

New study shows emotional cost for parents who put on a happy face for their children

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How do parents feel when they regulate their emotional expressions in ways that do not match their genuine feelings? Recent research suggests that parents' attempts to suppress negative and amplify positive emotions during child care can detract from their well-being and high-quality parent-child bonds. The findings were published in the March 2016 edition of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

In two studies, one experimental and the other a 10-day daily experience study, the scientists examined how parental negative emotion suppression and positive emotion amplification may shape parents' personal and relationship well-being. In the studies parents reported experiencing lower authenticity, emotional well-being, relationship quality, and responsiveness to their children's needs when they suppressed [negative emotions](#) and amplified [positive emotions](#) when providing care to their children.

"By examining the regulation of positive and negative emotions in tandem, our results can shed light on the unique effects of using each strategy," said lead author Dr. Bonnie Le, University of Toronto.

In the first experiment with 162 parents that focused on recalling past caregiving experiences

before answering a series of questions, the researchers found various emotional costs for the parents.

"For the average parent the findings suggest when they attempt to hide their negative emotion expression and overexpress their positive emotions with their children, it actually comes at a cost: doing so may lead parents to feel worse themselves," said co-author Dr. Emily Impett, University of Toronto Mississauga.

As a follow-up to determine if the difficulty of the [child care](#) situation might influence results, the researchers used a smaller group (118) of parents who provided free response answers to an open-ended question regarding a daily caregiving experience over the course of ten days. While more challenging caregiving led to more examples of suppressing the negative feelings and amplifying their positive feelings, the overall results were similar.

"Parents experienced costs when regulating their emotions in these ways because they felt less authentic, or true to themselves," said Dr. Le. "It is important to note that amplifying positive emotions was relatively more costly to engage in, indicating that controlling emotions in ways that may seem beneficial in the context of caring for children can come at a cost."

The authors acknowledge that while parents may experience costs from engaging in these emotion regulation strategies, it will be important to examine whether children may actually benefit from their parents efforts to hide potentially hurtful emotions and overexpress positive emotions.

"The findings shed light on one condition under which parenting may be associated with more pain than pleasure: when parents express more positive emotions than they genuinely feel and mask the negative emotions that they do feel when caring for

their children. Future research should identify more adaptive ways for [parents](#) to regulate their emotions that allow them to feel true to themselves and contribute to the most joyful and optimal experiences of parenting," summarized Dr. Impett.

More information: B. M. Le et al. The Costs of Suppressing Negative Emotions and Amplifying Positive Emotions During Parental Caregiving, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016).

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