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*Utah State University*

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DO ATTITUDES ABOUT SPOILING CHILDREN AFFECT ATTITUDES  
REGARDING WHAT INFANTS NEED FOR EARLY  
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by

Kathleen Westover

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family, Consumer, and Human Development

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2012

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**ABSTRACT**

Do Attitudes about Spoiling Children Affect Attitudes Regarding  
What Infants Need for Early Socio-emotional Development

by

Kathleen Westover, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2012

Major Professor: Dr. Lori A. Roggman  
Department: Family, Consumer, and Human Development

Secure infant attachment is important for the positive social-emotional development of children. Many parents have limited understanding of social-emotional development and the influence of appropriate responsive parenting behaviors to their infants' cues. For example, many parents believe you can spoil an infant if you pick them up every time they cry. Researchers study the impact of positive responses to infants' cues. Infants form a more secure attachment and learn to interpret the world as a safe place for exploration when parents respond to their signs of distress. In contrast, infants reared with authoritarian parenting styles of strict compliance and harsh punishment develop more insecure attachments.

This study measured undergraduate students' beliefs about spoiling children, child obedience, and parental responsiveness and examined changes in beliefs after instruction in the principles of attachment and the role of caregiver responsiveness in the formation of secure attachment. First, a pretest was administered followed by 1 to 2 hours of in-

class instruction regarding attachment theory. Next, a posttest was given to determine if in-class instruction had an effect on students' attitudes regarding spoiling children, child obedience, and parental responsiveness. Students' beliefs about spoiling children were associated with attitudes about child obedience and parent responsiveness, and students changed their attitudes about spoiling and responsiveness, although not obedience, after instruction. Young adults who have developed an understanding of parental responsiveness and have decreased their fears of spoiling children have the potential to be able to implement more developmentally supportive practices in their own lives as future parents and practitioners in the field of child development.

(74 pages)

**PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

Do Attitudes about Spoiling Children Affect Attitudes Regarding  
What Infants Need for Early Socio-emotional Development

by

Kathleen Westover, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2012

Infants that are raised in a warm loving environment have an increased probability of growing into responsible loving adults. Infants have the ability to make their needs known through different cues such as crying. Many parents do not understand how to respond appropriately to their infant's cues. For instance many parents believe that if you pick up an infant every time they cry they will become spoiled. Researchers have studied the effects of responding appropriately to an infant. Infants who have their needs met when they demonstrate signs of distress learn that the world is a safe place for exploration. Contrast this with infants who are raised by parents that exhibit extreme expectations of compliance and exercise harsh punishment for non-obedience of rules, see the world as a harsh punitive place.

This study measured undergraduate students' beliefs about spoiling infants, obedience and discipline practices, and what students believe is appropriate responses to infant's cues. The students were recruited from two course sections of FCHD 1500. First, students were given a pretest to help determine what they believed. Second, instruction was given to the students regarding research that shows the effect of parenting

practices on infants and in later development. Third, a posttest was administered to the students to determine whether or not in-class had an effect on students' attitudes regarding spoiling, obedience, and responsiveness. This study shows that the students in these classes changed their attitudes about spoiling and responsiveness after instruction but not obedience.

The majority of students who participated in this study majored in social science programs of study. With their new understanding of responsive parenting they will be able to develop more supportive practices in their lives as future parents and/or practitioners in the field of child development.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Dr. Lori Roggman. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor and friend. It was with great honor that I was tutored by a remarkable woman whose work is unparalleled in the field of child development. I have learned from the best. Not only did Dr. Roggman help me to grow academically, but she was by my side listening to me as I have gone through some of my toughest life choices and challenges. When life became too difficult she took my hand and guided me along. No words are adequate to express the gratitude I have for Dr. Lori Roggman for never giving up on me.



## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
PUBLIC ABSTRACT .....	v
DEDICATION.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
 CHAPTER	
I. PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	1
Attachment, Social-emotional Development and Caregiver Responsiveness .....	2
Parent Attitudes and Concerns.....	3
Attachment Interventions.....	4
Purpose of Study and Research Questions.....	5
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Attachment.....	9
Responsiveness .....	11
Attachment Interventions.....	13
The Myths of Spoiling Children .....	14
Conclusion .....	18
Hypotheses.....	18
III. METHODS .....	21
Design .....	21
Participants.....	21
Procedures.....	23
Measures .....	24
Data Analysis .....	27
IV. RESULTS .....	30
Data Description and Analysis.....	30
Research Questions.....	31

Research Question 1: Do Students Believe that Infants Can Be Spoiled with too Much Physical Contact or Care? .....	32
Research Question 2: Are Students Who Emphasize Obedience More Concerned about Spoiling Infants .....	33
Research Question 3: Are Students Concerned about Spoiling Infants Less Likely to Value Parenting Responsiveness? .....	33
Research Question 4: Did Students Who Participated in This Study Change Their Beliefs about Responsiveness? .....	34
Research Question 5: Did Students Who Participated in This Study Decrease Their Fears of Spoiling Children?.....	35
Research Question 6: Did Students Who Participated in This Study Decrease Their Attitudes about Parenting That Emphasize Obedience? .....	36
Research Question 7: Did Students Who Reported a High Level of Symptoms of Depression Show Less Change in Their Attitudes After Participating in This Study?.....	37
Additional Analyses.....	37
Summary .....	38
 V. DISCUSSION.....	 39
Associations to Empirical Literature .....	42
Limitations .....	44
Recommendations for Future Research .....	45
Conclusions.....	47
 REFERENCES .....	 48
 APPENDICES .....	 53
Appendix A. Approval from Institutional Review Board at Utah State University.....	54
Appendix B. Letter of Information Approved by Institutional Review Board at Utah State University .....	56
Appendix C. Participant Demographic Survey.....	59

Appendix D. PICCOLO Responsiveness Importance Survey .....	x 62
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**LIST OF TABLES**

Table		Page
1	Demographic Information on the Research Sample .....	22
2	Descriptives of the Research Variables .....	31

## **CHAPTER I**

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The social-emotional development of children has its roots in early attachment. John Bowlby defined attachment theory as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.” Attachment theory underlies much of what is known about the early beginnings of social-emotional development. The child’s first social interactions and first social relationships are in the context of parent-child attachment relationships (Appleyard & Berlin, 2007). Children’s attachment security, promoted by caregiver responsiveness to infant cues, is shown to lead to better social-emotional outcomes (Appleyard & Berlin, 2007). Many parents and other caregivers, however, have only limited understanding of attachment and may be concerned about spoiling children by responding to their needs (Wilson, Witze, & Volin, 1981). Social and emotional outcomes are a growing concern in education, and specifically programs such as Early Head Start aim to promote children’s early social-emotional development by providing high quality childcare or by increasing parents’ understanding of the importance of attachment and responsiveness to their infants (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families [ACYF], 2000). Providing information to future early childhood practitioners relating to the importance of responsive care may help increase children’s secure attachment and social-emotional development by childcare providers and by parents. Students in child development classes often work with parents in childcare settings or family service agencies after graduating. Their attitudes about spoiling children and

knowledge about attachment and parental responsiveness are likely to affect the quality and effectiveness of their work and are, therefore, important to study.

### **Attachment, Social-Emotional Development, and Caregiver Responsiveness**

Attachment theory, as developed by John Bowlby, is rooted in ethology (Bowlby, 1982). Ethologists believe all animals, including humans, have instincts that guide their behaviors in the conditions of the environment in which they live. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth were pioneers in applying ethological concepts to human development (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby particularly focused on the impact children suffer during separation from their mothers. Through his research, he concludes that children who experience prolonged separation from their mother and suffer the loss of other caretakers may, in a sense, “give up” on people altogether and never develop the ability to establish any depth to subsequent relationships. The loss of a secure attachment at a young age can produce negative outcomes throughout life. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) expanded on Bowlby’s theories by showing individual variations in the security of early attachment relationships.

Children’s behaviors during Ainsworth’s “Strange Situation Procedure,” a series of brief separations and reunions, showed the type or category of the attachment between mother and child (Ainsworth et al., 1978). A child with a secure attachment to his or her mother is likely to show distress during brief separations, seek contact upon reunion, and derive enough comfort from that contact to return to play. A secure child has a greater likelihood of developing positive long-term outcomes in social-emotional development

(Berlin, Cassidy, & Appleyard, 2008; Waters & Cummings, 2000). Insecure children, in contrast, show either an unemotional withdrawal after separation or are extremely distraught and inconsolable.

