



Music's Role in Emotional Expression Following Childhood Emotional Invalida

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Introduction

Childhood emotional invalidation (CEI) occurs when a child experiences an environment of intolerance toward expression of emotion [1]. This may include, but is not limited to, caregivers minimizing a child's feelings, blaming them for a negative mood, or punishing the child for expressing their emotions [1]. Through repeated emotional invalidation, a caregiver communicates to the child that outward displays of emotion should be obscured, and that emotions should instead be managed internally [2]. This is known as expressive suppression [6]. Consequently, an invalidated child may not learn how to label, process, and regulate emotions, leading them to habitually suppress their feelings [2]. CEI has been linked to many emotional regulation difficulties in later life, such as reduced emotional awareness, identity confusion, impulsivity, and relationship struggles [3-5]. Music has emerged as a possible tool for facilitating emotional expression and regulation for individuals with a history of CEI [20-22]. Through neurological and psychological processes, music may provide individuals with a history of CEI a method of emotional expression [20].

Objectives

This literature review aimed to clarify the developmental effects of CEI on adolescents and young adults, to identify the neural and psychological factors underlying emotional expression and regulation, and to investigate the mechanisms through which music may promote emotional expression in adolescents and young adults. Furthermore, by examining the relationship between the neurology of emotional regulation and music processing, the review sought to explore how music may promote self-reflection and identity development in individuals who have experienced CEI [11,12,16,17,18]. Ultimately, the study was conducted with the intent of identifying how music-based approaches may serve as support for individuals who struggle with emotional expression following CEI, while identifying gaps in the existing literature that warrant future research.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted to synthesize psychological and neuroscientific evidence regarding the potential role of music in facilitating emotional expression among adolescents and young adults with a history of CEI. A total of twenty-two sources were selected from searches conducted using Google Scholar, PubMed, and ProQuest. The sources included peer-reviewed studies, literature reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and dissertations relevant to developmental psychology, neuroscience, emotional regulation, and music therapy.

Search terms included *childhood emotional invalidation*, *emotional expression*, *emotion regulation*, *emotional dysregulation*, *emotional suppression*, *childhood emotional neglect*, *childhood adversity*, *music therapy*, *music-based interventions*, and *affective neuroscience*. Combinations of these terms were utilized to identify research addressing the psychological and neurological effects of childhood emotional invalidation and the potential beneficial relationship between musical engagement and emotional expression.



Sources were selected based on their relevance to the review's objectives, particularly their examination of emotional invalidation or related childhood adversity, emotional expression and regulation, neural mechanisms of emotion, or music-based approaches to emotional processing. Research involving adolescents and young adults held the most focus, though studies involving other age groups were considered when relevant to the review's theoretical framework.

The selected literature was analyzed thematically. Findings were organized into three primary areas: the psychological effects of childhood emotional invalidation, the neural mechanisms underlying emotional regulation and suppression, and music's potential role in emotional processing and expression. Evidence across these themes was synthesized to examine the possible connections between childhood emotional invalidation and emotional expression through music. Because direct research investigating this relationship remains limited, findings from related areas of research were considered separately, and potential applications of music were distinguished from effects directly demonstrated in individuals with a history of CEI.

Key Findings

The literature demonstrated that childhood emotional invalidation (CEI) is associated with persistent difficulties in emotional expression, awareness, and regulation. Repeated punishment of emotional displays may encourage habitual expressive suppression, in which individuals conceal their outward emotional responses rather than openly communicating their feelings [1,2,6]. Research on childhood maltreatment and invalidating environments tie these experiences to emotion dysregulation, ineffective coping mechanisms, reduced emotional clarity, and difficulties forming a stable sense of personal identity [3-5, 8-10, 14]. These patterns may challenge an individual's ability to recognize, interpret, and communicate their emotional experiences [6,10].

The neuroscientific research provides insight into the processes underlying emotional regulation. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), and amygdala are connected pathways that are involved in emotional processing and regulation [11,12,15]. Studies of childhood maltreatment describe that early adversity is associated with differences in these brain structures, such as changes in activity and connectivity, included within prefrontal-limbic networks involved in emotional regulation [12,13]. Research on expressive suppression also shows that concealing emotional responses involves prefrontal regulatory processes [11]. Altogether, these findings support that the consequences of childhood adversity may involve both learned emotional behaviors and differences in the neural systems that act in emotional processing [11-13].

