

research snapshot

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Responsiveness Is an Important Quality of Mothers

What is this research about?

The quality of the relationship between a mother and her infant is extremely important. It shapes an infant's social, emotional, and cognitive development. More specifically, the consistent reactions of a mother to her child, and vice versa, maintain the infant's ideal level of emotion and attention. These social interactions can be called "affect mirroring". In affect mirroring infants share affective states with their mothers. Classical theories of cognitive development suggest that at birth, infants are neither social nor cognitive beings. They slowly learn to distinguish between self, other people, and inanimate objects during the first two years of life. At this time, they develop expectations about the behaviour of people and recognize that people have intentions. In contrast, recent research has shown that from two months, infants treat people as social; they smile, talk, and imitate actions. Research also suggests that infants of non-depressed mothers – mothers who are responsive to their infants' affective state are smarter and more social than those whose mothers are less responsive.

What you need to know:

Mothers who consistently respond to their children's emotions, through mirroring, have smarter, more socially competent children.

What did the researcher do?

Maria Legerstee, a Professor at York University, tried to find out if mothers, who affectively respond to their children's emotions through mirroring infant emotions, have smarter, more social children. She looked at 70 infants in different age groups, up to ten months old. (The mothers of these infants were screened for mood disorders or postpartum depression.) Her goal was to find out:

If during the first year of life

- infants relate emotions to people's actions
- direct people's attention to object through pointing
- use prelinguistic gestures to communicate

What did the researcher find?

Professor Legerstee found that although contingent responding and imitation draws the attention of infants to their mothers, infants prefer maternal affective attuned responsiveness. Affective communication lays the foundation for social awareness. Legerstee's research shows that a mother's affective responsiveness is an important tool to promote a child's prelinguistic and intentional communication at 3, 5, 7, and 10 months. It also showed that the quality of social interaction between a mother and her child has an effect on primitive desire reasoning of the child. In other words, the infants of highly responsive mothers could figure out what people want or desire sooner than infants of less attuned mothers.

How can you use this research?

This study shows that actions which successfully improve mother-child relations early in life can lead to smarter, more socially competent children later on. However, more research is needed on theories of mind and attachment which have clinical implications.

About the Researcher

Maria Legerstee is Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University. This Research Snapshot is based on a number of her studies. Several of her publications can be accessed online at www.psych.yorku.ca/legerstee/publications.html

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Keywords

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