The differences between secure and insecure children are related to the responsiveness of their primary caregivers. The more sensitive a parent is at reading an infant's signals, the more confidence or security the child will gain in the parent as a source of safety and comfort (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978). These theories of attachment and the research based on these theories have withstood the test of time (Cassidy, 1999). They are generally understood and accepted in the academic community (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Alberseim, 2000) and have generated ideas about parenting interventions to support responsiveness to infants and young children (Berlin, Ziv, Amaya-Jackson, & Greenberg, 2005).

### **Parent Attitudes and Concerns**

Parents' current attitudes about the potential of responsiveness to "spoil" an infant, suggests that over 40 years of attachment theory and research have netted little gain in parents' understanding of attachment or the implementation of parenting practices that support attachment in individual families (Zero To Three, 2000). McIntosh (1989) describes the spoiled child syndrome as "characterized by excessive self-centered and immature behavior, resulting from the failure of parents to enforce consistent age appropriate limits" (p. 108). Spoiled children display a lack of consideration for others, demand to have their own way, have difficulty delaying gratification, and are prone to temper outbursts (McIntosh, 1989). A commonly-held myth in American society is that

if a baby is held every time it cries, the child will be spoiled (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clark, 1998), with almost 65% of mothers surveyed in 1981 agreeing with this statement (Wilson et al., 1981). A more recent study found that 57% of parents of young children incorrectly believe picking up a six-month-old every time he cries will spoil a child (Zero To Three, 2000). Research based on Bowlby and Ainsworth's theories have shown that when parents read a child's cues and act responsively, for example, by promptly picking up a crying baby, the child actually develops more independence and compliance and less aggression and anxiety (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Spoiling a child is not a byproduct of the responsiveness during caregiving that supports the development of secure attachment. Parents' concerns about spoiling children may, however, interfere with their sensitive responsiveness to their infants, particularly if they do not understand the importance of responsiveness for their children's attachment security or the importance of security for their children's social-emotional development.

Social-emotional development may also be thwarted by the effects of parents who practice parenting styles that demand strict levels of obedience and are followed by inconsistent or harsh punishment for lack of compliance (Awong, Grusec, & Sorenson, 2008). Researchers have found that this form of authoritarian parenting has an effect on externalizing negative behaviors as the child ages.

### **Attachment Interventions**

Security of attachment and the maternal responsiveness that supports it is so important to children's social-emotional development that various attempts have been



made to intervene in families in which infants are insecure or parents are insensitive or unresponsive to them (Berlin et al., 2005). These interventions have been implemented primarily by trained clinicians working with families that already have serious problems, although clinicians also provide some preventive work with at-risk families (Berlin et al., 2005).

Few of these interventions have been implemented by early childhood practitioners who do not have professional training to work with families with serious mental health or relationship problems. Although practitioners without psychological or other clinical training would not be prepared to address more severe kinds of problems pertaining to attachment or mental health, they may be able to provide sensitive care to infants in childcare settings or to provide parents with information about responsiveness and support parents' responsiveness in ways that help at-risk parents promote healthy attachments with their children. Practitioners aiming to support parent responsiveness and child attachment security need to understand the distinction between parental responsiveness and the parenting behaviors that could lead to spoiling a child and understand the unlikelihood of responsiveness leading to the negative outcomes associated with spoiling.

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore attitudes and knowledge about parental responsiveness, obedience, and spoiling children among students preparing for future parenthood or future careers in which they will be working with children, parents, or families. Because of the possibility that parents' responsiveness to their infants can be

increased through the guidance of a practitioner working with them or their children, it is important to understand if future practitioners are prepared with appropriate information. Currently, students in the Family, Consumer, and Human Development program at Utah State University take courses that will prepare them to become future parents or practitioners. Students majoring in psychology, elementary education, or social work also frequently take these courses. These courses provide basic information about social-emotional development, security of attachment, and responsive parenting, but students may vary in the attitudes they have when they first begin the course. Evaluating students' preconceived ideas about the importance of secure attachment, particularly as it pertains to the ability to spoil an infant, is central to this study. The aims of this study were to examine students' fears of spoiling infants, concerns about child obedience, and understanding of the importance of caregiver responsiveness to infants in supporting the development of attachment security and healthy social-emotional development. Students were assessed before and after class lectures on their attitudes about spoiling infants, child obedience, and parental responsiveness to determine if information and discussion on these topics could change their attitudes. The following research questions were addressed:

1. Do students in the Family, Consumer, and Human Development course 1500: The Developing Person through the Lifespan, at Utah State University, believe that infants can be spoiled with too much physical contact or too much responsive care?
2. Are students with attitudes regarding childrearing with an emphasis on obedience more likely to be concerned about spoiling infants?
3. Are students with high concerns about spoiling infants less likely to rate

parental warmth and responsive behaviors as important for children's early development?

4. Do students who evaluated their own beliefs and then discussed information about attachment, responsiveness, and spoiling infants increase the importance they ascribe to parental warmth and responsiveness with infants?

5. Do students who participated in this study decrease their fears of spoiling children?

6. Do students who participated in this study decrease their attitudes about parenting that emphasize obedience?

7. Do students who were rated as being highly likely to be depressed on a depression symptoms scale show less change in these attitudes after being exposed to information about attachment, responsiveness, and spoiling infants?

By addressing these questions, this study provides information regarding preconceived beliefs regarding spoiling a child versus supporting secure attachment. It also shows whether challenging beliefs through instruction can help students reduce their fears of spoiling children and increase their support of responsive caregiving.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of four major topics: attachment, responsiveness, attachment interventions, and myths of spoiling children. In the following sections each of these topics will be addressed in turn. First, attachment theory and research will be discussed in depth to establish the value of secure attachment as a necessary component of the social-emotional development of a child. This section will include an overview of original studies, their implications, and thoughts of recent scholars. Second, research on caregiver responsiveness, child obedience, and spoiling children as key predictors of secure infant attachment will show why it is important for parents to respond sensitively and consistently to their infants and young children. Studies of parenting behaviors in relation to different levels of security or secure base behavior will be reviewed. Third, attachment interventions that have been implemented by professionals and paraprofessionals to increase infant security and/or increase parent responsiveness will be summarized and their varying degrees of success discussed.

Lastly, the role of parent attitudes regarding spoiling will be discussed in relation to the potential success or failure of these intervention efforts. The topic of parenting beliefs will be explored regarding excessive responsiveness to an infant as a mechanism to developing a “spoiled” child. The term “spoiling children” will be defined. It will be shown that although the importance of responsiveness to an infant’s cries is widely supported by research and an accepted belief among scholars, parents are still holding on to the myth that responsiveness will lead to a spoiled child. Finally, the purpose of this

study is described to explore the attitudes regarding parental responsiveness and spoiling children among students who will be working in the child development field.

### **Attachment**

Attachment theory is based on an ethological approach to studying human development and behavior in terms of its adaptive value (Bowlby, 1982). Infant attachment to a primary caregiver is thought to be an evolutionary process that began as a protective measure since the beginning of man (Keller, 2000). Individuals formed groups to ward off predators that could impose harm and most certain death. The young were the most vulnerable. To perpetuate the species of the human race, the very youngest had to stay in close proximity to adults to survive. In order to achieve this closeness, infants use signals to draw adults close to elicit a response to their needs. At birth, this is achieved through cries. Later a series of smiles, coos, laughs, and babbles are used to get the attention of the caregiver to meet their physical and emotional needs (Keller, 2000).

Babies are attracted to other humans from the moment of birth. Newborns prefer the sound of the human voices that they heard in the womb (Querleu, Renard, Versyp, Paris-Delrue, & Crèpin, 1988). They have the ability to gaze at human faces but may look away from other visual stimuli such as a series of distorted or scrambled faces (Lamb, Bornstein, & Teti, 2002). This ability to connect to another human draws an emotional response from the parent or caregiver.

John Bowlby (1982) studied infants and cast a new direction by defining an organized set of infant behaviors as an “attachment behavioral system.” He believed that humans behaved in predictable ways to increase outcomes that will increase reproductive

success. He dismissed the theory that attachment is nothing more than a “drive” to satisfy the need for nourishment and comfort, such as being kept at a comfortable temperature and cleaned from a soiled diaper, or the theory from behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner that attachment is due to generalized reinforcement. Bowlby proved his point by stating that children who are abused or neglected, nevertheless become attached to a primary caregiver. They seek close proximity to others whether or not their physiological needs are being met (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008).

