

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Developmental Correlates and Predictors of Emotional Availability in Mother_Child Interaction: A Longitudinal Study From Infancy to Middle Childhood

Easterbrooks, M. A., Bureau, J. F., & Lyons-Ruth, K. (2012). Developmental correlates and predictors of emotional availability in mother_child interaction: A longitudinal study from infancy to middle childhood. *Development and Psychopathology*, 24(1), 65-78. doi:10.1017/S0954579411000666

SUMMARY: Maternal emotional availability (i.e., nonhostility, sensitivity, and nonintrusiveness) is important for children's functioning. Mothers and children were observed and tested in infancy and middle childhood to assess maternal interactive behaviors and child outcomes. Results revealed an association between maternal emotional availability and children's functioning, and a continuity of mother-child interaction from infancy to middle childhood.

KEY FINDINGS:

- More maternal emotional availability was associated with less children's controlling and disorganized attachment behaviors in middle childhood.
- A greater level of maternal emotional availability was also associated with fewer behavioral problems in school, and fewer depressive symptoms in middle childhood.
- Maternal emotional availability in middle childhood was predicted by early mother-infant interaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate new parents on the importance of early parent-infant relationship to children's functioning
- Work closely with military families and offer them support on how to deal with children's problem behaviors

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Reach out to military families and investigate if they have any concerns about parenting
- Develop workshops for military parents to foster secure parent-child attachment in military families

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness of the importance of parental emotional availability on military children's development
- Continue to support programs that improve the parenting skills of military parents

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Participants were referred by health or social service agencies because of concerns about the quality of parental care, or recruited from the community.
- Families were assessed twice: in infancy and in middle childhood; 43 of the initial 76 families completed the second assessment.
- Assessments were conducted at home and in the laboratory through questionnaires and observations, and the assessments included mothers' emotion availability, children's attachment behavior and behavioral problems, quality of mother-child interaction, and mother and child's depressive symptoms.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 43 mother-child dyads (19 of the children were girls) with low family income.
- The mother-child dyads were seen in infancy (12-18 months of age) and in middle childhood (7-8 years of age); the average age of the children when they were first seen was not provided in the article.
- Most (80%) of the children were White, and 51% of the mothers were single parents.

LIMITATIONS

- Families that did not participate in the seven-year follow-up were among the most vulnerable ones in infancy (i.e., had been referred for mother-infant interaction problems), therefore the results may not represent the entire sample.
- All participants were at psychosocial risk (i.e., poor mother-infant connection) and were low-income, so the results may be hard to generalize to the general population.
- The causality of the relationship between maternal emotional availability and middle childhood outcomes is not clear because of the design of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effects of both paternal and maternal emotional availability on children's functioning
- Increase the retention rate of the participants so that more vulnerable families could stay in the study
- Increase the diversity of the participants in terms of socioeconomic status so that the results are more representative of the general population

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>