



## RESEARCH SUMMARIES

### **Mothers' and Fathers' Sensitivity With Their Two Children: A Longitudinal Study From Infancy to Early Childhood.**

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*Developmental Psychology* 2017. 53 (5), 860-872

Hallers-Haalboom et. al. have recorded the levels of mothers' and fathers' sensitivity to their 1<sup>st</sup> born and 2<sup>nd</sup> born child at three sessions, when the youngest sibling was 1, 2 and 3 years old and the oldest sibling was on average 3 years (range 30 – 43 months) 4 and 5 years old. The hypotheses they were testing were whether levels of parental sensitivity across these years are a) stable, b) increase or c) decrease. Evidence can be found in the literature for all three.

Parents appear to use different types of responsiveness flexibly depending on the age and developmental stage of children. This is the first experiment using both fathers and mothers as well as studying both children along the same timeline over a three-year period.

The authors were also seeking support for either i) the "learning from experience" hypothesis (Whiteman et.al., 2003) leading to an improvement of parent-child interactions with the 2<sup>nd</sup> born child or ii) the spill-over hypothesis (Larson and Almeida, 1999; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter et. al., 2007) where experiences with the first-born child lead to negative implications for parents' relationships with later children in the family (second-born children experiencing conflict from their parents at an earlier age than their sibling, between childhood and adolescence).

A total of 364 families were included in the study, each had two parents and at least two children with an age difference of approximately 2 years. The parents had been born in the Netherlands and spoke Dutch. There were two visits (2 weeks apart) per year for 3 years. The order in which mothers and fathers were visited in each wave of research and which of the children were played with, whether first or second at each visit, was counterbalanced between families and waves.

The children of 99 of the 364 families were in the order boy – boy (B-B), 86 girl – girl (G-G), 90 B-G and 89 G-B. During the interviews, the parent and child dyad received a bag of toys to play with for 8 minutes and were filmed whilst playing. They were also given computer tasks. The parents' ability to show warmth and be appropriately responsive to the child (called parental sensitivity) was scored afterwards from the recordings. Important aspects were 1) the expression and appropriateness of positive affect and 2) clarity in perception of the child's signals and the ability and willingness to respond appropriately to such signals. A team of researchers were trained to code the results from the films. Reliability of coding was checked in several ways.

One of the limitations in this research was that the two children were observed/filmed separately. This may not represent daily family life. Another limitation is that the parents in the pool were mainly highly educated and Caucasian. If this was to be repeated they would need to select parents from a wider range of educational level, ethnic origin and psychological

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health. Thirdly, the amount of time each of the parents normally spent parenting each of the pair of children was not measured or analysed in this study.

Sensitivity to the second-born younger sibling (age 1 to 3 years) increased from age 1 to 2 and then remained relatively stable or decreased slightly from age 2 to 3.

Sensitivity to the first-born older sibling (aged approximately 3 to 5 years) decreased slightly from age 3 to 4 years and then decreased at a greater rate from age 4 to 5. In this experiment the only age that both children of a family could be analysed was at age 3. Mothers and fathers showed similar levels of sensitive behaviour towards either the first- or second-born child at age 3 which agreed with earlier work of Dunn et al. (1985). It suggests that the difference in sensitivity towards siblings was more closely related to the developmental stage of the child rather than to sibling order.

In this longitudinal study of parental sensitivity with two children from infancy (second child aged 1 year) to early childhood (first child aged 5 years) the sensitivity of parenting towards the first-born child (age 3 to 5 years) decreased over time but for the second-born child increased (from 1 to 2 years).

There was no support for the spill-over hypothesis. Parents' experiences with their first-born child did not have negative implications for their sensitivity toward their second-born child. It is likely that the second-born child's own unique characteristics and developmental stage play a more important role in this process than the experiences that the parent had with the other child.

The graph of change of parental sensitivity with child age was similar for mothers and fathers. At all assessment times, mothers showed higher levels of sensitivity behaviour than fathers.

Mothers' and fathers' sensitivity levels were found to be related over time. The pattern was very similar. There was no catch up of fathers' sensitivity during the three years, even at the third test at first born age 5 years where the fathers still had lower sensitivities than mothers. There is evidence that maternal involvement with her children remains, even in the current age, substantially higher than the paternal involvement. In Europe as a whole, and in The Netherlands specifically, mothers spend on average 2 or 3 times as much time in direct one-to-one interaction with their children compared to fathers (Huerta et al., 2013).

Mothers may maintain an advantage in sensitivity throughout child development because females are more competent in decoding social and emotional non-verbal information than males (Hall and Matsumoto, 2004) especially in decoding subtle emotional expressions (Hoffmann et. al., 2010).

## Conclusions

This study showed that when mothers or fathers played with either their son or daughter, the degree of sensitivity to their child was not related to whether it was the first or second child, but it increased, stayed level and then decreased. Mothers were more sensitive to their children than the fathers, and the fathers did not catch up during the experiment over three years. It was concluded that the developmental stage and characteristics of the toddler or child could be used to predict the parents' sensitivity to them. If a parent differed in their sensitivity to their two children, it was related to a child being slower or faster to reach developmental milestones.

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