Music may offer a means of supporting emotional expression by engaging neural networks involved in emotion and facilitating emotional awareness and self-reflection [16,18]. Research suggests that music listening can influence emotional experiences, while music-based interventions may support emotion regulation and mental health among adolescents and young adults [17,19,21]. Music may also help individuals communicate feelings that are difficult to articulate verbally by providing an alternative form of emotional expression. Findings from research on music therapy involving children and adolescents who have experienced abuse or

neglect signify that music-based approaches may support emotional expressivity [20]. Trauma-focused music therapy has also been explored as a means of supporting affective modulation among children who have been exposed to trauma [22]. These findings, collectively, indicate that music may have potential as a supportive approach for individuals with a history of CEI. However, because direct research examining music specifically among individuals affected by CEI remains limited, the extent to which these benefits generalize to this population is not yet fully determined.

Figure 1

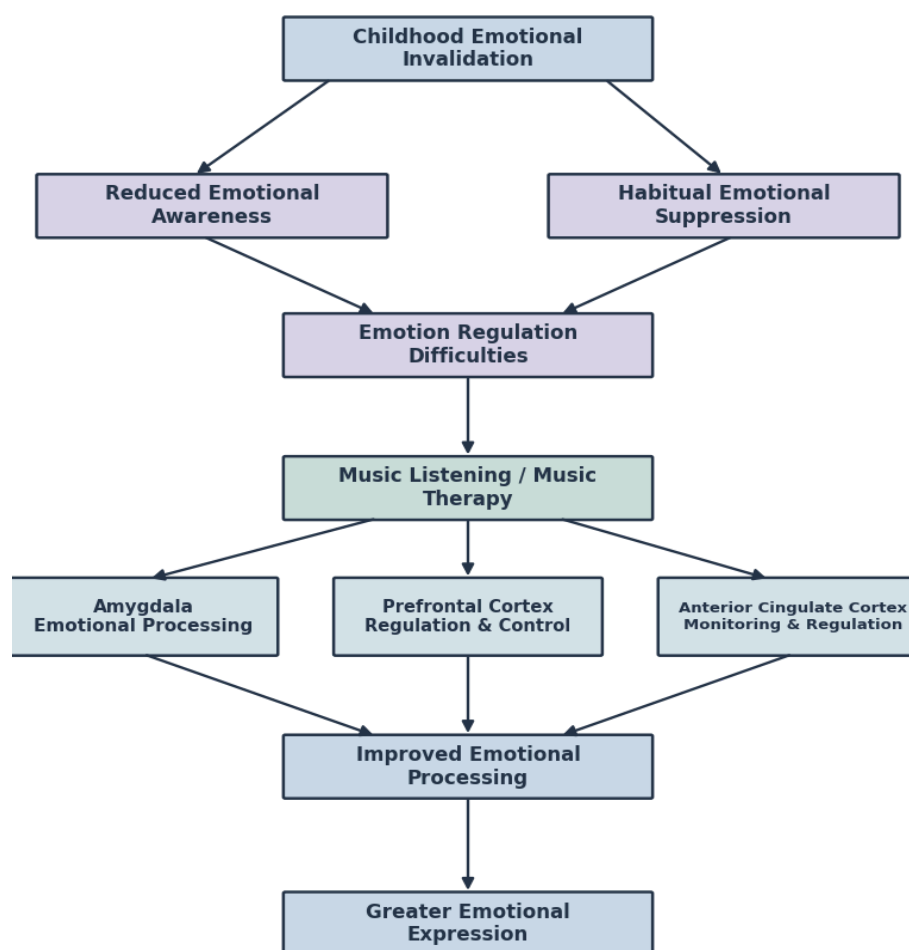


Figure 1 displays the proposed relationship between childhood emotional invalidation, emotional regulation difficulties, and music-mediated emotional expression. This model illustrates how CEI may contribute to emotional regulation difficulties through reduced emotional awareness and habitual emotional suppression. When emotional experiences are dismissed or discouraged repeatedly, individuals may struggle to recognize their feelings and develop patterns of suppressing emotional responses. These difficulties may interfere with emotional processing and expression. Music listening and music therapy are proposed as potential approaches to supporting individuals experiencing these challenges. The auditory processing and engagement

of neural systems related to emotion of music may involve the amygdala in emotional processing, the prefrontal cortex in regulation and control, and the anterior cingulate cortex in emotional monitoring and regulation. The interaction of these processes may support improved emotional processing and, potentially, greater emotional expression. However, these pathways represent proposed mechanisms rather than established effects, and further research is needed to determine whether music-based approaches effectively facilitate emotional expression in individuals with a history of CEI.