The ground-breaking work of Mary Ainsworth built upon the theories presented by Bowlby. She identified different types of attachment and discovered a simple 20 minute method to identify the type or style of attachment demonstrated between mother and child (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Her approach has been met with skepticism because of the straightforward design, yet there has not been another measure that has captured the categories of attachment as well as Mary Ainsworth’s “Strange Situation Procedure.”

Ainsworth and others have shown that responding attentively and sensitively to an infant’s signals will produce a child who is securely attached by the age of one year (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In reviewing decades of research on attachment, Cassidy (1999) concluded that responsiveness helped build security that enabled the child to explore his or her environment in a confident manner. With this confidence for exploration, a child can organize their world in a way that makes sense and learn new things in a meaningful way. In a comprehensive review of multi-level contributions to children’s development across several domains, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) concluded that brain development and cognition increase as well as the social-emotional development of the child as a result of a secure attachment (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Beck (1975) stated, “[Y]our baby’s

early environment and the amount of sensory stimulus he receives can actually cause physical changes in his brain and foster the growth of his mental capacity....” (p. 86).

### **Responsiveness**

In the earliest months of infancy, the primary concern of the child is internal as concern for self and the gratification of needs is the main goal. The social smile develops around 6 weeks of age and the infant begins to forge relationships with others (Rochat, Querido, & Striano, 1999). If the infant is attended to in a consistent pattern of warmth and attentiveness, then the child will have an increased capacity to relate to others positively in the future (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Karen, 1990). If the response is inconsistent or has high elements of stress from the caregiver, then later negative patterns of relationships will emerge (Zimiles, 1982).

Responsiveness to infants is comprised of three exchanges that must happen on a daily basis (Bornstein et al., 1992). First, the child must react or cue the adult about a need. Second, the adult must react to the cue. Third, the reaction must have an effect on the child. This continual three-step sequence of events has a prolonged effect on the eventual outcomes of a child. This is a global occurrence, and yet different cultures may respond to infants in different ways to achieve the overarching goal. In the article, “Maternal responsiveness to Infants in Three Societies: United States, France, and Japan” (Bornstein et al., 1992), the authors show that even though each society may have differing views of outcomes for their children, all three cultures respond to their children in a way that will promote positive long-term outcomes. In the United States, mothers are thought to promote the aspect of individuality and autonomy. In France, mothers see

the effects of emotional support as primary and achievement of their child as secondary. In Japan, the mother sees her infant as an extension of herself and works to develop a mutual dependency with her infant. Mothers in different cultures direct children's attention in differing ways. For example, an American mother may direct her child's attention to a toy or another mode of external stimulation to quiet the child. A mother in France will use verbal and physical responsiveness to the child's cues. In Japan, a mother would comfort a child by facing them toward her to express the need for dependence on them. Even though these responses are culturally different, they all respond to the cues of the child and provide the intervention needed to promote positive mother/child dyads.

Infants that are responded to with anger or with punitive measures for disobedience are more likely to develop attachments that are less than secure (Awong et al., 2008). Authoritarian is a parenting style that is characterized as strict obedience to parental rules and directions. Parents have high expectations of their children, but rarely explain their rationale or set clear boundaries for the child to adhere to parental demands (Baumrind, 1971). Inconsistent implementation of rules with little attention to infant cues can also be a detriment to a secure attachment to the caregiver. Indulgent or permissive parenting is characterized as having low expectations of the child. Parents may be highly involved in their child's life but place few, if any, restrictions or controls on their child's behavior. These children are often considered to be "spoiled" because they are not held accountable for their actions (Baumrind, 1971).



## Attachment Interventions

Because secure attachment is so important for children's early development and because parental responsiveness is a key factor in the development of security, interventions have been designed to promote child security, parent responsiveness, or both. Approaches to interventions vary greatly among cultures. For example, in Denmark the Danish Board of Health's policy is to encourage breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life. In order to ensure that this is happening, women are entitled to 6 months of paid maternity leave. Further support is given by contacts from home health nurses who make home visits to all infants and their families in the first months of life. This support is given to every citizen regardless of income, social class, or risk factors. In a study of caregiving and infant crying in Denmark, mothers who were given extra support through home health nurses exhibited responsive caregiving practices and attitudes that were consistent with secure attachments (Alvarez, 2004).

At the Centre for Child and Family Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands, researchers developed a program titled *Video Feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting* (VIPP; Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2008). This program uses video to instruct parents on parental responsiveness and the effects of sensitivity with their infants. Reading an infant's cues is vital to effective parenting. In this program, parent and child interactions are videotaped and then reviewed. Then the parent is guided by a practitioner to use the methods that are effective in responding sensitively to their infant. This method has been used in clinical and non-clinical groups to promote positive parenting techniques.

Contrast these approaches with services provided to mothers and infants in the United States. Most of these interventions are targeted toward parents and children who already have relationship problems. Other programs target families who may be at-risk because of poverty but otherwise are not necessarily showing serious relationship problems. Early Head Start is a federally funded comprehensive program that is offered in various communities throughout the United States. The program is offered to pregnant mothers and children from birth to three years of age. A family's income must be below poverty level guidelines to qualify for these services. The home visitors of this program have different levels of education within various fields of study (ACYF, 2002), but not necessarily any particular training regarding child attachment or parent responsiveness. Studies have shown positive outcomes for child development after participating in Early Head Start programs (ACYF, 2002), but there are no published studies regarding Early Head Start parent or practitioner attitudes about child attachment or parent responsiveness.

### **The Myths of Spoiling Children**

Even though studies have shown that responsiveness is important for children to have positive life-long gains in their social-emotional development, the question still remains whether or not too much attention given to an infant will promote aspects of a spoiled child. The term spoiling in this context, means to respond so frequently to the child's signals or cues that a demanding, dependent, clingy child will emerge (Hubbard & van Ijzendoorn, 1991).

Parents have differing beliefs or ideas regarding what constitute adequate or favorable parenting. Some parents believe that if you pick up a baby every time they cry then that baby will become spoiled and he or she will demonstrate needy, attention-seeking behaviors. These beliefs may lead to negative attitudes that may affect the type of parenting an infant will receive. In the article, *Spoiling an infant: Further support for the construct* (Solomon & Martin, 1993), the authors concluded that there are three types of beliefs regarding spoiling. The first, an infant cannot be spoiled; the second, an infant can be spoiled but this leads to positive outcomes; and the third, an infant can be spoiled and it will lead to negative outcomes (Solomon & Martin, 1993). In this particular study, 56% of respondents believed that it was not possible to spoil an infant under the age of 5 months. The remaining 44% of respondents were nearly equally split between believing that an infant could be spoiled and that it would lead to a positive outcome, or that an infant could be spoiled and that it would lead to a negative outcome. The high rate of 25% of respondents indicated belief that one can, but should not spoil a child under the age of 5 months. If it limits parental responsiveness to infants, this could have profound negative consequences on the further development of the child.

Spoiling children is often thought of as synonymous with overindulgence of children (Bredehoft, Clarke, & Dawson, 2002). The term overindulgence implies that parents give their children a wealth of family resources such as “material goods, time, attention, experiences, or lack of responsibility, at developmentally inappropriate times” (Bredehoft et al., 2002). Children who grow up in this type of environment often have a difficult time transitioning to the realities of life in an adult world. In contrast to overindulgence, spoiling is a term that means the child exhibits a self-centered attitude

that will eventually lead to ill-mannered, negative behaviors. It may be the fear of overindulgence that leads parents to believe that a responsive attitude to their infant will create an ill-tempered, spoiled child.

Parents' perceptions of appropriate parenting practices can be influenced by the previous generation's parenting, how comfortable they are in the role as parent, and other variables which may influence their level of responsiveness to their child (Smyke, Boris, & Alexander, 2002). Parents who believe their infant is manipulating them by crying will often refrain from giving developmentally appropriate responses to their baby. This lack of responsiveness can have detrimental effects on the child. Not only can the lack of stimulation affect the perception the child has of their environment, but it could have damaging effects on cognitive and other adaptive abilities. Parents who fear spoiling children may provide an environment that is less than supportive for the optimal growth and development of the infant. Depressed mothers often cite the fear of spoiling children as a reason to justify the lack of visual, verbal, and physical contact with their infants (Smyke et al., 2002).

