

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Children's Narrative Representations of Mothers: Their Development and Associations With Child and Mother Adaption

Oppenheim, D., Emde, R. N., & Warren, S. (1997). Children's narrative representations of mothers: Their development and associations with child and mother adaption. *Child Development*, 68(1), 127-138. doi:10.2307/1131930

**SUMMARY:** Parenting behaviors and relationships can have a strong impact on children's well-being. Relationships between four and five year old's behavior, representations of their mothers (i.e., negative, positive, disciplinary), and mother's psychological health were examined. Children with more positive, more disciplinary, and less negative representations of their mothers had fewer behavior problems at both four and five years of age.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Children who represented mothers in their play narratives as more positive, more disciplinary, and less negative had fewer behavior problems at both four and five years of age.
- Children with more negative representations or fewer disciplinary representations of their mothers at four years of age had greater behavior problems at four and five years of age; the associations were not purely a function of mothers' psychological distress.
- Representations of mothers were moderately stable; however, five year olds had fewer negative and more positive and disciplinary representations of mothers than four year olds.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with military organizations that work with families to encourage parents to attend evidence-based parenting education classes
- Educate professionals working with military families about the importance of including parent-child relationship strengthening in parenting programs

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer military parents classes with curricula about the importance of setting reasonable limits and enforcing a small number of clear rules for children
- Provide workshops to build military parents' discipline skills, including alternatives to aggressive discipline

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the use of evidence-based parenting methods of relationship-building and discipline in existing programs for military parents
- Continue to support programs in early childhood development settings that offer parenting training for military families

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## METHODS

- Mothers and children who were part of a large, voluntary child development research database were recruited via phone, with 85% agreeing to participate.
- Children's vocabulary and responses to parenting narratives were assessed at age 55 and 66 months; mothers also completed measures of their psychological health and their child's behavior.
- Children's representations of mothers were based on responses to parent narrative stems and categorized into positive, negative, or disciplinary representations; relationships between child behaviors, child representations of mothers, and mother psychological functioning were examined at four and five years of age.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 51 children, who were 51% female and 55 months old at baseline, and their mothers, who had a median age of 32 years.
- All mothers were White, 62% had completed college, and 42% were employed.
- At baseline, 12% of children were only children, 49% were oldest siblings, and 39% were younger siblings.

## LIMITATIONS

- Parent distress and psychological functioning may have confounded the results since parents rated their own psychological functioning and their child's behavior problems.
- Parents who chose not to participate may have differed in unknown ways (e.g., how busy or overwhelmed they felt) from those who participated.
- No causal conclusions can be drawn without a control group.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a similar study using researchers to code parent behavior in addition to child report of representations
- Explore the impact of family structure (e.g., single-parent families, two-parent families) and the child's representation of other caregivers on the relationship between mother representations and child behavior
- Investigate how children's representations of their mothers impact their long-term well-being (e.g., academic, social, emotional) in middle childhood and adolescence

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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