

## Cognitive processes associated with child neglect<sup>☆</sup>

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Received 6 April 2005; received in revised form 15 February 2007; accepted 17 February 2007

Available online 4 September 2007

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To compare neglectful and non-neglectful mothers on information processing tasks related to child emotions, behaviors, the caregiving relationship, and recall of child-related information.

**Method:** A natural group design was used. Neglectful mothers ( $N = 34$ ) were chosen from active, chronic caseloads; non-neglectful comparison mothers ( $N = 33$ ) were obtained from community agencies serving families. Participants were administered the IFEEL Picture task to assess maternal perceptions of infant emotions, eight vignettes of young children's behavior to assess attributions for child behavior across different scenarios, and a passage recall task to assess information processing problems. A measure of depression was used as a covariate to control for this variable.

**Results:** Neglectful mothers were significantly less likely to recognize infants' feelings of interest, more likely to see sadness and shame, more inaccurate at labeling infants' emotions, and had a more limited emotion vocabulary. They also made more internal and stable attributions for children's behaviors in situations where it was not clear whether a child was at risk of harm, and had poor recall of information. Depressive symptoms had little effect on these findings with the exception of information recall.

**Conclusions:** Neglectful mothers show significant problems in information processing concerning their child's emotions and behaviors, which may affect their childrearing behavior. Cognitive-behavioral interventions to improve parents' abilities to recognize their child's emotions and to address maladaptive attributions may be of value.

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*Keywords:* Child neglect; Attributions; Depression; Infant emotions

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<sup>☆</sup> This study was supported in part by a Doctoral Fellowship to Kathryn Hildyard from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and a Senior Research Fellowship to David A. Wolfe from the Ontario Mental Health Foundation.

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## Introduction

Child neglect accounts for more than 60% of all documented maltreatment cases in the United States, and poses one of the greatest threats to children's healthy growth and well-being (US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families [USDHHS], 2005). However, why some parents fail to provide proper care and nurturance remains greatly understudied (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). A promising approach to understanding child neglect stems from related work on information-processing explanations for physical child abuse, which may have relevancy for child neglect as well (Milner, 2003). These models can be organized into three stages of cognitive processing in the parent's selection, implementation, and monitoring of their behavior: (1) perception of social behavior or information, (2) interpretation, evaluation, and expectation that give meaning to social behavior, and (3) response selection. These three stages are followed by a fourth cognitive/behavioral stage, which involves the implementation and evaluation of the selected response (Milner, 2003).

Crittenden (1999) proposes that neglect is most often the result of a termination of information processing at the very early stages. That is, neglectful parenting may reflect a failure to perceive and attend to cues and information about the child's needs accurately, and to interpret them as requiring a response. Parental failure to respond to stimuli indicative of children's need for care may occur because the parent (a) did not perceive the child's signal, (b) did not interpret the signal as requiring a parental response, (c) was unable to select an appropriate response, or (d) selected a response but was unable to implement it.

The few studies that have investigated cognitive processes have generally supported the above view of cognitive differences between neglectful and non-neglectful parents. For example, neglectful parents have significantly less positive perceptions of their children, inadequate knowledge regarding appropriate child rearing, and more inappropriate, unrealistic, and negative expectations of children (Dubowitz, 1999; Erickson & Egeland, 2002). Moreover, neglectful parents are less likely to respond to a child's signals and more likely to initiate nonreciprocal types of interaction spontaneously, such as requests and demands (Aragona & Eyberg, 1981). However, studies are lacking on neglectful caregivers' ability to perceive and interpret social-emotional cues regarding a child's needs accurately, their attributions regarding the child's behavior, or their ability to recall caregiving related information.

We turned our attention to attachment research, given the association between parental attachment styles and sensitive and responsive caregiving. A compelling body of research has demonstrated that there are fundamental differences in the way in which individuals with different attachment styles perceive, attend to, and interpret social and emotional information. For instance, when presented with photos or videoclips of babies and asked to label the babies' emotions, secure mothers are more accurate in labeling the emotional displays (as determined by normative data) and use a wider range of emotion labels than non-secure mothers (DeOliveira, Moran, & Pederson, 2005). DeOliveira et al. also found that non-secure mothers were more likely to label the infants' affect in a restricted, "black or white" fashion, which she interpreted as suggesting that non-secure mothers are less empathic to the true complexities of emotions. Moreover, mothers with an unresolved attachment status were found to have the most severe difficulties in interpreting children's emotions. Finally, when responding to hypothetical vignettes involving children's misdeeds, secure mothers are less likely to attribute misdeeds to children's personality than non-secure mothers (Grusec & Mammone, 1995).

We were interested in investigating whether neglectful mothers, compared to non-neglectful mothers, would show deficits in processing of social-emotional information, similar to studies involving individuals with secure and non-secure attachment representations noted above. The few studies with neglectful

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