



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Developmental Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dr



Breastfeeding and the mother–infant relationship—A review

Jarno Jansen^{*}, Carolina de Weerth, J. Marianne Riksen-Walraven

Department of Developmental Psychology, Behavioral Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104, Nijmegen 6500 HE, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 July 2008

Available online 15 August 2008

Keywords:

Breastfeeding

Maternal bond

Infant attachment

Mother–infant relationship

Oxytocin

Prolactin

ABSTRACT

A positive effect of breastfeeding on the mother–infant relationship is often assumed in the scientific literature, but this has not been systematically reviewed. This review aims to clarify the role of breastfeeding in the mother–infant relationship, which is conceptualized as the maternal bond toward the infant and infant attachment toward the mother. Our findings indicate that theoretical mechanisms through which breastfeeding may enhance the maternal bond or infant attachment (i.e., endocrine and sensory factors involved in breastfeeding) can be found in both humans and animal models. However, the few empirical studies investigating this association have not found convincing support for a relation between breastfeeding and the quality of the mother–infant relationship. We therefore conclude that assumptions on a positive role of breastfeeding on the mother–infant relationship are not supported by empirical evidence, and recommendation of breastfeeding should solely be based on its well-documented positive effects on infant and maternal health.

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Introduction

Lactation is a defining characteristic of all mammals. In humans, breastfeeding has been related to improved maternal health (Labbok, 2001) and improved health and development of the infant (Anderson, Johnstone, & Remley, 1999; Caspi et al., 2007; Hanson, 1998). The positive effects of breastfeeding on the mother–infant relationship have also been widely advocated. This relationship can be envisioned as consisting of two complementary facets: *the maternal bond*, or the mother's tie to her infant, and *infant attachment*, defined as the infant's tie to its caregiver.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: J.Jansen@psych.ru.nl (J. Jansen).

Claims that breastfeeding positively affects the maternal bond and/or infant attachment have been put forward by various authors, not always accompanied by references or empirical evidence supporting such a claim. For example, a review on the benefits of breastfeeding concludes that "...breastfeeding enhances maternal–child attachment. ..." (Anholm, 1986, p. 8) without citing any scientific works relating breastfeeding to the maternal bond or infant attachment. More recent publications have made similar statements without providing empirical evidence (Aguayo, 2001; Leung & Sauve, 2005; Misri, Kostaras, Fox, & Kostaras, 2000). Furthermore, mothers report choosing breastfeeding over bottle-feeding to improve the mother–infant relationship (Arora, Mcjunkin, Wehrer, & Kuhn, 2000; Gijssbers, Mesters, Andre Knottnerus, Legtenberg, & van Schayck, 2005). These types of claims and beliefs may have an important psychological impact on mothers who are unable to nurse (due to, for instance, breast surgery or jaw malformation of the infant). In these mothers, assumptions of the positive effects of breastfeeding on the mother–infant relationship put forward by scientists and nursing staff can induce feelings of guilt (Crouch & Manderson, 1995; Zetterström, 1999). In fact, a UK study reported that mothers intending to bottle-feed were, according to self-reports, likely to be charged with being a bad mother (Murphy, 1999). Given these possible psychological consequences for non-breastfeeding mothers, the importance of sound scientific evidence on the relationship between breastfeeding and the mother–infant relationship becomes all the more apparent.

This review aims to clarify the role of breastfeeding in the (development of) the mother–infant relationship. We commence by summarizing current knowledge on the concept, development, and assessment of the maternal bond and infant attachment. We then theorize how endocrine and sensory factors involved in breastfeeding may enhance the maternal bond or infant attachment. We summarize and evaluate the empirical studies on the relations between breastfeeding and the maternal bond and infant attachment. We finish this review with a discussion on general methodological problems and possible future directions for studying breastfeeding and (the development of) the mother–infant relationship.

The mother–infant relationship: The maternal bond and infant attachment

The maternal bond and infant attachment: Definitions

We consider the mother–infant relationship as consisting of two complementary facets: the maternal bond, or the tie from mother to infant, and infant attachment, or the tie from infant to mother. Infant attachment entails the tie between infant and mother that develops from a distinct innate behavioral system, promoting mother–infant proximity (Bowlby, 1969/1982). The definition of the maternal bond is less clear. Klaus and Kennell (1976) introduced the term 'maternal bonding', defined as a biologically based emotional investment in the infant. After its introduction, the term 'bonding' and the related theories on it have received a fair amount of criticism (see next section). To prevent any confusion between the concept of the maternal bond and the theories related to 'bonding', we will hereafter refer to the tie from mother to infant as 'the maternal bond'. Recent descriptions emphasize that the maternal bond is complementary to infant attachment, functioning to ensure maternal closeness to her infant (Maestripieri, 2001a). It is directed to a specific infant (Kendrick et al., 1997; Keverne, 2006), and it is characterized by the expression of a clearly defined set of maternal behaviors (Levine, Zagoory-Sharon, Feldman, & Weller, 2007). We propose a combination of these definitions and define the maternal bond as the tie from mother to infant that promotes maternal behaviors aimed at mother–infant proximity and caregiving. It develops from the distinct neurobehavioral circuitry underlying emotion and motivation (e.g., Leckman et al., 2004; Swain, Lorberbaum, Kose, & Strathearn, 2007).

The maternal bond and infant attachment: Background

The maternal bond was described by Klaus and Kennell (1976) as part of a research line that evolved mostly in response to the emerging medical procedures surrounding birth. Based on studies in ungulates and at-risk human populations, they proposed that a mother is biologically primed to

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