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## Exploring parental behavior and child interactive engagement: A study on children with a significant cognitive and motor developmental delay



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### ABSTRACT

**Background and aims:** Parenting factors are one of the most striking gaps in the current scientific literature on the development of young children with significant cognitive and motor disabilities. We aim to explore the characteristics of, and the association between, parental behavior and children's interactive engagement within this target group.

**Methods and procedures:** Twenty-five parent-child dyads (with children aged 6–59 months) were video-taped during a 15-min unstructured play situation. Parents were also asked to complete the Parental Behavior Scale for toddlers. The video-taped observations were scored using the Child and Maternal Behavior Rating Scales.

**Outcomes and results:** Low levels of parental discipline and child initiation were found. Parental responsivity was positively related to child attention and initiation.

**Conclusions and implications:** Compared to children with no or other levels of disabilities, this target group exhibits large differences in frequency levels and, to a lesser extent, the concrete operationalization of parenting domains. Further, this study confirms the importance of sensitive responsivity as the primary variable in parenting research.

### What this paper adds?

This paper is the first step in filling the striking gap of knowledge on family and parenting factors in the current literature on the specific target group of young children with a significant cognitive and motor developmental delay. The parents of these children, and the professionals who guide them, experience a lot of uncertainty about recognizing and stimulating the interactional abilities of these children as well as about which parental interaction style is optimal for the child's development. This paper allows parents and practitioners to gain insight into the general qualitative characteristics of parent–child interactions within this target group, compared to (parents with) children with no or other levels of disabilities. Foremost, it cautiously confirms the importance of sensitive responsivity as the primary variable in parenting research and intervention programs. Also very important, this paper sets the stage for further research focusing on disentangling the probable bidirectional influences between parent and child by analyzing reciprocal sequences of parental and child behavior and/or conducting longitudinal analyses.

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## 1. Introduction

A child's development is the product of continuous dynamic interactions between the child and the experiences provided by his or her social settings (Lerner, Rothbaum, Boulos, & Castellino, 2002; Sameroff, 2009). Although interrelated with nonfamilial influences and the broader context in which families live (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000), the most proximal and most influential social setting is the child's family (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Lochman, 2004).

The idea that especially parents are primary agents of developmental change in their children is reflected in an extensive body of research on parenting behavior (Mahoney & Nam, 2011; Sameroff, 2010). In typically developing children, high levels of parental support (e.g. sensitive responsiveness, warmth and stimulation) are generally found to be associated with adaptive child outcomes in a variety of developmental domains (e.g. Farah et al., 2008; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001; Larzelere, Morris, & Harrist, 2013; Stams, Juffer, & van IJzendoorn, 2002; Zhou et al., 2002). On the contrary, (intrusive) directiveness and negativity appear to be inversely associated with developmental outcomes (e.g. Ispa et al., 2004; Larsson, Viding, Rijdsdijk, & Plomin, 2008).

Mahoney and Nam (2011) pointed out that the same general patterns of parenting associated with optimal development in typically developing children are evident in studies on children with a developmental delay. For example, maternal sensitivity and responsiveness are inversely associated with behavioral problems and positively related with appropriate behavior, communication and general development in young children with intellectual disabilities (Warren & Brady, 2007). Negative parent–child interactions are associated with child behavioral problems (Hastings, Daley, Burns, & Beck, 2006), while parental scaffolding has been demonstrated to be predictive for the social competence in children with developmental delays (Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007). A recent meta-analysis of 14 studies including 576 participants showed an association between positive parenting styles and more adaptive functioning in children with developmental disabilities (Dyches, Smith, Korth, Roper, & Mandelco, 2012). Research into the association of (different levels of) directiveness with (positive as well as negative) child outcomes has shown mixed results, although higher levels of parental directiveness are often observed in children with lower levels of cognitive functioning (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2008; Spiker, Boyce, & Boyce, 2002).

However, within the target group of children with a significant cognitive and motor developmental delay, knowledge on parenting is very scarce (Chadwick, Cuddy, Kusel, & Taylor, 2005; Van keer & Maes, 2016). The combination of significant motor and cognitive limitations, resulting in a high dependency of these children on their immediate social setting, provides parents with complex and unique challenges (Fagnart, 2011; Horn & Kang, 2012; McCollum, 2002). For example, in a study of Wilder, Axelsson, and Granlund (2004), parents perceived their children with profound and multiple disabilities to have difficulties initiating interaction and maintaining attention, and perceived themselves to be less competent in understanding the child's communication and in directing and maintaining the child's attention. However, it is unclear whether these challenges result in different patterns of parenting within this specific target group. Research on parenting young children with a significant cognitive and motor disability is especially warranted, since the early years might constitute an unique window of opportunity to influence children's developmental trajectories (Guralnick, 2005; Narvaez, 2012; Nelson, 2000).

Integrating several conceptually and empirically grounded models of child development, such as the transactional model (Sameroff, 2009), the developmental systems theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992), the ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) and the parenting process model (Belsky, 1984), Guralnick (2011) described a framework for understanding contextual influences on early (typical and atypical) child development. This framework encompasses risk and protective factors at three levels: child's current developmental characteristics, family patterns of interaction and family resources. Overall, the importance of family patterns of interaction is greatly stressed and it is proposed that the central task of early intervention is to establish, restore and/or stimulate family patterns of interaction to the most optimal level as possible in order to optimize the child's developmental opportunities. As to how this process unfolds, Mahoney and colleagues state that parent–child interactions influence child development by stimulating pivotal developmental behaviors (Mahoney, Boyce, Fewell, Spiker, & Wheeden, 1998; Mahoney & Nam, 2011). Pivotal behaviors are “behaviors that are central to wide areas of functioning such that a change in the pivotal behavior will produce improvement across a number of behaviors” (Koegel, Koegel, & Carter, 1999, p. 577). Interactive engagement behaviors, such as attention and initiation, are considered by constructivist theories to be core processes of learning and development and thus regarded as pivotal developmental behaviors (Kim & Mahoney, 2004). Mahoney, Kim, and Lin (2007) presented data indicating that the degree to which parents engage in responsive interaction with their child is associated with the child's use of these pivotal behaviors.

Based on these previous findings, we aim to

1. provide a general characterization of parental behavior towards young children with a significant cognitive and motor developmental delay,
2. provide a general characterization of these children's interactive engagement,
3. explore the association between parental behavior and children's interactive engagement in this target group.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Twenty-five unique parent-child dyads participated in the study. They were recruited through hospitals, diagnostic centers, early intervention teams and specialized day care centers in Flanders (Belgium;  $n = 11$ ) and the Netherlands ( $n = 14$ ). Professionals within these organizations were asked (by mail and/or by telephone) to inform potential participants on the study and to bring them into

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