In several studies, it has been found that parents with lower socioeconomic status have the highest concerns regarding spoiling children (Crockenberg & Smith, 2002; Smyke et al., 2002; Solomon & Martin, 1993). There may be alternate factors that contribute to this phenomenon. In a study with a sample of low-income African American mothers it was found that mothers purposely withdrew responsive behaviors as a mode to "toughen up" their children so they would be able to safely navigate external threats from the outside world (Smyke et al., 2002). In this same study, mothers who exhibited higher levels of depressive symptoms tended to have a decreased level of

maternal nurturing capabilities. The researchers in this study suggested that if a mother is effectively treated for depression then her levels of responsiveness should rise as nurturing behavior increases along with her knowledge of child development. Some theorists believe that it is important to strike an intuitive balance between responding to the needs of the child and having enough resources such as time and energy to ultimately attend satisfactorily to the child's needs (Hubbard & van Ijzendoorn, 1991). This implies that dealing with depression may require energy that would otherwise be needed for responsiveness.

Schaefer and Edgerton (1985) formed a series of questions to assess parental beliefs and values in relation to children's cognitive development. They found that parents who were more authoritarian and demanded high levels of obedience, or insisted on direct rule over their children's development, scored lower on the scales of parental modernity beliefs that foster children's initiative, creativity, and decision-making skills. This was an indicator that the future creativity, cognitive thought processes, and social-emotional development of the child had the potential to be thwarted. Parents who were more authoritative or gave high levels of support with high expectations had children who had higher cognitive abilities, reasoning skills, and emotional competence.

Young adults, regardless of parenthood status, may have varying opinions regarding spoiling, obedience, and responsiveness. Age, gender, and educational opportunities may all play a role in these opinions and attitudes. Young adults who are not parents could have an unrealistic viewpoint of parenting. Gender could play a key difference due to differences between young men and women in exposure to children they may have had in their younger years. For example, young women may have had

more babysitting or other child caring experiences than young men. Also, many young adults are continuing to receive information in educational settings. People with more education are less likely to emphasize obedience (Schaefer, 1991). As students gain more education, they are exposed to a variety of ideas from their studies that could have an impact upon their viewpoints regarding parenting and infant development.

### **Conclusion**

Students in the Family, Consumer, and Human Development department at Utah State University study the effects of parenting and outcomes of children. Many of these students will graduate and become parents or practitioners in child-care programs that support children and families. They will take with them their beliefs and attitudes as they rear their own children, or enter homes and child-care settings as professionals to help families in intervention programs. Few will obtain advanced degrees in which research on topics related to parenting and early development are explored in depth. It is for this purpose that this study assessed the beliefs, attitudes, and values of college students who are future parents and practitioners, provided information to challenge these preconceived beliefs, and assessed any resulting changes in student's beliefs, attitudes, and values about the care of infants.

### **Hypotheses**

This literature review suggests several hypotheses in relation to the proposed research questions. The hypotheses examined in this study were as follows:

1. Students in the Family, Consumer, and Human Development courses at Utah State University, who have not yet received course content information about attachment and responsiveness, are similar to other adults and parents who have responded to surveys in previous studies expressing their belief that infants can be spoiled with too much physical contact or too much responsive care.

2. Students who believe in authoritarian values of obedience are more likely to be concerned about spoiling infants.

3. Students who report fear of spoiling in regards to their attitudes about childrearing are less likely to rate parent responsiveness as an important parenting behavior.

4. Students who receive course content information about attachment and parent responsiveness, especially those who evaluate their own beliefs and participate in class discussion about attachment, responsiveness, and spoiling children, increase the importance they ascribe to parental responsiveness with infants.

5. Students who have these experiences decrease their fears of spoiling children.

6. Students who have these experiences decrease their attitudes about parenting that emphasize obedience.

7. The impact of these experiences is less for those students reporting a higher number of depressive symptoms.

These hypotheses were tested in the current study in a group of undergraduate students in human development courses. Students responded to questions about parent responsiveness, spoiling children, and child obedience before and after class activities about child attachment in relation to parental responsiveness. Changes in their responses

after the class experiences showed whether their attitudes could be changed with information, reflection, and discussion.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Design**

This study was a quantitative pre-post design to examine the effects classroom activities have on the beliefs of undergraduate students regarding parenting and child development. The design included a series of questionnaires, administered before and after the classroom activities, to undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of FCHD 1500: Development across the Lifespan at Utah State University. Questions about parenting addressed fears of spoiling children and values on child obedience and parent responsiveness. Other characteristics of the students involved were determined with demographic information and a survey of depressive symptoms.

#### **Participants**

The number of total participants in this study was 311 of the total of 367 students enrolled (85%), but only 231 students (63%) provided at least some pretest and some posttest data. Furthermore, two students did not complete the surveys and were excluded from the analyses to answer the research questions. Participants came from two sections of the human development course, but the second section represented the majority (63%) of the sample.

Demographic information was collected from the participants to understand the characteristics of the sample (see Table 1). Questions were asked to each student regarding their gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, parental status, and declared

Table 1

*Demographic Information on the Research Sample*

Participants	Variable	Number	Percentage
Instructor	Section 1	80	38
	Section 2	151	61
Gender	Male	53	23
	Female	178	77
Marital status	Married	37	15
	Single	194	85
Parental status	Parent	23	10
	Nonparent	208	90
Ethnicity	White	204	87
	Hispanic	10	5
	African American	3	2
	Asian American	8	3
	Other	6	3
Education	Freshman	104	45
	Sophomore	71	30
	Junior	42	19
	Senior	11	5
	Graduate	3	1
Declared major	FCHD, Psychology, Social Work Education	57	25
	Communicative Dis., Arts, Design	55	24
	Health, Physical Sciences	12	5
	Undeclared	39	17
	Business, Math, Science	40	18
	Language, Journalism, International Studies	21	9
		7	3

*Note.* Not all students enrolled in the two courses are represented in this table, only the research sample.

major/minor. This information is deemed important to control for moderating factors within the group. Demographic information was analyzed to describe the sample. The largest majority of students were freshman, White, single, and were nonparents. Over 75% of the students were female. Almost half of the students have declared FCHD,

Psychology, Education, and related fields as their major. Approximately one-fifth of the students are pursuing majors in the Health and Social Sciences. The remaining students have either not yet declared a major, or are in the Arts, Business, Math, and various other fields of study.

### **Procedures**

Participants were contacted through two instructors of the Development Across the Lifespan course. Students enrolled in those classes were invited to participate in the study by their instructors during class time and offered extra points toward their grade. Those students who declined participation were not penalized and had other opportunities for extra credit during the semester. The survey activities in which they participated in as research participants were part of their regular learning activities for the course. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Utah State University for the use of human subjects (see Appendix A). An IRB approved letter of information describing the study was given to each participant so that the data from their survey activities could be used for this thesis (see Appendix B). Data from any student who did not receive a written letter of information was not used for this study. Gifts and monetary compensation were not given for participation in this study.

Each student participated in the pretest survey activity via Blackboard Vista, a learning delivery system during the first week of class, similar to many other learning activities students in these courses were expected to do online as part of their on-campus course. Instruction on attachment theory was given according to the written plan within each instructor's syllabus for FCHD 1500 Spring Semester 2010, during weeks 4 or 5 of

the 15-week semester. A minimum of 3 hours of in-class instruction regarding attachment theory, the effects of responsiveness, and the causes of infant spoiling were given through lecture and a class discussion. Video and other activities were used as supplemental material to emphasize and illustrate the lecture material. Section 2 received an additional hour of in-class instruction regarding the connection, as shown by research, between early attachment in infancy and later romantic relationships in early adulthood. This effort to make learning relevant to students' current interests and motivations was made to potentially enhance their learning about attachment and parenting.

### **Measures**

A series of surveys was completed by every participant according to each instructor's outlined curriculum. These surveys assessed participants' demographic information and their beliefs about parenting behavior, child obedience, and spoiling children. In addition, a checklist of depressive symptoms assessed the likelihood of participant depression.

First, a *Participant Demographic Survey* was completed by each participant (Appendix C). A continuous descriptor of participant age was included along with categorical descriptors of gender, ethnicity, education level, major field of study, marital status, and parental status.

