

Hush Now Baby: Mothers' and Fathers' Strategies for Soothing Their Infants and Associated Parenting Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to examine the types of soothing behaviors used by mothers and fathers of infants, differences in use trajectories over time, and associated parenting outcomes.

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Methods: A longitudinal study of 241 families expecting their second child was performed. Data were collected at 1, 4, and 8 postnatal months and included measures of parental soothing techniques, involvement in soothing, distress in response to infant crying, and parenting self-efficacy.

Results: The average number of soothing techniques used was 7.7 for mothers and 5.9 for fathers. Soothing frequency decreased over time, and change patterns of soothing differed over time by gender. In couples who shared responsibility for soothing, fathers felt more efficacious in parenting and mothers were less upset by infant crying.

Discussion: Clinicians are encouraged to support fathers' engagement in infant soothing, facilitate the development of fathers' parenting confidence, and promote fathers' involvement in children's health and health care. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2015) 29, 145-155.

KEY WORDS

Parenting, infancy, father, soothing

Behaviors such as parental soothing of the infant are foundational to the developing parent-child relationship, yet little is known about the daily soothing behaviors used by parents. Helping the young infant regulate biobehavioral processes such as body temperature, food intake, and sleep-wake states is an important aspect of early parenting. Periods of crying are normative in infancy and, although crying frequency and intensity are likely related to infant temperament, parents of all infants must identify and use soothing techniques to calm their infants. Indeed, parents spend a great deal of time soothing their infants to help them

maintain, or return to, a state of regulation. It is important for clinicians to understand and strengthen parental soothing behaviors because they serve a critical developmental need by entraining the infant's own capacities for self-regulation (Doi, Kato, Nishitani, & Shinohara, 2011; Zeman et al., 2006). Successful soothing reinforces parents to continue to use specific soothing techniques that calm

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the infant. This process boosts parents' confidence, creates a growing sense of trust within the infant, and sets the foundation for the establishment of positive parent-infant relationships. When parents' soothing attempts are unsuccessful, they may experience increasing levels of frustration, placing the parent-infant relationship at risk. In severe cases, parental frustration can lead to abusive behaviors such as shaking that threaten the very survival of the infant (Lee, Barr, Catherine, & Wicks, 2007).

Because parental soothing supports early developmental and relationship processes, more research is needed to understand the specific ways in which mothers and fathers soothe their infants on a daily basis. Although fathers have increased the time they spend on child care in general, fathers continue to engage in less child care than do mothers across the family's child-rearing years (Bianchi, 2011). During early infancy, mothers are more likely than fathers to take time off of work to care for the infant, leaving mothers with many more opportunities to engage in infant-care activities. Periods of infant crying and fussing, however, often occur in the evening (McGlaughlin & Grayson, 2001), when fathers are likely to be home, providing fathers with an opportunity to engage more fully in this child-rearing task.

Most families have more than one child, and the transition from one child to two can be stressful for some parents (Volling, 2012). First-time parents may worry about the pregnancy, delivery, and birth, as well as their abilities to care for an infant. In contrast, mothers expecting their second child have already been through the late-night feedings, sleep deprivation, and care of a newborn and report being more concerned about balancing the care of two young children and how their relationship with the firstborn will change once the baby has arrived (Richardson, 1983). The father's involvement in infant caregiving may be critically important during this transition, and men's abilities to soothe a young infant may contribute to the mother's

mental health, the emotional adjustment of the first child, and overall family functioning. Further, balancing the care of both an infant and older firstborn may require that both parents be skilled at comforting a distressed infant. Fathers in the current study were part of a larger longitudinal investigation of changes in family life after the birth of a second child, and all men were experienced fathers in the sense that they had already cared for their firstborn during infancy. This point is important to underscore when examining parental soothing, particularly in the case of fathers, because many men may not have had experience with infants before their first child, so examining parental soothing for new fathers may not be the best means of addressing whether men can and do soothe their distressed infants. Thus, we were able to examine the soothing techniques of experienced fathers during the year after the birth of their second child. The main goal of this study was to compare the soothing techniques of experienced mothers and fathers with their second-born infants during the year after the birth.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Psychological Association (APA) have identified the study of father involvement in child health and development as a national health priority (APA, 2004; Schor, 2003). However, the majority of studies examining parental soothing of infants have been conducted with mothers after single-event stressors such as immunizations (see, for example, Jahromi & Stifter, 2007; Lewis & Ramsay, 1999). In the few studies examining the soothing behaviors of fathers with their young infants, research with non-United States samples has suggested that fathers spend approximately half the time that mothers spend in soothing their upset infants on a daily basis (Hossain et al., 2005; Sun & Roopnarine, 1996). However, because child-care practices are culturally informed, it is not known whether U.S. fathers may exhibit similar patterns of daily soothing. This study is the first to examine types and rates of daily soothing in a U.S. sample of experienced fathers and mothers.

In the parenting of older children, U.S. fathers tend to interact in more physically active ways compared with mothers (MacDonald & Parke, 1986). Effective soothing, however, requires a dialing down of bio-behavioral activity, rather than a ramping up, so fathers may have more difficulties soothing their infants should they rely on more physical and stimulating sorts of soothing techniques. Although no studies have been performed to examine the daily soothing behaviors of fathers in the United States, three studies using U.S. samples have examined the specific soothing behaviors that fathers used with their newborn infants during single-event episodes. Jones and Lenz (1986) videotaped father-newborn interactions and found that increased infant crying was associated with increases in affectionate/comforting physical touching and lower

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