



Maternal parenting stress and mothers' reports of their infants' mastery motivation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Mastery motivation is a psychological force that stimulates an individual to attempt to master a task that is challenging to him or her. This prospective longitudinal study examined the relationship between maternal stress, using the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, and infant mastery motivation, using the Dimensions of Mastery Questionnaire, for 150 mother–infant pairs assessed at both 6- and 18-months of age. Infants of mothers with elevated stress levels at 6 months tended to show lower mastery motivation at 18 months (standardized beta = $-.46$, $p = .001$). Conversely, infants with lower general competence (standardized beta = $-.24$, $p = .021$) and lower persistence during social interactions with other children (standardized beta = $-.18$, $p = .037$) at 6 months of age had mothers with elevated total stress at 18 months of age. Implications for programs which simultaneously intervene with child and mother are discussed.

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1. Introduction

For children, long-term skill development is dependent on a number of factors. While children's native abilities and the role of environment have received the most attention, equally important, but far less studied, is the intrinsic motivation children possess to master and affect their environment through learning, exploring, and problem solving. This inherent drive, which consists of both affective (e.g. pleasure from learning) and persistence components, is referred to as mastery motivation. When measured in preschoolers (3–5 year-olds), mastery motivation is predictive both of current readiness to learn (Turner & Johnson, 2003; Wise, 2007a) and long-term improvements in mental age and social, communication and daily living skills (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001). Given the critical influence of mastery motivation on childhood development, factors that influence the early development of mastery motivation deserve attention. This report focuses on the effects of one of those influences, parenting stress, on early development of mastery motivation in children at 6 and 18 months of age.

White (1959) was one of the first to challenge psychologists to consider children's behaviors such as play, interests, and exploration as self-initiated efforts intended to have an effect on their environment. He used the term *competence* to refer to a child's capacity to interact effectively with the environment and argued that motivation for competence involved

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discovering the reciprocal effects between the child and the environment – termed *effectance motivation*. While White's work began a dialogue regarding the existence of motivation for competence, he did not offer *how* effectance motivation might be measured.

Almost 20 years later Harter (1978) translated the concept of effectance motivation into researchable hypotheses and measures. While noting that many factors and characteristics of the children themselves likely influence motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation, optimal task challenge levels, and the internalization of self-reward and mastery goals), she also stressed the importance of acknowledging the dependency of infants and children on their primary caretakers as a source of information and feedback (i.e., positive reinforcement and the child's perceived competence) for mastery attempts. She argued that, for optimal development, reinforcement of attempts and successes must begin in early infancy and continue during the first few years of life. Support for the importance of these early interactions came when Yarrow, Klein, Lomonaco, & Morgan (1975) demonstrated that early infant cognitive–motivational scores predicted Stanford-Binet IQ scores at three-and-a-half years of age. In a subsequent study looking specifically at infants' *persistence*, a component of motivation, they (Yarrow, Morgan, Jennings, Harmon, & Gaiter, 1982) found moderately high correlations between motivation scores and cognitive development. These results led them to propose a reciprocal relationship between persistence and competence, noting that infants who persistently try to solve problems might become more competent, derive more satisfaction from working on skills, and would, therefore, be more likely to practice them. In addition to the relationship between motivation and cognition, these findings also highlighted the importance of understanding individual differences in intrinsic motivation.

Although it may be difficult to separate cognition and motivation, Morgan, Harmon, & Maslin-Cole (1990) argued that the assessment of motivation is most appropriate when tasks are developmentally appropriate, moderately challenging, and varied in difficulty. Proposing that effectance motivation, as described by White (1959) and Harter (1978), refers to the broader range of mastery-related behaviors that children engage in during development, they coined the term *mastery motivation* to describe the psychological force that spurs individuals to attempt independently, with focus and persistence, to solve a problem or master a skill or task that they find moderately challenging.

While the concept of effectance motivation originated from the ideas of White (1959), Harter (1978), and Yarrow et al. (1982, 1975), the concept of mastery motivation, described by Morgan et al. (1990) is more clearly defined. Unlike White's (1959) *competence*, which was used to describe what a child could already do, mastery motivation includes a child's *attempts* to solve a problem, regardless of whether completion is successful. Morgan et al. (1990) concept of mastery motivation also includes a child's independent, unassisted attempts to master a task or problem using his or her own resources, persistence (focused behavior to reach a goal or obtain a skill) and attempts at problem solving or skill mastery in order to gain control over the environment.

Morgan et al. (1990) theory describes mastery motivation as a child's motivation to become competent at a task, but they acknowledge characteristics inherent to the tasks that must be considered if one is to accurately measure mastery motivation. First, the task must be at least moderately challenging: If the task is not challenging, there will be nothing to master. Additionally, problems and tasks used to measure mastery motivation must be challenging to a child's own developmental level and, thus, individually challenging, highlighting the individual differences component of mastery motivation.

In summary, Morgan et al. (1990) concept of mastery motivation applies to all domains of behavior, in both the social and inanimate environment. Additionally, they assert that (a) mastery motivation is primarily intrinsic, (b) there are individual differences in mastery motivation due to genetic and environmental factors, and (c) the strength of mastery motivation may vary from one domain of behavior to another. As mastery motivation measured at 1-year of age already predicts later mastery motivation (Marsland, 2005), this report focuses on the early development of mastery motivation from 6- to 18-months of age.

Environmental factors also contribute to child development, and influence parent–child interactions and mastery motivation. While environmental events beyond parent–child interactions may influence the development of mastery motivation (Majnemer, Shevell, Law, Poulin, & Rosenbaum, 2010; van der Pal et al., 2008), Harter (1978) stressed the importance of acknowledging the dependence of the very young child on the primary caretaker. The degree to which the primary caretaker positively responds to infant distress (Young & Hauser-Cram, 2006), provides positive feedback for mastery attempts (Turner & Johnson, 2003), and avoids negative feedback (including interference with attempts at autonomy (Marsland, 2005)) are correlated with the child's level of mastery motivation. For example, in preschool children, parenting style and socioeconomic status are both correlated with school readiness; mastery motivation is a key mediator in this relationship (Wise, 2007b).

Many factors may interfere with the ability of the primary caretaker to support and encourage their developing child. For example, parental distress is associated with mothers reporting their infants as more difficult (Mantymaa, Puura, Luoma, Salmelin, & Tamminen, 2006), and maternal depression (a correlate of stress) is negatively associated with infant persistence, a component of mastery motivation (Redding, Harmon, & Morgan, 1990). A particular type of maternal stress that may impact infant mastery motivation is parenting stress. Parenting stress measures (i.e., Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995)) reflect stressors specific to parenting a particular child including: a child domain reflecting child self-regulation and how easy (or difficult) a child is to manage from the parent's perspective; a parent–child interaction domain reflecting the ability of the child to “reward” the parent and the parent's perception of the child's “acceptability” of the parent; and a parental domain arising from self-perceived competence as a parent, feelings of depression about being a parent, and spousal support in parenting (Morgan, Busch-Rossnagel, Barrett, & Wang, 2009). Parenting stress is correlated with infant temperamental difficulty (Gelfand, Teti, & Fox, 1992), with infant temperament then predictive of mastery motivation (Gelfand et al., 1992;

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