and consequences of emotions. That is, they demonstrated an increased capacity to talk with their child about how to manage emotional events, a key component of emotion coaching. Other research has found that emotional discourse is associated with emotion coaching (Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007), strengthening emotion socialization practices (Salmon et al., 2009), and better emotional competence in children (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991).

We also found significant increases in parent-reported empathy, a key feature of being able to connect and respond to a child's emotions (De Paul & Guibert, 2008). The program taught parents to consider 'adult similar' situations when trying to understand their child's feelings. It is likely that connecting with their own emotional reactions influenced changes in parents' attributions of intentions in their child, so that they no longer saw their child as merely demanding attention or being difficult when displaying negative emotion, and were consequently better able to empathize with their child's genuine distress or other strong feelings.

The final aim of the study was to evaluate anticipated improvements in children's emotional competence and behavior. We found improvements in emotional knowledge, a key aspect of children's emotional competence, for both the intervention and the control groups. This can be partly accounted for by normal developmental change that occurs during the year prior to starting school; however, children whose parents participated in the program increased significantly more than waitlist control children. The program's focus on parents learning emotion coaching, including emotion labeling and exploration, seems to have contributed to increases in children's knowledge of emotions. As its label implies, knowledge about emotions is an important skill necessary for social functioning, academic success and prosocial behavior (Denham, 1998). Increasing emotion knowledge thus offers a valuable avenue for improving child outcomes.

Lastly, there were also significant differences between the two groups on behavior, favoring children in the intervention group. These changes were reported by parents and teachers, suggesting that change occurred across settings. Although the program did not directly target behavior problems, paying attention to emotions (including anger) that underlie children's behavior and helping parents to connect and empathize around emotions may have contributed to these improvements. Better parental emotional regulation and less disapproval of children's emotions were also likely to have had a positive influence on the emotion climate of the home. Increased emotion coaching and emotion talk may have assisted children to develop better emotion awareness and regulation, resulting in fewer difficult

behaviors such as tantrums. Children's experience of greater understanding and acceptance of their emotions by their parent can also help children to contain, rather than intensify, their emotional responses. Emotional competence, of which emotional knowledge is one aspect, influences behavior (Denham et al., 2000) in part because children develop an understanding and a way of communicating about their emotions rather than reacting with unregulated behavior when encountering an emotional event. Increasing attention to a child is also likely to have changed as a result of this program, and may account for some of the changes in children's behavior.

### Limitations

Measuring changes in emotion coaching where parents respond supportively to children and teach them about emotions is challenging. The self-report measure of emotion coaching does not capture an important feature of emotion coaching, namely, acknowledging and validating children's emotions prior to engaging in problem solving. An independent measure of empathy might have reduced collinearity and strengthened the findings for that outcome. It is also possible that parent report measures were affected by expectancy bias. A limitation of the observation measure used here is that parents were not responding 'in the heat of the moment' but in an organized context. Although automatic responses are more probable when children are emotional in vivo, we are unaware of any measures that accurately capture in vivo emotion socialization practices; thus this study included only parent reports of such situations. The inclusion of a control measure for the influence of increased parental attention on child outcomes may also have strengthened the study.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the novel parenting program, *Tuning in to Kids*, led to improved parent emotion socialization practices that are likely to have contributed to identified improvements in children's emotional knowledge and reductions in challenging behavior. *Tuning in to Kids* is thus a promising addition to available parenting programs. It addresses a gap in available programs by focusing on the parent-child emotion relationship and children's emotional competence.

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### Key points

- Parents' emotion socialization practices are known to influence emotional and behavioral functioning in children and yet few parenting programs address these practices.
- The *Tuning in to Kids (TIK)* parenting program is a new intervention targeting emotion socialization practices in parents of preschool children.
- Findings indicate that *TIK* was successful in improving reported and observed parent emotion socialization practices.
- At six-month follow-up there was a significant increase in children's observed emotional knowledge and significant reductions in parent- and teacher-reported child behavior problems.
- *TIK* is a promising addition to available parenting programs.

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