



## Infant characteristics and parental engagement at the transition to parenthood



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### ABSTRACT

Positive engagement activities support children's adaptive development and new parents are encouraged to be highly engaged with infants. Yet, fathers' engagement is widely understudied and maternal engagement quantity is frequently overlooked. Our study contributes to growing knowledge on associations between infant temperament and parental engagement by testing transactional and moderation models in a recent sample of first-time parents when infants were 3, 6, and 9 months old. Stringent longitudinal, reciprocal structural equation models partially confirmed an engagement "benefit". Mothers' engagement marginally contributed to their children's gains in effortful control from 3 to 6 months regardless of child gender. Further, mothers' engagement reduced infant negative affect from 6 to 9 months regardless of child gender. Mothers' ratings of infant negative affect were gendered; mothers' ratings of infant negative affect increases more from 3 to 6 months for boys. Fathers' engagement was contextually sensitive; child gender moderated the link between negative affect and engagement from 6 to 9 months, such that fathers became more engaged with boys whom they rated higher on negative affect; there was no effect for daughters. Finally, we found that effortful control moderated associations between negative affect and maternal engagement; mothers' engagement increases from 3 to 6 months were greater for children initially rated lower in effortful control. Implications for future research and parenting education and support services are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Frequent engagement in developmentally appropriate parenting activities is central to facilitating children's early socio-emotional development (e.g., Pleck, 2010). For instance, mothers' and fathers' engagement with infants promotes mastery motivation and attention during toddlerhood (Lang et al., 2014), key skills that facilitate children's later social and educational success (Carter & Briggs-Gowan, 2006). Similarly, child temperamental characteristics like negative affect (i.e., irregularity of mood, frequent crying, low enjoyment) and effortful control (i.e., inhibitory control, soothability, low intensity pleasure) are foundational to children's socioemotional development. Infants displaying high levels of negative affect are often irritable and respond poorly to parental structuring (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000), behaviors that may later be met with rejection from teachers and peers (Scaramella & Leve, 2004). In contrast, children with greater effortful control are better regulated and tend to have greater academic competence (Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008) and fewer problem behaviors (Murray & Kochanska, 2002) than peers with lower effortful control.

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Child characteristics are integral determinants of parental engagement (Belsky, 1984), yet few studies have explored links between parental engagement and infant temperament beyond a focus on mothers and the implications of difficult temperament (e.g., Bridgett et al., 2009). This gap in knowledge is surprising given the importance of fathers (e.g., Pleck, 2010) and early effortful control (Murray & Kochanska, 2002; Valiente et al., 2008) in supporting children's positive development. Moreover, we know of no study that has explored reciprocal associations between infant temperament and parental engagement. Infant negative affect may function as a risk factor that may reduce parental engagement. Reduced parental engagement represents a significant risk for children early in life, as parental engagement may benefit infants by promoting regulatory capacities, thereby reducing displays of negative affect and increasing effortful control (see Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003).

Even fewer studies have explored important interactions among temperament traits (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003) and between temperament and child gender (Buss, 1981). Frequent displays of negative affect may place infants at risk for lower parental engagement, but evidence suggests that effortful control may protect children with high negative affect from losing the important benefits of parental engagement (Belsky, Friedman, & Hsieh, 2001; Gartstein, Putnam, & Rothbart, 2012; Stifter, Spinrad, & Braungart-Reiker, 1999). Further, parents may respond differently to temperamental displays based on child gender; girls with higher effortful control elicit greater engagement from mothers (Schoppe-Sullivan, Kotila, Jia, Lang, & Bower, 2012), whereas boys' negative affect lowers maternal engagement (Maccoby, Snow, & Jacklin, 1984). We do not know how these important interactions shape fathers' engagement, which is troubling given that contemporary dual-earner fathers are highly engaged with infants (e.g., Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2013).

Our study contributes to existing knowledge in at least four ways. First, we examined links between infant temperament and mothers' and fathers' frequency of direct engagement with infants in developmentally appropriate activities in a recent sample of new parents experiencing first-time parenthood, a critical period of development in the life course. The developing infant requires high levels of parental engagement (Bornstein, Lamb, & Teti, 1992), and the developing family negotiates and establishes new relationships and routines that set the stage for future parental engagement. Second, father engagement is often measured as the quantity of time spent with children, whereas research on mother engagement is typically focused on qualitative aspects of her parenting (Pleck, 2010); thus, few studies have explored associations between temperament and engagement frequency in mothers (for exceptions see McBride, Schoppe, & Rane, 2002; Mehall, Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Gaertner, 2009; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2012). Our third contribution is through the use of both mother and father reports of infant temperament; we know of no other studies that have investigated associations between infant temperament and father engagement using father reports. Finally, we used a transactional framework (Sameroff, 1975), exploring longitudinal, reciprocal associations between infant temperament and parental engagement.

### 1.1. Parental engagement

Positive engagement encompasses a wide range of interactions that facilitate children's adaptive development and has been highlighted as the most important aspect of a father's involvement with his child (Pleck, 2010). During infancy, these activities may range from meeting basic childcare needs to playing and reading with children. Though mothers spend more time with infants overall, fathers as well as mothers devote large proportions of their child-related time to positive engagement with infants (Kotila et al., 2013).

A social context of intensive parenting encourages parents to be highly engaged with their children (Quirke, 2006), a standard that is especially salient for dual-earner mothers who must "compensate" for their time spent working by maximizing their engagement time. Yet, some studies indicate child gender differences in engagement, such that fathers are more engaged with sons than daughters (e.g., Raley & Bianchi, 2006) and some scholars argue that father engagement is particularly sensitive to contextual influences, such as child temperament and gender (Belsky, 1984). Developmentally appropriate, stimulating parental engagement fosters positive child outcomes (Lang et al., 2014), therefore identifying characteristics that may place infants at risk for decreased engagement by either parent may create opportunities for early parenting intervention.

### 1.2. Infant temperament

Temperament describes several aspects of early behavior that appear early in infancy, are relatively stable over time, and are precursors of later personality development (Else-Quest, Hyde, Goldsmith, & Van Hulle, 2006). Individual differences in temperament are constitutionally and environmentally influenced, and are contextually driven expressions of reactivity and self-regulation (Rothbart & Derryberry, 1981). Conceptualizations of temperament indicate the presence of three defining factors: effortful control, negative affect, and surgency (Rothbart et al., 2000). We focused our analysis on negative affect and effortful control because of the large literatures linking negative affect and effortful control to child outcomes.

Negative affect is one of the first temperamental characteristics displayed early in infancy (e.g., Rothbart, 1989). Infants exhibiting negative affect may become distressed when presented with novel stimuli that elicit fear or when responding to structure and limits (Rothbart & Derryberry, 1981). Biological underpinnings warrant the study of negative affect in infancy, as the physiological basis necessary for displays of negative affect, the frontal cortex, is active pre-birth, whereas the control (i.e., discriminatory/regulatory) mechanism, the neocortex, becomes active later on through the infant's experience (Dawson,

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