



## Research article

# Impact of a maternal history of childhood abuse on the development of mother–infant interaction during the first year of life



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of a maternal history of abuse on mother–infant interaction (emotional availability; EA) in infancy and early toddlerhood. Over an 18-month period, women giving birth to a child in the local obstetric units were screened using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. Women who reported moderate or severe sexual and/or physical abuse were included in the maltreatment group ( $n = 58$ ; MG) and compared with a non-maltreated comparison group ( $n = 61$ ; CG). EA was investigated under experimental conditions when the children were 5 and 12 months of age using the Emotional Availability Scales. While mother–child dyads in the MG showed only very discrete interactional alterations at an infant age of 5 months, their EA differed significantly from the CG at 12 months due to the lack of an increase in EA observed in the MG. Exploratory analyses showed an additional effect of emotional abuse on EA at 12 months. These data indicate that the period when child locomotion develops might represent a critical time window for mothers with a history of abuse. Our results constitute an advance in research on child abuse as they identify a possible time window of non-normative alteration in mother–child interaction. This period could be targeted by strategies to prevent intergenerational transmission of abusive experiences.

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Over the last few decades, childhood maltreatment and its adverse consequences for the individual have been identified as a major public health problem (Norman et al., 2012). In this context, researchers have also been focusing on a potential transgenerational transmission of childhood maltreatment experiences, embedding corresponding results in a “cycle of abuse” framework. Here, having experienced abuse in childhood increases the risk of perpetrating child maltreatment later as a parent (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Widom, 1989). Many studies have provided empirical support for this hypothesis (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Egeland, Bosquet, & Chung, 2002; Smith, Cross, Winkler, Jovanovic, & Bradley, 2014), but the results are still inconsistent and the exact mechanisms underlying transgenerational transmission remain unclear (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Langeland & Dijkstra, 1995; Widom, Czaja, & DuMont, 2015).

Focusing on potential pathways, researchers have raised the question of whether experiences of childhood abuse might interfere with later parenting behavior. According to social learning theory, children who grew up without an acceptable

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role model of parenting might have difficulties in adopting this role themselves (Bert, Guner, & Lanzi, 2009; Pears & Capaldi, 2001). Attachment theorists discuss disadvantageous effects on the development of internal working models as prototypes for all future relationships (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2003; Bretherton, 1985; Main & Goldwyn, 1984). Additionally, as childhood maltreatment is closely linked to higher rates of psychopathology in adulthood, symptoms could interfere with the parent's ability to provide optimal parenting – a pathway that has been found for maternal depressive symptoms in particular (DiLillo & Damashek, 2003; Martinez-Torteya et al., 2014; Norman et al., 2012; Schuetze & Eiden, 2005). Recently, research has started to highlight the significance of emotion regulation in parenting, which has been shown to be affected by early maltreatment experiences (Briere & Jordan, 2009; Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002; Oshri, Sutton, Clay-Warner, & Miller, 2015). Mothers who are having trouble regulating their own emotions might show maladaptive strategies in parenting situations, such as aggression or withdrawal (Ehrensaft, Knous-Westfall, Cohen, & Chen, 2015). Supporting this line of reasoning, Smith et al. (2014) were able to show that the relationship between maternal experience of child abuse and later child abuse potential was mediated by maternal emotional dysregulation and negative affect reported in the context of mother–child interaction (Smith et al., 2014). Other results suggest that, especially under stress conditions, physically abused mothers may focus less on their babies (“filtering-out”) (Gara, Allen, Herzog, & Woolfolk, 2000). In their review, DiLillo and Damashek (2003) concluded that mothers who had experienced sexual abuse in their childhood seem to be more emotionally distant toward their children.

