



The Baby Care Questionnaire: A measure of parenting principles and practices during infancy[☆]



Alice Winstanley¹, Merideth Gattis*

School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Cardiff, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The current report provides a new framework to explore the role of parenting practices and principles during infancy. We identify structure and attunement as key parenting principles during infancy. Structure represents reliance on regularity and routines in daily life. Attunement represents reliance on infant cues and close physical contact. We suggest parents' relative endorsement of these parenting principles is related to their choices about practices such as feeding, holding and night-time sleeping. We designed the Baby Care Questionnaire to measure parents' endorsement of structure and attunement, as well as their daily parenting practices. We report data demonstrating the factor structure, reliability and validity of the BCQ. The BCQ, to our knowledge, is the first comprehensive measure of parenting practices and principles during infancy. We conclude with a discussion of future directions for the measure.

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1. Introduction

Every day, caregivers around the world make decisions about how to care for their infants. Caregiving decisions differ within and across families and cultures, despite all babies' biological similarity (Small, 1999). We propose that caregiving decisions are based on general principles, and are reflected in practices or specific behaviours parents use to achieve positive outcomes for their offspring. In the current report, we address the need for empirical investigations of caregiving principles and practices in infancy and introduce a new measure, the Baby Care Questionnaire, to be used in such investigations.

1.1. Caregiving during infancy

Infancy is a period of high dependency and intense caregiving in which parents must respond to their infant's need for food, sleep and emotional attachment (Bornstein, 2002; Small, 1999). Parents differ in their beliefs about the best way to meet these needs as well as their specific caregiving behaviours. Research on caregiving principles and practices has tended to focus on specific infant needs, such as eating, sleeping, or soothing, rather than looking across those needs. For example, the Infant Feeding Style Questionnaire (IFSQ; Thompson et al., 2009) and the Caregiver's Feeding Style Questionnaire (CFSQ;

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* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Park Place, Cardiff CF10 3AT, United Kingdom.

E-mail addresses: avw30@cam.ac.uk (A. Winstanley), gattism@cardiff.ac.uk (M. Gattis).

¹ Current address: Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes, Power, Orlet Fisher, Mueller, & Nicklas, 2005) are parent-report measures of parental beliefs and behaviours related to feeding, and have been used to identify specific strategies for feeding as well as their correlates and developmental consequences. Similarly, the Brief Infant Sleep Questionnaire (Sadeh, 2004) and the Parental Interactive Bedtime Behaviour Scale (Morrell & Cortina-Borja, 2002) are parent-report measures of parent and infant behaviours surrounding bedtime and sleeping, and have been used to identify relations between parent and infant behaviours, such as parenting bedtime routines and infant sleeping problems. A small number of studies have examined parenting practices across different domains. However, such studies have focused on specific associations between practices, such as the association between bed-sharing and breastfeeding (Ball, Hooker, & Kelly, 1999; Blair, Heron, & Fleming, 2010; Santos, Mota, Matijasevich, Barros, & Barros, 2009), rather than on general caregiving principles and potential relations between principles and caregiving practices during infancy.

We propose that two key principles that guide caregiving during infancy are structure and attunement. *Structure* refers to the extent to which parents endorse the utilisation of regularity and routines in infant care. Many popular books and magazines aimed at parents have argued for the benefits of regularity and routines in caring for infants (for example, Ford, 2001), but to date few empirical studies have investigated the influence of parental support for regularity and routines during infancy on developmental outcomes. A number of studies have investigated the influence of regularity and routines during childhood on developmental outcomes and reported positive outcomes for both children and parents (see reviews from Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983; Fiese et al., 2002; Grusec & Davidov, 2010; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). For example, routines in daily life are associated with better sleep for children and their parents (Mindell, Telofski, Wiegand, & Kurtz, 2009; Seymour, Brock, During, & Poole, 1989), elevated mood (Sprunger, Boyce, & Gaines, 1985), lower levels of conflict and greater life satisfaction (Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983). In the context of parent-child interactions, the term structured parenting has been used to refer to varying degrees of parental control, direction and guidance, such as instructing a child in how to play a game, and it too is associated with positive developmental outcomes (Leve et al., 2009). In the context of infant care, the principle of structure also implies some degree of parental control and guidance, as infants are not able to autonomously regulate states such as sleeping and arousal. St James-Roberts (2007) has argued that sleeping schedules, a form of parental control, function as learning scaffolds for infants to learn sleeping and waking patterns and therefore can reduce night waking. Thus structure is a principle about the role of external guidance in helping infants increase the regularity of states such as sleeping and waking, hunger and eating, and arousal and soothing.

Attunement refers to the extent to which parents endorse the utilisation of infant cues and close physical contact in infant care. In the context of parent-child interactions, the term attunement has been used to describe parental sensitivity and responsiveness to infant cues and attentional states, such as noticing an infant's interest in an object, and describing the object (Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Hahn, & Haynes, 2008; Legerstee, Markova, & Fisher, 2007). In the context of caregiving, attunement describes variations between caregivers in the extent to which they value and rely on children's cues to hunger and satiety, drowsiness and wakefulness, and distress and soothing (Hughes et al., 2012; Tikotzky & Sadeh, 2009). Previous studies have established relations between sensitivity and responsiveness to children's attentional states and interests and a number of positive developmental outcomes, such as social, communicative and cognitive skills (e.g., Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1997; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006; Legerstee et al., 2007). Few studies, however, have investigated relations between attunement in the context of caregiving and developmental outcomes: those that have done so have for the most part focused specifically on maternal responsivity to infant distress and its effect on infant crying (for example, Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Hubbard & van Ijzendoorn, 1991). In this paper we aim to investigate the relations between attunement and caregiving practices more generally.

Individual differences in parental beliefs about infants and parenting have important effects on choice and effectiveness of parenting behaviours. For example, parents who assign more responsibility to the child than the adult for caregiving failures are more unwavering and directive in their parenting behaviour (Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Guzell & Vernon-Feagans, 2004). Such parents may endorse structure, as this principle allows parents to have more control and regularity in the caregiving role. Individual differences in caregiving beliefs may be due to caregiving experience: expectant parents evaluate and develop caregiving principles during pregnancy, but the experiences of caring for an infant may alter or strengthen these principles. Finally, individual differences in caregiving principles may also be due to infant characteristics such as age, gender, health and temperament.

Structure and attunement are often considered opposing categories – for example, caregiving experts tend to advocate either infant-demand or scheduled parenting (St James-Roberts, 2007; St James-Roberts et al., 2006). However, the negative relationship between structure and attunement, as well as the approaches advocated, are based on personal experience and popular culture (for example, “huggers” and “schedulers”; James, 2008; Williams, 2010) rather than empirical evidence (St James-Roberts, 2007). Middle-class parents in historically interdependent societies, such as Costa Rica, appear to combine scheduled and infant-demand caregiving (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Keller, Borke, Yovsi, Lohaus, & Jensen, 2005). We propose that structure and attunement are orthogonal and so caregiving principles can vary independently.

1.2. Relations between principles and practices

One of the questions examined in the current study was about the relations between parenting principles and daily decisions about practices, such as where to put infants to sleep, what to feed them and how long to hold them (specific

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