

What About The Children?

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Changes in patterns of early mother-child interaction: A longitudinal study of the first 18 months of life.

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High-quality interactions between infants and their main caregivers early in life are critically important for development. The concept of attachment was first proposed in the 1960s by the British psychologist John Bowlby. His work was later extended by fellow psychologist Mary Ainsworth. Ainsworth's research focused on how attachment could differ across different parent-infant pairings. She identified a pattern of attachment called "secure attachment" in which infants have learnt that their caregiver can be relied upon to meet their needs. A secure attachment results in a strong emotional connection between the infant and caregiver and allows the infant to feel safe and secure.

Ainsworth and her colleagues believe that secure attachments between infants and their caregivers develop when a caregiver responds to their infant's needs in a way that is highly sensitive, in terms of both the appropriateness and the promptness of the response. Since Ainsworth's original studies, a large body of research has demonstrated that sensitive parenting has many social and emotional benefits, including better emotion regulation, reduced behavioural problems, improved social skills and stronger moral development. Sensitive parenting has also been linked to the development of a range of cognitive skills including language, memory, attention, and problem solving.

As infants grow, there may be changes in how caregivers respond to their infants – i.e. caregivers gradually adjust their responses based on the motor, language, and cognitive skills of their infants.

Perea-Velasco designed a longitudinal study to investigate how the appropriateness and promptness of caregiver responses change over the first two years of an infant's life. They observed 52 mother-infant pairs from intact middle-class families at three different time points: when the infant was 6 months old, 12 months old, and 18 months old. At each of these time points the mother-infant pair visited a research laboratory and were asked to play as they normally would at home. Age-appropriate

toys were provided. The researchers were interested in how often the mother responded appropriately to the child, and how long it took the mother to respond to the infant (promptness) during free play. The researchers compared the appropriateness and promptness of caregiver responses between instances in which the infant was interacting with the caregiver versus instances in which the infant was engaged in solitary play.

The researchers found that responses from the mother increased in appropriateness over time, such that mothers provided more appropriate responses to 18-month-olds as compared to 6-month-olds. This was true both when infants were interacting with their caregiver and when they were playing independently. Alongside this, they found a decrease in intrusive responses (i.e. responses that did not support the infant's current needs such as offering toys or games that are above their capability) and protective responses over the same time-period. In contrast, the promptness of maternal responding changed over time *only* when children were engaging in solitary play – mothers tended to respond slower to their infants at 18 months compared to when they were 6 months old.

These findings suggest that as infants get older, mothers are less likely to interrupt solitary play, and are more likely to provide their children with time and opportunities for independent learning as well as greater freedom to explore. This encourages problem solving and increased autonomy, resulting in high-quality interactions that are optimal for the child's stage of development. In spite of the fact that the patterns of interaction changed over time, there was still regularity in the infant-caregiver interactions, supporting the child's perceptions that their caregiver was predictable and responsive to their needs. This is one of the first research studies to demonstrate that maternal sensitivity is a dynamic concept that can change and adapt depending on the needs of the child and their stage of development.

This research had been conducted with a group of self-selected parents whose relationship with their babies was apparently unproblematic. However, the approach and methodology could well be useful in therapeutic programmes where professional intervention to encourage appropriate 'responsiveness' of parents towards their young children is required.

Dr Helen Brown