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

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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).

RESULTS

- 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.

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.

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