Figure 2

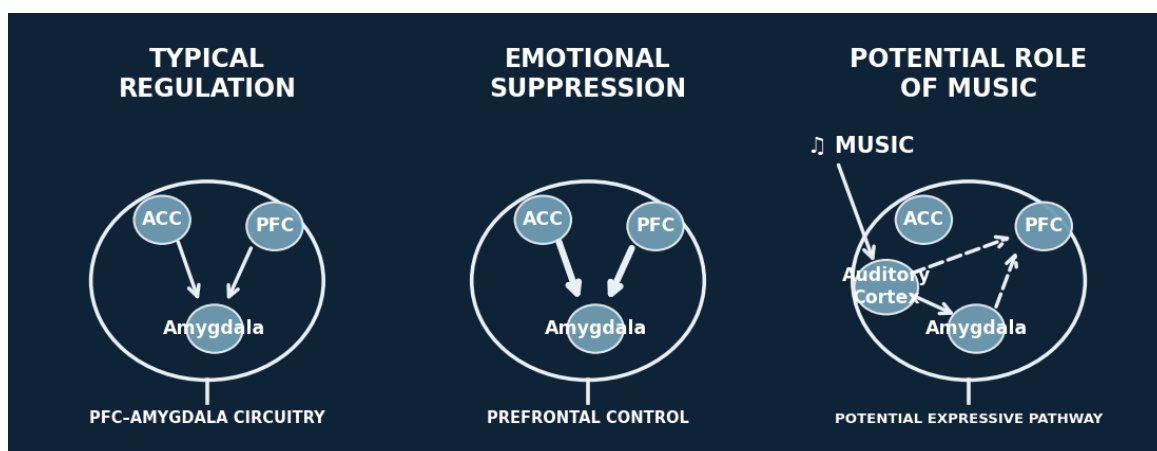


Figure 2 illustrates the proposed neurological relationship between typical emotional regulation, emotional suppression, and music's potential role in facilitating expression. The prefrontal cortex (PFC) and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) are two of the brain's main centers for emotional understanding and reaction, while the amygdala is responsible for stress responses. In typical emotional regulation, in which an individual responds to emotions adaptively, the PFC works along with the amygdala to naturally lower emotional intensity. Additionally, the ACC monitors emotional states efficiently without triggering high internal distress leading to emotional clarity, flexibility and relief. When a person consistently suppresses their emotions, the PFC has to exert heavy force to keep the emotion shut down. The ACC discerns extreme friction between what you feel and what you force yourself to show, which can lead to mental drainage, stress, fatigue, and a reduced ability to shift between mental states. Listening to or creating music turns down the alarm of the amygdala, gives the exhausted PFC a break from suppression, and helps the ACC process emotions smoothly. Emotional expression creates a state of neural balance, which makes it crucial for healing negative pathways, reducing tension, and restoring emotional flexibility.

Discussion

The findings of this review conclude that childhood emotional invalidation (CEI) may influence emotional expression through the interaction of learned behavioral patterns and the neural systems involved in emotional regulation. When children's emotional experiences are repeatedly dismissed or discouraged, they may learn to conceal their feelings rather than identify, process,

and communicate them [1,2,6]. Over time, habitual expressive suppression potentially contributes to difficulties regulating emotional responses and recognizing emotional experiences [6,8,10,14]. Research has also associated childhood emotional invalidation and related adverse experiences with difficulties in self-concept clarity and identity development [3–5]. These findings highlight the importance of considering not only how individuals regulate their emotions, but also whether they are able to recognize and express them.

The neurological findings provide a framework for understanding these difficulties. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), and amygdala, participate in interconnected processes involved in emotional evaluation, monitoring, and regulation [11,12,15]. Research on childhood adversity has identified associations with differences in the structure, activity, and connectivity of neural systems involved in these processes [12,13]. Additionally, research on expressive suppression indicates that concealing emotional responses involves prefrontal regulatory processes [11]. These findings illustrate a possible connection between learned emotional suppression and the neural systems involved in regulating emotional responses. However, they do not establish that CEI produces a specific pattern of neural dysfunction in every affected individual. Rather, they provide a framework for understanding how childhood experiences and emotional strategies may relate to later emotional difficulties [12,13,15].

