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Contexts of relations of infant negative emotionality to caregiver's reactivity/sensitivity☆

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine whether and how infant negative emotionality, depression in the caregiver, and marital emotional support are related to the caregiver's reactivity/sensitivity. The central question concerned interaction effects between these risk factors. Furthermore, it was of special interest whether there were interaction effects of infant positive and negative emotionality on the reactivity/sensitivity of the caregiver. Participants were 101 mothers and their healthy 4-month-olds. The infant temperament characteristics were measured by parent report as well as in the laboratory. Caregiver behavior was observed during home visits. Hierarchical regression analyses were computed. Whereas there were no direct associations between either maternal depression or infant negative emotionality and maternal reactivity/sensitivity, the interaction of the two risk factors proved highly significant. Good marital support was directly linked to maternal reactivity/sensitivity. The relevance of positive infant emotionality could not be demonstrated. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Infant temperament; Maternal depression; Marital support; Maternal reactivity; sensitivity; Mother-infant interaction

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades transactional models of development have replaced “nature-nurture” related perspectives, in which the development of personality was considered as either determined by environmental factors or genetic dispositions alone (Sameroff, 1975). There has been growing consensus that the course of development consists of a mutual process in which infant and caregiver constantly influence each other. The infant’s own contribution to his or her development, an aspect that has been neglected for a long time, has now been brought into focus: For example, Belsky’s process model of the determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984) explicitly considers the impact of infant characteristics. In temperament research the notion that particular infant characteristics can have an effect upon the caregiver’s behavior has become a central issue (Bates, 1989; Rothbart, 1989; Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994; Rothbart & Posner, 1985; Thomas & Chess, 1977). Furthermore, in the literature on child and adolescent psychiatry, difficult infant temperament is now regarded as a risk factor for the development of early behavioral problems as well as for the development of inadequate patterns in the initial infant-caregiver relationship (Papoušek & Papoušek, 1990; Rubin, 1993; Rutter, 1989; Warren, Huston, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Zeanah, Boris, & Larrieu, 1997). In spite of these well established assumptions, there is still a lack of systematic knowledge regarding the postulated associations, especially for the time of early infancy (Seifer, Schiller, Sameroff, Resnick, & Riordan, 1996).

More than 10 years ago, Crockenberg (1986) reviewed the existing research in an article that has since been frequently cited. Crockenberg was concerned with the question of whether and how infant temperamental characteristics (specifically negative emotionality or irritability) and patterns of parenting (specifically reactivity/sensitivity) work together and influence each other. Three possible models were presented:

1. Temperamental characteristics directly influence the caregiver’s responses. It is expected that different temperaments elicit distinct patterns of caregiving, e.g., infant irritability causes caregivers to respond in an insensitive manner to the infant’s needs.
2. Temperament influences caregiving only under specific conditions, i.e., it interacts with psychosocial attributes of the caregiver. This means that high irritability of an infant would not lead to decreased reactivity for all mothers, but only in the presence of particular attitudes, dispositions or current life circumstances.
3. Temperamental characteristics are not associated with caregiving at all. However, both classes of variables combine and interact in their effect on infant development. In the sense of “organismic specificity” this means that a difficult baby that happens to be paired with an unresponsive mother will have an unfavorable prognosis whereas the same lack of reactivity towards a child with an easy temperament would not have the same effect.

Crockenberg (1986) reported 16 studies that dealt with associations between infant negative emotionality and maternal reactivity/sensitivity, nine of which yielded support for the notion that high irritability is linked to lower maternal reactivity. Seven, however, suggested the contrary, namely that mothers of highly irritable infants are more positive and show more commitment when interacting with their babies.

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