Second, a survey assessed student attitudes about parental responsiveness using the *PICCOLO Responsiveness Importance Survey* (Appendix D), adapted from the Parenting Interactions with Children Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO; Roggman, Cook, Innocenti, Jump-Norman, & Christiansen, 2009).

PICCOLO is designed to provide a valid, reliable measurement tool for practitioners in the Early Childhood Development field to measure observable behavior of parents. It has strong psychometric properties as a measure of parenting (inter-rater reliability > .80, validity evidence from correlations with independent parent behavior measure and from correlations with child outcomes), but it has not been used to measure attitudes about parenting. The PICCOLO measure is divided into four domains: Affection, Encouragement, Teaching, and Responsiveness. Behavioral descriptors of responsiveness and other key parenting behaviors, the items from PICCOLO, were included in the survey used with undergraduate students who participated in this study. Items were listed with a response format in which participants indicated how important they believe behavior is for children's early social development. Students rated each item from 1 = not important to 5 = very important. According to the authors of this survey, responsiveness is defined as "reacting to child's cues, emotions, words, and behaviors, following child's lead in play or conversation." The other parenting domains included behaviors that may also be differentially valued depending on student beliefs about spoiling, such as, "parent is often physically close to child" in the affection domain. All items in the PICCOLO measure predicted positive child developmental outcomes and have been rated by early childhood practitioners in the field as important for children's development (Roggman et al., 2009). Nevertheless, students just beginning their education in child development were expected to vary in the importance they place on these parenting behaviors.

Third, a survey assessed student attitudes about values of obedience. The students' values of children's obedience and autonomy were measured by the *Parent*

*Modernity Scale* (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), as adapted for the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP), and referred to in this study as the *Parenting Attitudes Survey*. The psychometric properties have been reported for this survey as adapted for the EHSREP study (Shears, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Selig, 2008) and support its use as a consistent and accurate measure of attitudes about children's obedience and autonomy. This survey assesses parents' beliefs about the importance of obedience and the importance of children's development of autonomy. A series of statements was presented. Students were asked to indicate the extent they agreed with each statement by choosing the corresponding number that best described their own personal beliefs. After each statement, a Likert-type scale was presented with a 4-point agree/disagree response format: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree. This format required students to make a decision about whether they agreed or disagreed by omitting a neutral response option.

Fourth, a survey instrument, *Ideas about Child Development Survey*, assessed student attitudes about spoiling infants and their knowledge of child development. Questions related to the idea of spoiling were selected from the *Knowledge of Infant Development Index* (KIDI; MacPhee, 1981) and from the survey titled *What Grown-ups Know about Child Development* (Zero To Three, 2000). Items numbered 2, 7, 8, 10, 13, and 14 were adapted from the survey, *What Grown-Ups Know about Child Development*. All other statements were adapted from the KIDI. The KIDI is a self-administered survey created to assess parent knowledge of developmentally appropriate infant behaviors, using a 4-point agree/disagree response format. The developer of the measure assumed that if parents have knowledge concerning age appropriate infant behaviors,

parenting practices, and developmental milestones then more effective parenting practices would ensue. This scale is valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive. *What Grown-ups Know about Child Development* was from a national survey that questioned 3,000 individuals from the general population about child development, including questions about spoiling.

Fifth, a survey assessed participant reported symptoms of depression. The *Center for Epidemiological Studies--Depression Scale* (Radloff, 1977) is a self-assessment scale designed to screen for depressive symptomology within the general population. The scoring procedure for the questionnaire was, 0 for answers in the first column (rarely or never), 1 for answers in the second column (some or a little of the time), 2 for answers in the third column (occasionally or a moderate amount of the time), 3 for answers in the fourth column (most or all of the time). The scoring of positive items was reversed. Possible range of scores were 0 to 60, with the higher the score the more likelihood of depressive symptomology. This 20-item scale had been tested in clinical and household settings, and high internal consistency has been reported with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .85 to .90 across studies (Radloff, 1977). The CES-D also meets concurrent validity by clinical and self-report criteria, as well as substantial evidence of construct validity (Radloff, 1977).

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected were analyzed using quantitative descriptive statistics. Associations were measured according to the strength of the correlation between variables and the mean differences between groups defined by the section of the course in

which students were enrolled. The hypotheses were tested from the data collected using statistical tests appropriate for each of the following research questions.

1. Do students taking the Family, Consumer, and Human Development courses at Utah State University believe that infants can be spoiled with too much physical contact or too much responsive care? This question was answered by examining descriptive and frequency statistics from student responses to items on the *Ideas about Child Development Survey*.

2. Are students with high concerns about spoiling infants more likely to have attitudes about parenting that emphasize obedience? This question was answered by examining bivariate correlations for scale scores and item ratings of the *Ideas about Child Development Survey* with the *Parenting Attitudes (Modernity) Survey*.

3. Are students with high concerns about spoiling infants less likely to rate parental responsive behaviors as important for children's early development? This question was answered by examining bivariate correlations for scale scores and item ratings on the *Ideas about Child Development Survey* with the *PICCOLO Parent Behavior Importance Survey*.

4. Do students who evaluate their own beliefs and then discuss information about obedience, responsiveness, and spoiling infants increase the importance they ascribe to parental responsiveness with infants? The question was answered by testing the difference between pretest and posttest summary scores and ratings on the *PICCOLO Parent Behavior Importance Survey*, using a paired *t* test and a repeated measures ANOVA to compare the course sections.

5. Do students who participated in this study decrease their fears of spoiling



children? This question was answered by testing the difference between pretest and posttest summary scores and ratings on the *Ideas about Child Development Survey*, using a paired *t* test and a repeated measures ANOVA to compare the course sections.

6. Do students who participated in this study decrease their attitudes about parenting that emphasize obedience? This question was answered by testing the difference between pretest and posttest summary scores and ratings on the *Parenting Attitudes (Modernity) Survey*, using a paired *t* test and a repeated measures ANOVA to compare the course sections.

7. Do students who reported a high level of symptoms of depression on the *Center for Epidemiological Studies--Depression* scale show less change in their attitudes after participating in this study? This question was answered by using the standard cutoff for scores indicating high risk for depression and then examining pretest and posttest changes within the high and low depression groups, using a paired *t* and a repeated measures ANOVA to compare the course sections.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Data for this study were collected by surveying students in two sections of an undergraduate course at Utah State University: FCHD 1500: *Human Development Across the Lifespan*. A pretest was given to both sections of students prior to classroom instruction. Section one received instruction regarding attachment theory. The second section received instruction regarding the role of parental responsiveness in the development of secure attachment and the developmental implications of relational attachments in addition to the instruction in attachment theory. Analyses of the data were done upon completion of the data collection procedures, and only participants who provided at least some pretest and posttest data were included in the analyses. This chapter will review the results from the analyses. First, the general analytical approach, measures of central tendency, and measurement reliability will be reported. Then each research question will be discussed in relation to the results of the analyses.

#### **Data Description and Analysis**

Measures of central tendency (means and standard deviations) were calculated for each research variable (Table 2). All results were considered reliable when alpha levels of single construct scales reached .60 or greater. Various statistical analyses were used to address the research questions. Bivariate correlations were used to determine the associations of students' attitudes regarding spoiling children, child obedience, and parental responsiveness. Paired *t* tests were used to test changes in attitudes before and

Table 2

*Descriptives of the Research Variables*

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviations	Cronbach's alpha
Pretest attitudes					
Spoiling children attitudes	1.00	2.90	2.13	.31	.64
Child obedience attitudes	1.29	3.14	2.24	.35	.66
Parent responsiveness attitudes	2.57	5.00	4.03	.61	.85
Depressive symptoms	.00	48.00	13.02	8.08	.89
Posttest attitudes					
Spoiling children attitudes	1.00	3.00	2.00	.33	.64
Child obedience attitudes	1.00	3.29	2.22	.36	.61
Parent responsiveness attitudes	2.43	5.00	4.2	.60	.89
Depressive symptoms	.00	56.00	11.53	9.80	.92

after attachment instruction. Independent *t* tests were calculated to test for pretest and posttest differences between Section 1 students and Section 2 students. Two-way repeated measure ANOVAs were calculated to examine group differences between depressed and non-depressed students, and between class sections in changes in attitudes. Results of these analyses provided information that address the research questions. Generally, only statistically significant results are reported.

