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Lindsey M. Forbes
University of Western Ontario

Carey Anne De Oliveira
Child and Parent Resource Institute, London, Ontario

Greg Moran
University of Western Ontario, gmoran2@uwo.ca

David R. Pederson
University of Western Ontario, pederson@uwo.ca

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Disorganized Attachment and Mother-Toddler Interactive Behavior in a Problem-Solving Task

¹Lindsey M. Forbes, ²Carey Anne De Oliveira, ¹Greg Moran, & ¹David R. Pederson

¹Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

²Child and Parent Resource Institute, London, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: To examine emotional and behavioral regulation and Disorganized attachment at 24-months in a high-risk sample of adolescent mother-toddler dyads.

RESULTS: Disorganization was associated with **1)** increased toddler negativity and a lower quality of experience and **2)** decreased levels of maternal support and assistance during the problem-solving tasks.

CONCLUSION: These findings offer converging support for the suggestion that Disorganized dyads experience marked difficulties in emotional and behavioral regulation.

INTRODUCTION

● During the first year of life **most** infants learn to manage a variety of emotions in an organized manner, within the context of their attachment relationships.

● In contrast, children in Disorganized relationships display *“an apparent lack of, or collapse of, a consistent strategy for organizing responses to the need for comfort and security when under stress”* (Lyons-Ruth, 1996, p. 67)

● Disorganized attachment in infancy is linked to difficulties managing stress and disturbances in the regulation of **emotions** and **behavior** in childhood and adolescence (van IJzendoorn et al., 1999)

● In the second year, there is a progression from dyadic to self-regulation of emotions (Kopp, 1989). However, in the face of emotional challenges, toddlers may draw on parental resources for regulatory support (Sroufe, 1996).

● Increasingly difficult problem-solving tasks (Matas et al., 1978) may challenge the toddler’s autonomy and provide an emotional challenge, specifically, when individual coping resources are insufficient for task-solving.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

● As part of a longitudinal study, 80 adolescent mother-infant dyads were recruited from 2 city hospitals.

● Mothers ranged from 15.9 to 19.9 years at infant birth ($M = 18.4$, $SD = .99$).

● 59% were single, 44% were on social assistance and had completed an average of 11 years of education.

● 47% reported a history of trauma and 63% met the cut-off for depression on the CES-D when infants were 12-months of age.

MEASURES

Interesting-but-Scary (IbS) Paradigm (De Oliveira, 2001; Forbes, Evans, Moran & Pederson, in press)

The IbS laboratory Paradigm involved the mother and toddler in: a 10-minute separation and reunion, 5 minutes of free-play period and a 3-minute exposure to an interesting/fear-evoking, remote-controlled toy spider.

Using a modification of the Strange Situation coding system (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Solomon, 1990), relationships were assigned ratings for **Disorganization (1-9)**. Coders were blind to behavior in the Matas Task.

Matas Problem-Solving Task (Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978) This task consisted of 3 individual problems, presented in order of increasing difficulty. The first problem was easily solved by most two-year-olds, but the last 2 problems generally required the help of an adult.

Dimensions of child and maternal behavior were coded from videotapes. Coders were blind to attachment classifications assigned in the IbS Paradigm.

RESULTS

Attachment Disorganization at 24-months

● 24 month attachment classifications (ABCD) assigned in the IbS paradigm were concordant with 12 month Strange Situation classifications, $\chi^2(1, N = 71) = 12.14$, $p < .001$, $Kappa = .38$, $p < .001$ (Forbes et al., in press).

● Level of Disorganization (1-9) at 12 and 24 months was positively correlated, $r = .30$, $p < .05$.

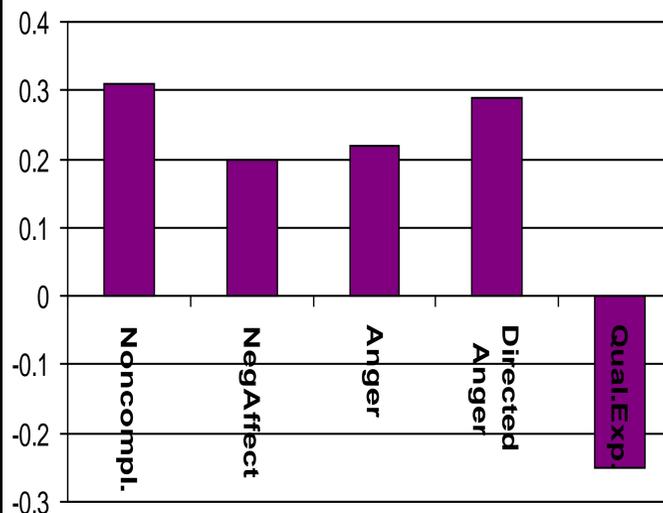
Disorganization and Child Behavior in the Problem-Solving Tasks (See Figure 1)

● 12-month Disorganization was **not** significantly associated with dimensions of child behavior in the problem-solving tasks.

24-month Disorganization (1-9) was:

- **Positively** correlated with toddler *noncompliance, negative affect, anger, and anger directed at mother.*
- **Negatively** correlated with *quality of experience.*

Figure 1. Correlations between Level of Disorganization and Toddler Behavior During Problem-Solving Tasks.



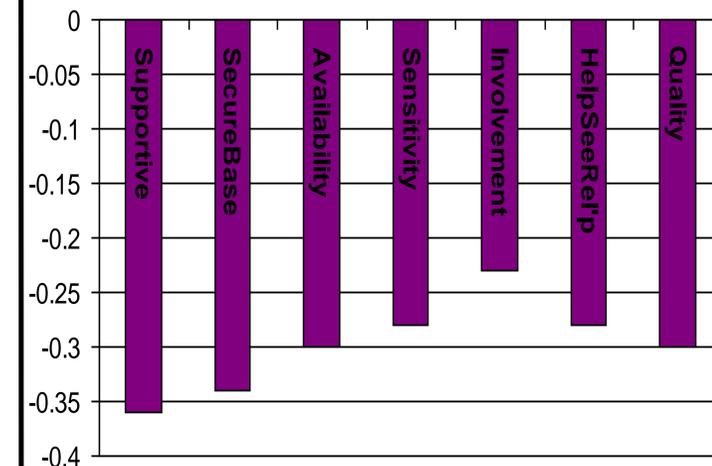
Disorganization and Maternal Behavior in the Problem-Solving Tasks (See Figure 2)

● 12-month Disorganization was **not** significantly associated with maternal behavior in the problem-solving tasks.

24-month Disorganization (1-9) was:

- **Negatively** correlated with *maternal supportive presence, secure base behaviour, availability, sensitivity, involvement, helping to see relationships, and overall quality of assistance.*

Figure 2. Correlations between Disorganization and Maternal Behavior During the Problem-Solving Tasks.



CONCLUSIONS

● During the challenging problem-solving tasks, Disorganization was associated with:

● increased toddler *negative affect*, suggesting a poorer quality of experience for the child.

● a lower quality of maternal assistance (e.g., less support, availability, sensitivity, involvement).

● **At 24-months of age, attachment Disorganization was clearly associated with dysfunction in the emerging goal-corrected partnership during problem-solving.**

● Schieche and Spangler (2005) reported that toddlers previously classified as being in Disorganized relationships in infancy displayed the greatest dysfunction of the attachment-exploration system during problem-solving.

● The current study extends this literature by examining Disorganization and problem-solving concurrently.

● Findings provide converging support for the marked difficulties in **emotional and behavioral regulation** associated with Disorganization.

Email: lforbes@uwo.ca