

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## A Latent Growth Examination of Fear Development in Infancy: Contributions of Maternal Depression and the Risk for Toddler Anxiety

Gartstein, M. A., Bridgett, D. J., Rothbart, M. K., Robertson, C., Iddins, E., Ramsay, K., & Schlect, S. (2010). A latent growth examination of fear development in infancy: Contributions of maternal depression and the risk for toddler anxiety. *Developmental Psychology*, 46(3), 651-668. doi:10.1037/a0018898

**SUMMARY:** The authors evaluated the developmental trajectory of child fearfulness in the first year of life, using parent report (Study 1) and laboratory-based observations (Study 2). The use of laboratory-based observations (Study 2) is of particular importance given lingering concerns regarding the limitations of parent report in the context of temperament assessment as well as extensive research linking maternal depression to potential perceptual distortions and subsequent over-reporting of negative child behaviors and emotional expressions.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Less fearfulness observed earlier in the first year of life gave way to steady increases in fear over time, as evaluated by both mother report and laboratory observations. In addition, infant fear between eight and 12 months of age was a significant predictor of increased toddler anxiety symptoms.
- Relative to male infants, female infants showed steeper increases in fear reactivity over time (Study 1). Although not significant, a similar trend was observed in Study 2.
- More maternal depressive symptoms were linked with steeper increases in infant fearfulness over time. However, maternal depression was not linked to the initial level of infant fearfulness.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate mothers regarding the typical development of fear in their young children and how to best respond to it
- Assist mothers with depression to find sources of help and support while raising young children

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide workshops that aim to help mothers cope with depression and depressive symptoms to prevent non-normative increases in infant fearfulness
- Develop interventions aimed at the parent-child interaction dynamic in an attempt to improve the quality of early social exchanges

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development of preventative programs and interventions for families that may experience depressive symptoms that impact child well-being
- Recommend education for professionals who work with military families regarding the typical development of fear in young children

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## METHODS

- Developmental changes in the fear of young children was assessed at four, six, eight, ten, and twelve months of age through parent survey and laboratory observation in a civilian (nonclinical) sample drawn from communities in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Nevada.
- Participants also provided information regarding maternal mental health symptoms.
- Data were analyzed to determine the normative development of fear in infants and predictors of deviations from that development.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Two hundred and ninety-two mothers (92% White) with four month old infants participated.
- Mothers were between the ages of 20 and 46 years old (M = 30, SD = 5).
- Infants were 50% boys and 50% girls.

## LIMITATIONS

- Additional parent characteristics (e.g., marital satisfaction, socioeconomic challenges, education) were not examined in this study, but may be important in understanding the development of infant fearfulness and risk for early manifestations of anxiety.
- The sample was limited to civilian families in a specific geographic area, which may limit the extent to which the results apply to other populations.
- Prior research suggests that maternal depressive symptoms may have a distorting effect on the caregivers' perceptions of child behavior, which may lead to over-reporting of difficulties when compared to other sources of information.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate the ranges of fearfulness that lead to clinical levels of anxiety problems in order to target early identification of at-risk infants and intervention efforts
- Examine whether negative emotionality in general or a diagnosed mental health disorder play the same role in shaping the growth of infant fear trajectory
- Examine developmental trajectories of additional domains of temperament (e.g., positive emotionality) in conjunction with parent and family characteristics (e.g., marital satisfaction, multiple demographic correlates such as socioeconomic status and education, and emotion regulation attributes)

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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