



Parental responses to infant crying: The influence of child physical abuse risk and hostile priming[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Managing a crying infant is a challenge universally faced by new parents. This study examined whether parental interpretations, feelings, and behaviors following exposure to a 2-minute videotaped segment of a crying infant varied as a function of child physical abuse (CPA) risk and exposure to cues of hostility (i.e., hostile priming).

Method: Participants included 84 general population parents (52 low and 32 high CPA risk) with valid and complete protocols. It was predicted that (1) negative trait ratings, (2) feelings of hostility, and (3) ability to modulate grip strength would differ across CPA risk groups (high vs. low) and priming conditions (hostile vs. neutral).

Results: As expected, high, compared to low, CPA risk parents rated the crying infant more negatively and reported higher levels of hostile feelings after watching the crying infant video. Hostile priming independently increased feelings of hostility, such that high CPA risk parents who were primed with hostile words reported higher levels of hostile feelings relative to all other conditions. Hostile priming also was modestly associated with increased use of excessive force when parents attempted to produce a half-strength grip; however this difference was apparent only among high CPA risk parents.

Conclusions: High, compared to low, CPA risk parents rated the crying infant more negatively and reported higher levels of hostile feelings after watching the crying infant video. Hostile priming independently increased hostile feelings and was modestly associated with use of excessive force in the hand grip task among high CPA risk parents.

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Introduction

Children less than 4 years of age accounted for 76.6% of child maltreatment fatalities in 2005, with infants less than a year old accounting for 41.9% of these deaths (Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Prevention programs designed to reduce child physical abuse (CPA) risk, and associated infant homicides, often strive to educate parents regarding the stresses inherent in caring for an infant who may spend, on average, 2–3 hours a day crying. Such programs also seek to increase awareness of the risk of harm that occurs when a parent responds to a crying infant with excessive force, and suggest ways parents can enlist help and/or manage negative feelings as needed (e.g., Dias, Smith, deGuehery, Mazur, & Shaffer, 2005; LeCroy & Milligan Associates, 2006).

Of course, efforts to reduce CPA risk through education programs may prove ineffective to the extent that parents at risk for CPA fail to utilize newly acquired information and skills during challenging moments in parenting (Crouch & Milner,

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2005). Indeed, accumulating evidence suggests that high and low CPA risk parents appear to differ in how they process information during challenging parent–child interactions. For example, a study involving a nationally representative sample of Dutch parents (with children less than 6 months of age; $N = 3,259$) found that parents who reported on an anonymous questionnaire that they had shaken, slapped, or smothered their infants at least once in response to crying, compared to parents who denied such behaviors, were more likely to describe their infants' crying as excessive (Reijneveld, van der Wal, Brugman, Hira Sing, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004). However, abusive and nonabusive parents in the aforementioned study did not differ in their objective estimates of the frequency with which their infants' displayed extended crying episodes (e.g., 3 or more hours a day for 3 or more days a week). Thus, parental interpretations of excessiveness, versus objective descriptions of the frequency of infant crying, were more predictive of maltreatment risk.

The possibility that high, compared to low, CPA risk parents differ in how they process (interpret) information related to caregiving has been suggested in a number of cognitive models of CPA (e.g., Azar, Breton, & Miller, 1998; Bugental et al., 2002), including the social information processing (SIP) model of child physical abuse (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003). According to the SIP model of CPA, high, compared to low, risk parents differ in how they encode, interpret, and respond in caregiving contexts. A basic proposition of the SIP model is that high CPA risk parents possess pre-existing schema that increase the likelihood that they will process child-related information in a manner that increases risk of hostile and/or aggressive behavior.

Consistent with this proposition, Neese, Crouch, Farc, Milner, and Skowronski (2005) found that high, compared to low, CPA risk parents displayed a greater tendency to spontaneously (without intention or awareness) encode ambiguous child-related information in more negative, relative to positive, terms. Relatedly, Farc, Crouch, Skowronski, and Milner (2004) reported that high, compared to low, CPA risk parents interpreted ambiguous child photographs as more hostile. Further, Farc et al. reported that exposure to cues of hostility (i.e., priming) increased the degree to which the ambiguous child photos were viewed as hostile, even when the hostility-related cues were presented outside of awareness (e.g., subliminally). Findings from Farc et al. illustrated how accessibility of hostility-related schema, whether due to chronic (as a function of CPA risk status) or temporary (due to priming) activation, influenced parental responses to ambiguous child stimuli. Further, Farc et al. demonstrated that CPA risk and exposure to hostile cues combined additively, with each factor increasing the degree to which ambiguous child stimuli were interpreted as hostile. Thus, personal characteristics (e.g., CPA risk status) and situational variables (e.g., presence of hostility-related cues) appear to cumulatively influence how parents process information in a caregiving context.

Given that high, compared to low, CPA risk parents make more negative interpretations of ambiguous child cues, they also may be inclined to interpret infants' cries (which are often ambiguous with regard to their meaning) in negative or hostile terms. Thus, high CPA risk parents, particularly if primed with hostile cues, may interpret an infant's cries as negative or hostile, and the hostile trait activation may automatically (without intention or awareness) increase the parent's feelings of hostility and readiness to enact hostile behavioral responses (e.g., verbal and/or physical aggression; Bargh, 1997; Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Dijksterhuis, Bargh, & Miedema, 2000). To the extent that encoding and interpretive processes occur automatically (without intention or awareness), high CPA risk parents may not recognize the contribution of their own perceptual and interpretive biases, and instead are likely to view hostility (i.e., their interpretation of the child) as originating from the crying infant (Todorov & Bargh, 2002).

To advance our understanding in this area, the present study was designed to examine the influence of CPA risk status and hostility priming on parental reactions to a crying infant. The dependent measures included trait ratings of a crying infant, feelings of hostility, and ability to modulate grip strength during a hand grip task. It was hypothesized that after viewing a 2-minute videotaped segment of a crying infant:

1. High, compared to low, CPA risk parents would rate the infant more negatively, report feeling higher levels of hostility, and use excessive force when attempting to modulate their grip to half strength.
2. As a result of temporary activation of hostile schema (produced by supraliminal priming procedures), it was hypothesized that parents in the hostile, versus neutral, priming condition would rate the crying infant more negatively, report feeling higher levels of hostility, and use excessive force when attempting to modulate their grip to half strength.
3. Based on previous findings (Bargh, Bond, Lombard, & Tota, 1986; Farc et al., 2004), it was predicted that the combined influence of CPA risk status and priming would produce an additive effect, such that high CPA risk parents in the hostile priming condition (relative to all other groups) would report the highest negative trait ratings of the crying infant, more extreme feelings of hostility, and greater use of excessive force during the hand grip task.

Method

Participants

Data from 84 parents (38.6% male, 61.4% female) were used in the analyses for this study. The mean age was 31.7 years ($SD = 10.12$) and 44.6% were African American, 48.2% Caucasian, and 7.2% Latino. The majority of the parents (68.7%) were not married and the mean number of children was 1.9 ($SD = 1.2$). Approximately half the parents (53.8%) had a high school education or less. The mean highest grade completed was 13.18 years (range 11–18 years; $SD = 1.7$).

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