### **Research Questions**

Results of the statistical analysis to address each of the research questions discussed in Chapter III will be reported in this section. The results of the statistical analyses will be described in text and tables.

**Research Question 1: Do Students Believe that Infants Can be Spoiled with too Much Physical Contact or Care?**

The question regarding students' attitudes towards spoiling an infant if they have too much physical contact or responsive care was examined by analyzing the attitudes based on their pretest responses to the *Ideas About Child Development Survey*. Responses were recoded so that high scores reflected stronger beliefs that babies can be spoiled by too much care. Items 1, 3, 8, and 9 were eliminated from examination to allow more cohesiveness in the measure, and Items 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 were retained for internal consistency provided by Cronbach's alpha of .64. The student responses were averaged across items rated on a 1 to 4 scale, and scores ranged from 1, meaning the student strongly disagreed that a baby could be spoiled with too much physical contact and responsive care to 4, meaning the student strongly agreed that a baby could be spoiled by too much care. The mean score was 2.13,  $SD = .31$ , meaning that the students in this sample agreed slightly more than they disagreed that a baby can be spoiled with too much physical contact or responsive care. The key item that emphasized spoiling infants by comforting them was, "Picking up a 3-month-old every time they cry will spoil them," with which 29% of students agreed somewhat or strongly; and, "The more you comfort crying babies by holding and talking to them, the more you spoil them," with which 16% of students agreed somewhat or strongly. Another item of particular interest was the statement that "spanking is an acceptable form of discipline that helps children learn self-control," with which 19% of these students agreed.

**Research Question 2: Are Students Who Emphasize Obedience More Concerned about Spoiling Infants?**

Student attitudes toward the importance of child obedience were examined by analyzing their pretest responses to questions selected from the Parenting Attitudes (Modernity) Survey. Items 1 and 9 were eliminated from examination to allow more cohesiveness in the measure, as indicated by internal consistency index provided by Chronbach's alpha of .66. The students' responses, averaged across items rated on a 1 to 4 scale, ranged from 1, meaning that students strongly disagreed that children should always be obedient, to 4, meaning that students agreed that children should always be obedient. The students' responses to the survey averaged 2.24,  $SD = .35$ , meaning that students agreed slightly more than they disagreed that children should always be obedient. Research Question 2 was addressed by correlating the obedience emphasis score with the spoiling anxiety score. At the pretest, students who rated obedience as important were more likely to agree "you can spoil an infant,"  $r = .18, p = .01$ . Of the individual items in the spoiling measure, the only individual items that were significantly correlated with the obedience emphasis scores was the item stating that "spanking children as a regular form of punishment helps children develop a better sense of self control,"  $r = .23, p = .00$ , and the item saying that "comforting crying babies by holding and talking to them will spoil them,"  $r = .23, p = .00$ .

**Research Question 3: Are Students Concerned about Spoiling Infants Less Likely to Value Parenting Responsiveness?**

Student attitudes towards the importance of parent responsiveness were examined

by analyzing their pretest responses to selected questions related to responsiveness on the *PICCOLO Parenting Behavior Importance Ratings* survey. No items were eliminated from this measure because high internal consistency was indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of .85. Research Question 3 was addressed by correlating the responsiveness value score with the spoiling infants anxiety score. The students' responses to the survey and ranged from 1, meaning students believed that responsiveness was not important to 5, meaning that students believed that parent responsiveness was very important, and averaged 4.03,  $SD = .61$ , indicating that they believed that parental responsiveness was important. At the pretest, students who rated responsiveness as more important were less likely to agree that you can spoil an infant,  $r = -.22, p = .00$ . Of the individual items in the spoiling infants anxiety measure, the only single items that were significantly correlated with the responsiveness value score were the items suggesting that spanking is an acceptable form of discipline,  $r = -.16, p = .02$ ; that a 12-month-old knows right from wrong,  $r = -.19, p = .11$ ; that if you pick up a 3-month-old every time they cry they will become spoiled,  $r = -.18, p = .01$ ; and that 3-year-olds should be expected to sit still for 1 hour,  $r = -.21, p = .00$ .

#### **Research Question 4: Did Students Who Participated in This Study Change Their Beliefs about Responsiveness?**

Question 4 was examined using a paired  $t$  test to examine changes in students' attitudes toward the importance of parental responsiveness. The differences between pretest and posttest mean scores indicated that students' beliefs regarding parental responsiveness changed after course instruction. The average ratings of the

responsiveness items, on a 1 to 5 scale, increased from an average pretest score of *Mean* = 4.03, *SD* = .61, to an average posttest score of *Mean* = 4.20, *SD* = .61, and the change was statistically significant, *paired t* = -4.63, *p* = .00. In Section 1, students increased their responsiveness ratings from an average pretest score of *Mean* = 3.84, *SD* = .59 to an average posttest score of *Mean* = 4.07, *SD* = .60, and the change was statistically significant, *paired t* = -.3.68, *p* = .00. In Section 2, students increased their responsiveness ratings from an average pretest score of *Mean* = 4.13, *SD* = .60 to an average posttest score of *Mean* = 4.27, *SD* = .60, and the change was statistically significant, *paired t* = -3.06, *p* = .00. The interaction of the within-group change and the between-group course sections was tested using a mixed model ANOVA but was not statistically significant.

**Research Question 5: Did Students Who Participated in This Study Decrease Their Fears of Spoiling Children?**

Question 5 was examined using paired *t* tests to examine changes in students' attitudes toward the possibility of spoiling an infant by providing comfort and care. The average ratings of the spoiling items, on a 1 to 4 scale, decreased from an average pretest score of *Mean* = 2.13, *SD* = .35, to an average posttest score of *Mean* = 2.00, *SD* = .33, and the change was statistically significant, *paired t* = 3.88, *p* = .00. In Section 1, students decreased their spoiling ratings from an average pretest score of *Mean* = 2.14, *SD* = .27, to an average posttest score of *Mean* = 2.03, *SD* = .32, and the change was statistically significant, *paired t* = .64, *p* = .00. In Section 2, students decreased their spoiling ratings from an average pretest score of *Mean* = 2.13, *SD* = .33, to an average

posttest score of  $Mean = 1.98$ ,  $SD = .33$ , and the change was statistically significant  $paired t = 5.61$ ,  $p = .00$ . The interaction of the within-group change and the between-group course sections was tested using a mixed model ANOVA but was not statistically significant.

**Research Question 6: Did Students Who Participated in This Study Decrease Their Attitudes about Parenting That Emphasize Obedience?**

Question 6 was examined using *paired t* tests to examine changes in students' attitudes toward the importance of children's obedience. The average ratings of the obedience items, on a 1 to 4 scale, decreased from an average pretest score of  $Mean = 2.24$ ,  $SD = .35$ , to an average posttest score of  $Mean = 2.22$ ,  $SD = .36$ , but the change was not statistically significant. In Section 1, students decreased their obedience ratings from an average pretest score of  $Mean = 2.21$ ,  $SD = .34$ , to an average posttest score of  $Mean = 2.20$ ,  $SD = .37$ , but the change was not statistically significant. In Section 2, students decreased their obedience ratings from an average pretest score of  $Mean = 2.25$ ,  $SD = .36$ , to an average posttest score of  $Mean = 2.23$ ,  $SD = .35$ , but again, the change was not statistically significant. The interaction of the within-group change and the between-group course sections was tested using a mixed model ANOVA but was not statistically significant.



**Research Question 7: Did Students Who Reported a High Level of Symptoms of Depression Show Less Change in Their Attitudes After Participating in This Study?**

The question regarding the influence of depression on changes in attitudes was examined by analyzing student reports of depressive symptoms in the *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression* scale. Questions 4, 8, 12, and 16 were reversed coded and congruency of the measure was indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of .89. The cut-off score of 12 indicated probable clinical depression and included about 2 of every 5 undergraduate students (41%) who participated in this study. The effect of depression on changes in student beliefs about parental responsiveness, child obedience, and spoiling infants were examined by testing the interaction of the within-group change and the between-group depression categories in a mixed model ANOVA, but the results were not statistically significant. Furthermore, students in the depression category did not differ from other students in attitudes about spoiling, obedience and responsiveness of children.

