



Intervention effects on negative affect of CPS-referred children: Results of a randomized clinical trial[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Exposure to early adversity places young children at risk for behavioral, physiological, and emotional dysregulation, predisposing them to a range of long-term problematic outcomes. Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) is a 10-session intervention designed to enhance children's self-regulatory capabilities by helping parents to behave in nurturing, synchronous, and non-frightening ways. The effectiveness of the intervention was assessed in a randomized clinical trial, with parents who had been referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) for allegations of maltreatment. Parent-child dyads received either the ABC intervention or a control intervention. Following the intervention, children from the ABC intervention ($n=56$) expressed lower levels of negative affect during a challenging task compared to children from the control intervention ($n=61$).

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Introduction

Young children referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) may experience a range of adverse early experiences, including abuse, homelessness, poverty, neglect, and exposure to violence. These experiences can lead to a variety of problems, including difficulties with the regulation of behavior, physiology, and affect (Bernard, Butzin-Dozier, Rittenhouse, & Dozier, 2010; Gunnar & Vazquez, 2001). Parents, serving as co-regulators, play a critical role in supporting young children's regulatory development during infancy, and in helping children as they gradually begin to take over regulatory functions themselves during the toddler and preschool years (Calkins & Keane, 2009; Kopp, 1982; Raver, 1996). However, CPS-referred and other high-risk parents often fail to provide the kinds of interactions critical for the development of children's regulatory capabilities (Dadds, Mullins, McAllister, & Atkinson, 2003; Shipman et al., 2007). Thus, there is a compelling need for effective interventions for families who have been referred to CPS but whose children remain living with their biological caregivers.

The Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) intervention was developed to help parents learn to behave in ways that support children's ability to develop self-regulatory skills, and addresses many issues relevant for CPS-referred families. The present study assessed the effects of this intervention on expression of negative affect in CPS-referred children, a key component of affect regulation.

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Effects of Early Adversity on Emotion Expression

Early childhood is an important period for the development of emotional competence in children (Kopp, 1989; Kopp & Neufeld, 2003). Emotional competence involves the expression of emotions and the appropriate control of emotional expressiveness under different conditions (Denham et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2006; Saarni, 1999). An important component of this control of emotional expressiveness is the ability to regulate expression of negative affect during challenging or frustrating situations. Difficulties regulating the expression negative affect have been linked with later behavior problems and lower social competence (Dennis, Cole, Wiggins, Cohen, & Zalewski, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2000; Fabes, Eisenberg, Nyman, & Michaelieu 1991; Hill, Degnan, Calkins, & Keane, 2006).

Given the central role that parents play in the development of children's ability to regulate their emotion expression, it is not surprising that maltreated children display deficits in emotional development (Field, 1994; Graziano, Keane, & Calkins, 2010). Human infants are born almost fully dependent on parents, and many aspects of development rely on parent's involvement (Hofer, 1994; Winberg, 2005). This is especially true of children's developing regulation abilities, as parents serve a key role as co-regulators of behavior, affect, and physiology (Calkins & Keane, 2009; Hofer, 1994). Through many successful experiences in which infants regulate emotions effectively with the help of a parent, children are gradually able to take over the regulatory processes themselves. Therefore, these parent-child interactions during infancy and toddlerhood are critical for the development of child emotion expression and regulation capabilities (Calkins, 1994; Thompson & Meyer, 2007).

Maltreating parents often fail to provide the critical support necessary for the development of children's emotional competence. Specifically, maltreating parents have been found to engage in less validation and more invalidation of children's emotions compared to non-maltreating parents (Dadds et al., 2003; Shipman et al., 2007). These controlling and dismissing parental responses have been linked to greater emotion regulation difficulties and increased anger expression in young children (Dadds & Rhodes, 2008; Denham, Mitchell, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997; Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007).

Children who experience maltreatment lack a co-regulator at a crucial time in development. As would be expected given how central parental input is to children's developing regulatory capabilities, problems are seen among maltreated children in the regulation of behavior, physiology, and emotions (Bernard et al., 2010; Bandon, Calkins, & Keane, 2010). Bernard et al. (2010) demonstrated that children living with maltreating parents showed a dysregulated, flatter, pattern of diurnal cortisol production compared to children living with foster parents or children living under low-risk conditions. Blunted cortisol is predictive of externalizing behavior problems in early childhood (Alink et al., 2008). Parental maltreatment and inattention have also been associated with deficits in inhibitory control and problems regulating behavior (e.g., Bandon et al., 2010; Field, 1994). Most important to the issues addressed in this paper, maltreated children exhibit more negative affect under challenging conditions than seen among non-maltreated children (Calkins, Smith, Gill, & Johnson, 1998; Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989; Gaensbauer, 1982; Shields & Cicchetti, 1998).

Targeting Emotion Expression through Intervention

Given that maltreatment is associated with problems regulating the expression of negative affect, it is critical that interventions target this key developmental task among CPS-referred children. Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) was designed to enhance children's ability to regulate their affect, behavior, and physiology by helping parents serve as co-regulators. The specific parent behaviors targeted in the intervention include: (a) behaving in synchronous ways, (b) responding in nurturing ways to children's distress, and (c) avoiding frightening behaviors. Taken together, synchronous, nurturing, and non-frightening interactions are expected to enhance children's developing regulatory capabilities.

The first component, enhancing parental synchrony, was included as an intervention target to help improve children's ability to regulate physiology, emotions, and behavior. During the intervention sessions, parents are helped to follow their child's lead and give the child control over the interactions. Shonkoff and Bales (2011) described this give and take of synchronous interactions as "serve and return" (e.g., the child "serves" with a bid for the parent's attention, and the parent "returns" with an immediate and appropriate response). For example, if a child bangs two blocks together, a parent might respond synchronously by imitating the child (i.e., also banging two blocks together), commenting on what the child is doing (e.g., "You're banging the blocks!"), or taking delight in what the child is doing. According to Shonkoff and Bales, these "serve and return" interactions are integral to the development of young children's brain architecture, laying the foundation for the development of behavioral and regulatory capabilities over time (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Further, by responding quickly and sensitively, parents both help children to regulate their affect, and also provide children opportunities to express emotions in ways that feel controllable (Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002). This synchronous responding has been shown to decrease the amount and intensity of negative affect displayed by infants (Spinrad & Stifter, 2002), with infants of unresponsive parents showing significantly more sadness and anger compared to infants of responsive parents (Cohn & Tronick, 1983).

The second intervention component, enhancing parental nurturance when children are distressed, is associated with children developing secure, organized attachments (Bernard et al., 2012; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997), and learning to manage negative affect effectively (Brown, Fitzgerald, Shipman, & Schneider, 2007; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Spinrad, Stifter, Donelan-McCall, & Turner, 2004). Nurturance refers to sensitive responses that occur specifically in response to child distress. For example, when a child falls down and bumps his head, a mother might say, "Oh sweetie, are you okay?"

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