Research results on effects of maternal maltreatment experiences on mother–child interaction have been inconsistent, which is partly attributable to methodological differences, such as diversity in how maltreatment and interactional quality were measured. Many studies utilized self-report measures to assess parenting behavior, finding significant associations between maternal history of abuse and reported impaired mother–child interaction (e.g. Banyard, 1997; Bert et al., 2009; Dubowitz et al., 2001). Yet, the use of self-reported data on parenting behavior is controversial, especially so in research on victims of maltreatment. Traumatizing childhood events have been associated with avoidant coping strategies in particular, such as dissociation, substance abuse, or tension-reduction behaviors (Briere & Jordan, 2009; Marysko et al., 2010). These strategies could prevent memories and experiences from being integrated, thereby possibly evoking a limited ability to reflect on interpersonal relationships (Bailey, Moran, & Pederson, 2007; Bailey, DeOliveira, Wolfe, Evans, & Hartwick, 2012). However, only a few studies so far have applied observational measures of parenting (e.g., Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Browne, 2005; Lyons-Ruth & Block, 1996).

A framework that focuses specifically on the emotional context in mother–child interactions and in which emotional availability in mother–child-interaction can be observationally assessed is represented by Biringen's concept of “Emotional Availability” (EA; Biringen, Robinson, & Emde, 1998). EA is a global or holistic judgment by which the observer uses contextual cues and clinical judgment to infer the appropriateness of behaviors (Biringen et al., 2005). It focuses on the emotional exchange between mother and child and refers to the emotional signaling of the parent to the child as well as the signaling of the child to the parent. High scores indicate adequate maternal emotion regulation since “leakage” or open expression of negative emotions would result in lower scoring (Biringen, 2000; Biringen et al., 1998). EA has only been examined in a few populations at risk, such as mothers with substance use difficulties or low-income, single mothers (Biringen, Derscheid, Vliegen, Closson, & Easterbrooks, 2014; Easterbrooks, Bureau, & Lyons-Ruth, 2012; Stack et al., 2012). To the best of our knowledge, only two studies have focused on the associations between maternal history of abuse and EA. Results from a sample of first-time mothers under the age of 21 indicate that mothers who report a history of physical abuse show less optimal structuring, less sensitivity, and more hostility while playing with their 18-month-old toddlers (Driscoll & Easterbrooks, 2007). In a sample of 93 mothers and their 4- to 6-year-old children, Bailey et al. (2012) did not find associations between EA and physical/sexual abuse, but neglect, emotional maltreatment, witnessing family violence, and signs of hostility proved to be significantly related to maternal hostility. They suggested that, since studies on physical and sexual abuse rarely controlled for other forms of maltreatment, some effects might be due to other co-occurring forms of maltreatment (Bailey et al., 2012).

However, not only maternal characteristics can exert an influence on the emotional exchange between mother and child. Beginning in the latter half of the child's first year, the developmental milestone of locomotion changes the relation between the infant and its environment dramatically (Anderson et al., 2013). The child discovers a sense of autonomy and control, which creates challenges for parents, such as balancing the need to encourage exploration while discouraging hazards. Additionally, acquisition of locomotion plays an important role in forming an attachment relationship since it is one precondition for a child to proactively seek proximity (Campos et al., 2000). Biringen, Emde, Campos, and Appelbaum (1995) reported data from a community-based sample in which communication between mothers and their children was marked not only by more negative clashes, but also by more positive exchanges in a group of children with more walking experience compared to a group of children with less walking experience. The authors suggested continuing research in clinical samples since mothers in high-risk dyads might react differently to the child's separation from the mother (Biringen et al., 1995). For mothers with a history of abuse, it could be particularly challenging to experience their children developing some sort of independence and autonomy. For them, a sense of loss of control might emerge, a situation in which the abused mother might experience again her own helplessness and victimization through interactions with the child (Möhler, Resch, Cierpka, & Cierpka, 2001).

Considering the potential influence of the child's development on the quality of interaction between mother and child, there is a significant lack of knowledge about the trajectory of EA over the course of development since only a few studies so far have used longitudinal designs (Biringen et al., 2014). Additionally, most studies focused on low-risk community samples

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