**Additional Analyses**

Additional analyses were conducted to address student characteristics of age and gender that could have affected their attitudes. Attitudes about spoiling were related to age, both at pretest,  $r = -.22, p = .001$ , and at posttest,  $r = -.18, p = .006$ , indicating that younger students had more anxiety about spoiling children. None of the other attitude measures were related to age. The only difference by gender was that at the posttest, female students put less emphasis on obedience than male students,  $t(229) = 2.08, p = .04$ . Depressive symptoms were unrelated to gender or age. Only 10% of the students

enrolled were parents so analyses comparing parents with nonparents were not conducted.

### **Summary**

The results of this study showed associations among students' attitudes about spoiling infants, child obedience, and parental responsiveness, and also showed how these attitudes changed from before instruction to after instruction. Students expressed attitudes that children could be spoiled by too much care and that both child obedience and parental responsiveness were important. Students who valued obedience more and responsiveness less were more likely to agree that infants and children can be spoiled by too much care. After instruction regarding attachment and the role of parental responsiveness in social-emotional development, students decreased their concerns about spoiling infants and increased their value of parental responsiveness. They did not, however, change their beliefs about the importance of child obedience. Additional instruction made no significant differences in student belief changes. In addition, depressive symptoms seemed to have little influence on the changing beliefs of students after instruction.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study will be summarized in the following sections and connections will be made to previous research findings. This study was designed to contribute to the body of literature regarding parenting and parenting practices by examining the beliefs of undergraduate students likely to be future parents or practitioners working with parents. Specifically, it addressed the notion that young adults believe that infants can be spoiled regardless of the research that suggests the contrary. Pretest responses showed that although undergraduate students believe infants can be spoiled by too much care and place a strong emphasis on child obedience; they also believe that parent responsiveness to children's needs is important. Furthermore, students' beliefs about spoiling infants were related to their values about parenting. Students were more likely to believe that infants and young children could be spoiled if they also placed more emphasis on the importance of child obedience and less value on the importance of parental responsiveness.

The results of this study indicate that instructional knowledge can change students' beliefs regarding parenting practices. Classroom instruction regarding attachment theory had a positive impact on students' attitudes in posttest results. Students were less likely on the posttest than on the pretest survey to agree that babies can be spoiled with too much attention or responsiveness. However, posttest results indicated that students' belief that obedience is imperative to parent-child relationships did not change after instruction. One explanation for this is that Utah State University's

predominant religion is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the basic beliefs in this church's theology is the importance of obedience to higher authority.

Parents are taught to teach their children correct principles and children are expected to obey. Religious affiliation was not asked in the demographic survey. It would be of interest to include this in future studies.

The results do not support an additional effect of supplemental instruction applying the instructional content regarding attachment theory and research to romantic relationships, a topic of interest to many undergraduate students. Students who participated in the study were in two sections of the same course. The Section 1 and Section 2 classes of students had nearly identical demographic characteristics. The difference between the sections was only in the instructional component of the study. Both Section 1 and Section 2 were given a lecture regarding attachment theory presented by the same lecturer. In addition, Section 2 was presented with supplemental lecture material, applicable to their current lives, regarding outcomes of secure attachment in infancy on future romantic relationships in early adulthood. The only outcome difference between Section 1 and Section 2 was the outcome of discipline. Section 2, with the information regarding future implications, was less likely to consider spanking as an acceptable method of discipline in the posttest results. Prior to the posttest, both sections had similar beliefs regarding spanking as an acceptable form of discipline.

The pretest surveys revealed that nearly 42% students reported signs of depressive symptomology. The researcher expected that these students would show the least amount of change in attitudes from pretest to posttest because perspective-taking could be more difficult when a distressed person is presented new information that could foster stronger

interpersonal relationships. Because previous studies have determined that depression of the mother is a factor that may impede the formation of secure attachments between mother and infant (Crockenberg & Smith, 2002); this was an important individual factor to consider. Nevertheless, when students with more depressive symptoms were examined separately, however, results indicated that they changed their attitudes after instruction no less than students with fewer depressive symptoms.

This study contributes to our understanding about how young adults, as emerging parents, view parenting in regards to spoiling infants, child obedience, and the importance of responsive parenting behaviors. Second, this study demonstrates a better understanding of how teaching methods can impact the attitudes of students. After class instruction, students' attitudes changed regarding the likelihood of spoiling and the value of responsive parenting behaviors, but did not change regarding the importance of child obedience. The second section of students with enhanced instruction did not show significantly greater changes of attitudes. The differences between pretest and posttest means were slightly greater for this group, but the difference was not statistically significant, indicating that students needed only basic information with little application to their current lives, to change their beliefs. Third, results indicated that students who reported of symptoms of depression were no more or less likely to change their beliefs, so symptoms of psychological depression among students did not seem to interfere with their ability to gain from information about social-emotional development.

Parent educators and practitioners working with parents of infants and young children have the ability to foster secure attachments by supporting parental responsiveness. They can instruct parents that responsiveness does not lead to spoiling

but to attachment security. By contrast, a spoiled child is one who has been reinforced for inappropriate behaviors and is given their way with excessive demands, especially during tantrums (McIntosh, 1989). This is simply not the same thing as a child's sense of security and trust in a caregiver because of responsive caregiving. Responsiveness to infant cues, communication, and emotional expressions, especially in infancy, does not spoil children.

### **Associations to Empirical Literature**

Students in sections 1 and 2 of FCHD 1500: *Development across the Lifespan*, were presented the opportunity to reflect on and report their attitudes and beliefs prior to course instruction regarding attachment theory. A wide variety of questions were asked to determine the beliefs and attitudes of these students. Questions were adapted from research measures primarily regarding spoiling infants, child obedience, parental responsiveness, and depression symptoms.

Questions regarding anxiety about spoiling infants tied into the literature regarding those infants who are responded to when they show signs of distress, form a more secure attachment and learn to interpret the world as a safe place for exploration (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This study measured how well undergraduate students understood the principles of attachment theory and the role of caregiver responsiveness in the formation of secure attachments. The change in attitudes between pretest and posttest surveys indicated that students who were given information regarding attachment theory were less likely to believe that infants can be spoiled.

Obedience emphasis was an area of interest. There was little change in students' emphasis on child obedience. Research by Schaeffer and Edgerton (1985) examined authoritarian parenting that demanded high levels of obedience or insisted on direct rule over children's behavior. This study could be an indication that those students who strongly believed that obedience is an important component in the parent-child relationship became more unchangeable in their responses as they pondered this over time. More emphasis on future studies could be placed on the importance of authoritative parenting and the positive outcomes in this parenting style compared with a more authoritarian controlling style.

Responsiveness values were measured using the *PICCOLO Parenting Behavior Importance Survey*. This instrument was designed to be used by practitioners in the field of child development. It was used in this study to identify the value that students who may eventually become practitioners, placed on the role of responsive caregiving. As indicated in the results section, students who were given lecture material regarding spoiling infants then placed more emphasis on responsive parenting. Students in the second section, who received supplemental instruction, did not place any higher value on responsiveness after instruction than those students in the first section.

As outlined in the text, depressed mothers often cite the fear of spoiling infants as a reason to justify the lack of visual, verbal, and physical contacts with their infants (Smyke et al., 2002). This could indicate that unresponsiveness parenting could be due to depression interfering with understanding positive parenting behaviors. The lack of responsiveness that depressed mothers have been shown to give to their infants is the reason that the depression scale was added to this study. The *Center for Epidemiological*

*Studies Depression Scale* was used in this study to measure the level of depressive symptoms that students in this study were exhibiting. Students who indicated high depressive symptomology, however, were no less likely to change their attitudes toward spoiling infants after instruction. Perhaps attitudes can change regardless of depression, but depression might affect whether or not people can put attitude change into action by changing their behaviors.

### **Limitations**

This study provides valuable insight into the attitudes of college-age students regarding parenting and specifically, their attitudes toward spoiling infants. However, there are various issues that could present concern when generalizing to the larger population. The first is the young age of the students. Seventy-five percent of the participants were either college freshman or sophomores. The mean age is 21. Only 10% of the sample were parents. This could imply that this group of students had little time to explore their perceptions of parenting and the implications that parenting relationships will have on the future outcomes of a child. One or two class periods were little time to expect an overwhelming outcome of attitudinal change in long-held beliefs.

A second limitation is the exploratory framework of the design. The research questions stated that all associations between variables would be explored. However, it was noted that if all variables and possible outcomes were explored this would have increased the probability of inflated significant results and would have increased the possibility of having a Type I error. Future research could focus on additional hypothesis testing suggested by this study.



