

Parental sensitivity in a play task: Associations with preschooler psychological symptoms

Abby Chaney, Taylor Corbin, Sierra Workman, Brandi Stone, & Shari L. Kidwell

Department of Psychology, Morehead State University
Research Mentor: Shari L. Kidwell



Introduction

- ❖ **Parental Sensitivity** is defined as a parent's ability to notice a child's signals, interpret them correctly, and respond to them promptly (Mesman & Emman, 2013).
- ❖ Sensitivity is a dyadic concept, as it involves determining how the child responds to the parent's behavior (Crittenden, 1981; Mesmen & Emman, 2013).
- ❖ High sensitivity has been found to protect children from consequences of parental and family adversity (Gerlach et al, 2022).
- ❖ **Children's Internalizing Symptoms** are directed inward and can consist of withdrawal, sadness, anxiety, and somatic complaints.
- ❖ Anxiety and somatic complaints appear to be influenced by interpersonal relationships (Bouvette-Turcot, 2017; Liu, Chen, & Lewis, 2011).
- ❖ Symptoms show an inverse relationship with social skills and emotional intelligence (Olivier, Morin, Langlois, Tardif-Grenier, & Archambault, 2020).
- ❖ **Children's Externalizing Symptoms** are directed out toward their environment and can consist of aggression and rule-breaking behavior.
- ❖ Decreased maternal support has been found to predicted an increase in child externalizing symptoms (Coe, Davies, & Sturge-Apple, 2020; Leclere et al, 2014).
- ❖ Children who exhibit severe externalizing symptoms show poor functioning across multiple life domains at age 18 (Wertz, 2018).

Hypothesis

Parents who are more sensitive to their child's emotional cues will have children with lower internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

Methods

- ❖ Our research involves 20 families.
 - ❖ 4.5 is the average age of the children, consisting of 8 females and 12 males.
- ❖ Sensitivity was measured as follows:
 - ❖ We used a free play ring toss activity and observed both parental and child behavior.
 - ❖ We used the toddler version of the 15-point **Care Index** to code parental sensitivity (Crittenden, 2006/2016).
- ❖ The **Puppet Interview** was developed to collect the children's self-report of internalizing/externalizing symptoms. Measelle & colleagues (1998) informed the procedure.
 - ❖ Children were interviewed using two puppets, the puppets made forty-eight positive/negative statements about themselves, and children were asked which puppet they identified with.
- ❖ The **Child Behavior Checklist** (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) consists of 113 questions scored on a 3-point Likert scale. These questions were answered by the parents to record their child's symptoms.



Results

- ❖ The TCI scores ranged from 3.5 to 11, with a mean of 6.6 and standard deviation of 2.1.
- ❖ There was a significant negative correlation between CBCL internalizing symptoms and sensitivity as measured by the TCI.
- ❖ There was a significant negative correlation between CBCL externalizing symptoms and sensitivity as measured by the TCI.
- ❖ No significant correlation was found between sensitivity as measured by the TCI and the children's self report measure.

Risk Level	Scores
Adequate	7-14
Inept	5-6
High Risk	0-4

	CBCL Internalizing	CBCL Externalizing	Puppet Internalizing	Puppet Externalizing
TCI (sensitivity)	-.584**	-.461*	-.228	-.207

** Correlation is significant at .01, *Correlation is significant at .05

Discussion

Results and Relevancy

- ❖ We have partial support for our hypothesis.
- ❖ Parents who reported more child externalizing and internalizing symptoms displayed lower sensitivity with their children.
- ❖ This is consistent with research on the importance of sensitivity.
- ❖ However, parenting quality has been associated with child well-being in many studies; sensitivity, as defined by Ainsworth, has been far less studied.
- ❖ This research is relevant to parent and child intervention.

Limitations

- ❖ Children's cognitive development may have limited their capacity to self-report symptoms.
- ❖ Cannot conclude a causal relationship.
- ❖ Our non-significant findings may be attributed to our relatively small sample size.

Future Research

- ❖ Complete coding for all 54 families

Selected References

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