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Styles of Maternal and Paternal Sensitivity in Early Infancy

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The attachment relationship formed between infant and primary caregiver influences the child's view of the world and future relationships (Stern, 2002). Less optimal consequences are related to insecure attachment with the primary caregiver (Sroufe, 2005). An in-depth understanding of the many facets and influences of the attachment relationship is necessary for intervention and education programs that effectively increase the probability of secure attachments.

The maternal-infant relationship has been the focus of most research on attachment (Freeman, Newland, & Coyl, 2010). Maternal sensitivity is an important antecedent for a secure attachment (van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kanenburg, 2004). Detecting problems with maternal sensitivity and the quality of attachment has sparked intervention programs that have proved successful (Ziv, 2005). However, the benefit of earlier intervention in problematic parental-infant relationships is evident (Juffer, van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kanenburg, 2008). Evaluating valid measures of parental sensitivity at an earlier infant age is a main focus of this research project. This study is unique in that it assesses sensitivity at 6-10 weeks old.

Fathers are also an important attachment figure in a child's life (Freeman et al., 2010). As research includes fathers, the collection methods and measures need to be tested to ensure validity for fathers as well as mothers. Researchers have tried to determine if previously established measures of maternal sensitivity are valid for detecting paternal sensitivity as well. The results are inconclusive and necessitate further exploration (Lamb & Lewis, 2004). Mothers and fathers develop different interaction styles with their children as the child ages and this may be the reason for the uncertain results (Freeman et al., 2010). Another major goal of this study is to compare the sensitivity of mothers and the sensitivity of fathers during interaction with their infant.

Mothers and fathers volunteered their participation by responding to a newspaper solicitation. A sample of 30 father-infant and 50 mother-infant dyads were observed using a split screen during a 10-minute interaction in the laboratory. Infants ranged from 6-10 weeks of age. Parents completed an adult temperament scale and mothers completed the infant temperament scale (Lerner, 1982). Videotaped interactions were rated for sensitivity using a 9-point scale (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974). Discrete behaviors of parents and infants (e.g., smiling, eye contact, auditory expression) were observed in 5-second intervals for presence or absence. Temperamental dimensions included activity level, attention span, adaptability, rhythmicity, and reactivity.

A *t*-test compared sensitivity scores of mothers and fathers, with mothers scoring higher than fathers. Of particular interest was the quality of sensitivity between mothers and fathers. For example, mothers and fathers were both sensitive to conversation cues from their infant and allowed space for infant vocalizations. Mothers tend to vocalize (talking, singing, whispering) during the entire interaction except when the infant vocalizes. Fathers tend to wait for the infant to vocalize and then respond. Mothers tend to match the infant's volume level whereas fathers tend to maintain the same volume throughout the interaction. These styles are discussed in relation to temperament styles and specific interactive behaviors.