Another limitation was that this study was conducted at a University in the western United States with predominantly Caucasian subjects. The predominant religion of the students at this university is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This region and religion could have an impact on ideology of strict adherence to parental limitations and obedience. This study did not question students about their religious background or religious or cultural beliefs, but these beliefs could have an impact on attitudes about parenting in general and children's obedience in particular.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should focus on the importance of guiding future parents on parenting outcomes with an awareness of their values and beliefs about parenting. The influence of long-term stability in secure attachments on the life of future generations could be studied as a sociological phenomenon and the impact to society explored. In order to study the impact of instruction on attitudes toward spoiling infants in a longitudinal design, it would be valuable to test students not only after instruction, but also after they become parents to determine whether or not their stated attitudes have long-lasting effect.

A crucial issue, then, is how students will transmit their mental representations of behaviors they fear will spoil infants to their future parenting practices. As shown in the demographic table, the majority of students in this study were not parents and this may have affected their attitudes toward obedience, spoiling, and parenting responsiveness. This study did support the hypothesis of the importance of direct instruction and the effect it can have on shaping young adult attitudes toward parenting. What is not

indicated is the length of time students will hold on to these beliefs. Future studies would have to be conducted to determine whether or not the change in attitude had a longitudinal effect that could influence students when they become parents.

Another promising line of research is the application of parenting research to parenting education. A longitudinal study could determine how parenting beliefs prior to the transition to parenthood affect parenting practices. If prior beliefs influence future parenting behaviors, this would argue for preventative practices to promoting positive parenting beliefs before parenthood versus interventions to change parent practices during parenting. Applicable curricula regarding parent responsiveness and fears of spoiling infants could be applied to regular education. In addition to testing the students after they become parents, a follow-up study could be conducted that explores the employment of these students after graduation. The students who enter helping fields could be tested regarding their attitudes toward spoiling and parenting behaviors in general. Another hypothesis could be made regarding whether their attitudes affect their parenting education efforts with their clients.

There is a question of whether students would have shown even more change by the end of the course after receiving further information regarding parenting styles. Parenting styles such as authoritative and authoritarian parenting as well as other information concerning child development were presented in lectures and materials throughout the 13-week course. This information about parenting with children, in combination with previous information about the formation of attachment in infancy, may have helped students understand responsiveness to infants as a precursor to the authoritative style of parenting in which children's needs are taken into account and the

development of self-regulation and understanding of behavior limits is supported (Baumrind, 1971; Schaeffer & Edgerton, 1985).

### **Conclusions**

In summary, this study was designed to examine student beliefs about parenting practices and children's early development. Specifically, it aimed to test the notion that young adults believe that infants can be spoiled regardless of the research that suggests the contrary. This study achieved this objective by showing that, on average, undergraduate students believe that infants can be spoiled and should be obedient, but that parents should also be responsive to their children's needs. This study also gives a better understanding of how teaching methods can impact the attitudes of students. This study supported the hypothesis that direct instruction can affect young adult attitudes toward parenting by showing that students' beliefs about infants and parenting may be changed by educating students about attachment theory and the large body of research linking responsive parenting during infancy to positive child development outcomes. Although the results were modest, they suggest that teaching young adults the basic principles of attachment theory has the potential to influence future generations through more supportive parenting and more positive developmental outcomes.

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A.**

**Approval from Institutional Review Board at Utah State University**



USU Assurance: FWA#00003308

Protocol # 2529

1/6/2010

SPO #:  
AES #:UTA00

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Lori Roggman  
Kathleen Westover

FROM: Kim Corbin-Lewis, IRB Chair *Kim Corbin-Lewis*  
True M. Fox, IRB Administrator *True M. Fox*

SUBJECT: Do Attitudes About Spoiling Affect Attitudes Regarding What Infants Need  
for Early Social Emotional Development

Your proposal has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board and is approved under exemption #2.

- There is no more than minimal risk to the subjects.  
There is greater than minimal risk to the subjects.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file. **Any change in the methods/objectives of the research affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.** Injuries or any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the IRB Office (797-1821).

The research activities listed below are exempt based on the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human research subjects, 45 CFR Part 46, as amended to include provisions of the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, June 18, 1991.

2. Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through the identifiers linked to the subjects; and (b) any disclosure of human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

**Appendix B.**

**Letter of Information Approved by Institutional Review Board  
at Utah State University**



USU IRB Approved: Jan. 6, 2010; Page 2 of 2  
Approval Terminates: 01/05/2011  
Protocol Number: 2529  
IRB Password Protected per IRB Administrator

## LETTER OF INFORMATION

### Do Attitudes About Spoiling Affect Attitudes Regarding What Infants Need for Early Social Emotional Development

**Introduction/ Purpose** Professor Lori Roggman in the Department of Family and Human Development at Utah State University (USU) and Kathleen Westover, are conducting a research study to find out more about undergraduate students attitudes regarding spoiling and parental responsiveness of infants. You have been asked to take part because you are enrolled in the course FCHD 1500. There will be approximately 150 participants at this site. There will be approximately 300 total participants in this research.

**Procedures** If you agree to be in this research study, you will be asked to complete:

1. Pretest answers to survey questions. Approximate time 20 minutes.
2. Three in class hours of course instruction.
3. Posttest answers to survey questions. Approximate time 20 minutes.

**New Findings** During the course of this research study, you will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research, or new alternatives to participation that might cause you to change your mind about continuing in the study. If new information is obtained that is relevant or useful to you, or if the procedures and/or methods change at any time throughout this study, your consent to continue participating in this study will be obtained again.

**Risks** There is minimal risk in participating in this research.

**Benefits** There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. The investigator, however, may learn more about the association between course instruction and change in attitudes or beliefs of the students.

**Explanation & offer to answer questions** Kaelin Olsen has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach Professor Roggman at (435) 797-1545

**Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence** Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence or loss of benefits. You may be withdrawn from this study if the participant is under the age of 18.

**Confidentiality** Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only Dr. Roggman and Kathleen Westover will have access to the data which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked room. Personal, identifiable information will be kept for the purpose of receiving course credit.



Department of Family, Consumer, and  
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Old Main Hill  
Logan UT 84322-2905  
Telephone: (435) 797-1501



USU IRB Approved: Jan. 6, 2010; Page 2 of 2  
Approval Terminates: 01/05/2011  
Protocol Number: 2529  
IRB Password Protected per IRB Administrator

### LETTER OF INFORMATION

#### **Do Attitudes About Spoiling Affect Attitudes Regarding What Infants Need for Early Social Emotional Development**

**IRB Approval Statement** The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any pertinent questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email [irb@usu.edu](mailto:irb@usu.edu). If you have a concern or complaint about the research and you would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator to obtain information or to offer input.

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435-797-1545  
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**Appendix C.**  
**Participant Demographic Survey**

**Participant Demographic Survey**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Declared Major/Minor \_\_\_\_\_

For the following questions please indicate answer by marking the appropriate response.

Class Section: 1\_\_\_\_\_ 2\_\_\_\_\_

Gender:

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Education post high school, current status:

Freshman \_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore \_\_\_\_\_ Junior \_\_\_\_\_ Senior \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate (2<sup>nd</sup> BS, MS, or PHD) \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity:



Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_ African American \_\_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_\_

Native American \_\_\_\_\_ Other/no response \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status:

Married/Cohabitation \_\_\_\_\_ Single \_\_\_\_\_

Parental Status:

Parent \_\_\_\_\_ Nonparent \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D.**

**PICCOLO Responsiveness Importance Survey**

### PICCOLO Responsiveness Importance Ratings

Please rate the following descriptions of parent-child interaction for how important they are in supporting children's social-emotional development.

#	Description	Not Important	1	2	3	4	Very Important
8	Parent pays attention to what child is doing	1	2	3	4	5	
9	Parent changes pace or activity to meet child's interests or needs	1	2	3	4	5	
10	Parent is flexible about child's change of activities or interests	1	2	3	4	5	
11	Parent follows what child is trying to do	1	2	3	4	5	
12	Parent responds to child's emotions	1	2	3	4	5	
13	Parent looks at child when child talks or makes sounds	1	2	3	4	5	
14	Parent replies to child's words or sounds	1	2	3	4	5	