



Report on Research

College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences

Distressed by Your Baby's Distress? How You Respond Matters

A mother's attentiveness to her baby's distress, especially in the first year, is more important to his secure attachment than lots of positive feedback when he's happy and content, concludes a University of Illinois study published in the June issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

"Unfortunately, sometimes it's difficult for parents to deal with their child's distress," said Nancy McElwain, a U of I assistant professor of human and community development. "A mother may become anxious when her baby is really unhappy and try to comfort him by saying, 'Oh, don't cry, don't cry.' But it's okay to cry.

"If the new mother wasn't comforted very well by her own mother when she was a child, she may need help learning to console her own infant," the researcher said.

In the study, McElwain coded maternal sensitivity to distress and nondistress in 357 mothers and their babies at six and 15 months, then assessed attachment security in the babies at 15 months. Infant difficult temperament was also used as a predictor and found not to be a factor. The data came from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, which involved more than 1,300 families.

"A mother's sensitivity to her baby's distress at six months was a significant predictor of the baby's attachment security at 15 months, but sensitivity during times of nondistress was not. It's important that babies become securely attached to their caregivers because it's the foundation for future healthy child development," she said.

Mothers who realize they are uncomfortable with their baby's distress should find ways to compensate or cope with those feelings so they can change their behavior, she said.

What does a sensitive response to distress look like? "Ideally, you want to show your child through your facial expression and your tone of voice that you understand how she feels and that you empathize with her," the researcher said.

"Respond in a timely way to your infant's cues, and let your interactions with your infant be driven by the baby's agenda, not your agenda," she added.

Recent research has shown that children respond more positively to mothers who are able to think of their infant as a person who has needs, desires, intentions, and a mental world, McElwain said.

"Try to see things from the infant's point of view as much as possible. When mothers talk to their babies, even at six months, about the baby's mental state and how the baby is feeling, infants respond to that verbalization," she said.



But don't obsess over your baby's distress. "Sensitivity doesn't necessarily mean responding to your baby every minute of the day. It does mean thinking about why the baby is upset. Of course, it's easier to interact sensitively with a baby when he's happy, and no mother can respond perfectly 100 percent of the time. It's the pattern that's important," McElwain said.

Being attuned to your baby's emotional life should result in a securely attached toddler who seeks out his caregiver when he needs to be comforted and is able to explore his environment relatively freely when he isn't stressed, said the researcher.

"The first year of life is so important," McElwain said. "And we can see from this study that the way mothers and caregivers respond to a baby's distress is a very important factor in the child's healthy development."

Cathryn Booth-LaForce of the University of Washington is co-author of the study. Funding was provided by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.