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Maternal Sensitivity: From Child to the Neighborhood

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The current study examined the association between maternal sensitivity and distal factors such as neighborhood quality. Previous research that has examined distal influences on maternal sensitivity has focused on family-level factors while ecological factors, such as the quality of the neighborhood, have been neglected. Significant associations were found between maternal sensitivity and ecological factors: maternal education, household income, and neighborhood safety, while it was highest (N=37, SD=44) in context of low neighborhood safety. Previous research that has examined distal influences on maternal sensitivity has focused on family-level factors while ecological factors, such as the quality of the neighborhood, have been neglected. Significant associations were found between maternal sensitivity and ecological factors: maternal education, household income, and neighborhood safety.

### Background

Maternal behavior that is sensitive to infants' signals has been shown to foster positive outcomes in child development across multiple domains (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1989; Spangler et al., 1994) and has important implications for policy interventions at the neighborhood level to promote maternal sensitivity. The few studies that have examined distal factors focused on family characteristics specific to the child, mother and familial environment. After controlling for these characteristics, observed neighborhood challenge was found to explain additional variance in maternal sensitivity.

### Method

- 480 families were drawn from the full sample of the Kids, Families and Places Study which is an ongoing prospective study of newborns, older siblings and their families in Canada (Toronto and Hamilton). Families were recruited through the Public Health Units and were enrolled in the study if the newborn was full term, the mother spoke enough English to engage in a conversation, and the family had at least one other child. This study used data from the completed wave 1 data collection.

#### Measures

- **Infant age (in months), SD=1 month.** Infant gender: 50% boys
- **Maternal sensitivity: Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (MBQS; Pederson & Moran, 1995), coded from videotapes**
- **Proximal factors:** Maternal age at first pregnancy, educational attainment and household income: mother report
- **Maternal depression: CESD (Radloff, 1977) mother report**
- **Distal factors:** Ecological factors: neighborhood challenge: Neighborhood Cluster Observation Schedule (McGuire, 1997), interviewers’ observations

#### Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the possible association between maternal sensitivity and ecological factors and whether, after controlling for child, maternal and familial characteristics, this association explained additional variance in maternal sensitivity.

#### Results

The data were analyzed using hierarchical regression to examine the amount of variance in maternal sensitivity attributable to proximal and distal factors.

#### Discussion

- The current study examined the association between maternal sensitivity and distal factors such as neighborhood quality. Previous research that has examined distal influences on maternal sensitivity has focused on family-level factors while ecological factors, such as the quality of the neighborhood, have been neglected.
- Significant associations were found between maternal sensitivity and ecological factors: maternal education, household income, and neighborhood safety.
- Findings from this study demonstrate that: attributes of the ecology explain variance in maternal sensitivity, above and beyond the influence of child, mother and familial characteristics.
- Findings of this research support further investigations on the influence of ecological factors on maternal sensitivity. Further research is needed to identify the causal mechanism that may mediate or explain the ways in which the quality of the neighborhood influence maternal sensitivity.