Music may provide a useful method for addressing some of these difficulties because it can engage emotional processes without requiring direct and immediate verbal acknowledgement of emotions. Research on music and emotion says that music can influence listeners' felt emotional experiences and provide opportunities for emotional engagement [17,18]. Studies of music listening during adolescence have also examined its role in emotion regulation and identity construction, suggesting that music may provide opportunities for self-reflection [16]. For individuals who find it difficult to identify or communicate their feelings, listening to music or engaging in musical activities may offer an alternative way to explore and express emotions. Research examining music-based interventions among adolescents and young adults has reported potential mental health benefits, while studies involving children and adolescents who have experienced abuse or neglect suggest that music therapy may support emotional expressivity [19,20]. Trauma-focused music therapy has also been explored as an approach to affective modulation among trauma-exposed youth [22]. Together, these findings provide a basis for investigating music as a supportive approach for individuals who experience emotional expression struggles following CEI.

An important distinction is that emotional regulation and emotional expression are related but have separate outcomes. Research on music has examined both listeners' felt emotions and the emotions expressed through music, indicating that these experiences should not be treated as identical [17]. Similarly, research on music-based interventions has examined a range of psychological and mental health outcomes, which do not necessarily establish improvements in emotional expression specifically [19]. Music may help an individual manage emotional intensity without necessarily making it easier to communicate feelings to others. Conversely, a person may use music to identify or express an emotion without immediately reducing its intensity. Future investigations should therefore assess emotional awareness, expressive confidence, emotional disclosure, and emotion regulation as distinct outcomes.

These findings may have implications for supportive and trauma-informed approaches to emotional development. Music-based activities, including listening, songwriting, and improvisation, could also be investigated as ways to encourage emotional exploration and self-expression. Existing research on music-based interventions and music therapy provides a foundation for examining these approaches among young people experiencing psychological difficulties or recovering from adverse experiences [19,20,22]. However, the available evidence does not establish that every musical activity will benefit every individual with a history of CEI. Individual responses to music and the specific needs of participants should be considered when developing future interventions.

A major limitation of the existing literature is the lack of direct research connecting CEI, music, and emotional expression within the same population. Although research has examined the effects of childhood adversity on emotion regulation [8,12–14], the relationship between music and emotional experiences [16–18], and music-based interventions for young people [19,20], these findings do not independently establish that music improves emotional expression specifically among individuals affected by CEI. Furthermore, studies examining childhood maltreatment or abuse may not fully represent individuals who experienced emotional invalidation without other forms of adversity. Future research should directly investigate adolescents and young adults with a history of CEI, compare different forms of musical engagement, and measure changes in emotional awareness, expression, and regulation. Controlled interventions and long-term studies could help establish whether music-based therapies actually produce measurable benefits on emotional expression and whether those benefits persist over time.

Overall, the literature provides a theoretical and empirical basis for further investigating music as a potential means of facilitating emotional expression following childhood emotional invalidation. By considering behavioral, psychological, and neurological evidence together, this review identifies a promising research direction while addressing the need for studies that directly examine the relationship between CEI and emotional expression that is music-based.

Conclusion

Childhood emotional invalidation (CEI) is associated with difficulties in emotional expression and regulation, including expressive suppression and challenges with emotional clarity and identity development [3-10,14]. Research on childhood adversity also identifies associations with differences in neural systems involving the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and anterior cingulate cortex, which contribute to emotional processing and regulation [11–13,15]. Music engages psychological and neural processes related to emotion and may provide an alternative means of exploring, processing, and communicating feelings [16–18]. Research on music-based interventions and music therapy suggests that music may support emotional expressivity and mental health among young people, including those who have experienced abuse or neglect [19,20,22]. For adolescents and young adults with a history of CEI, music may offer a potential avenue for emotional exploration and self-expression. However, the existing literature does not yet establish its effectiveness specifically for individuals affected by CEI. Further research should directly examine how different forms of musical engagement influence emotional



awareness, expression, and regulation in this population. Understanding this relationship may help inform individualized, trauma-informed approaches to supporting individuals whose early experiences discouraged the communication and expression of their feelings.

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