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Precursors of social emotional functioning among full-term and preterm infants at 12 months: Early infant withdrawal behavior and symptoms of maternal depression



Vibeke Moe^{a,b,*}, Hanne Cecilie Braarud^{b,c}, Tore Wentzel-Larsen^{d,e}, Kari Slinning^{b,a}, Unni Tranaas Vannebo^b, Antoine Guedeney^f, Mikael Heimann^g, Anne Margrethe Rostad^h, Lars Smith^a

^a Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway

^b National Network for Infant Mental Health, the Regional Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Eastern and Southern Norway, Oslo, Norway

^c Regional Centre for Child and Youth Mental Health and Child Welfare West, Uni Research Health, Norway

^d Norwegian Center for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, Oslo, Norway

^e The Regional Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Eastern and Southern Norway, Oslo, Norway

^f Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hospital Bichat-Claude Bernard APHP, France, Inserm U 1178 and Université, Denis Diderot Paris Cité, France

^g Division of Psychology, Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Sweden

^h Municipality of Trondheim's Welfare Clinic, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This study forms part of a longitudinal investigation of early infant social withdrawal, maternal symptoms of depression and later child social emotional functioning. The sample consisted of a group of full-term infants (N = 238) and their mothers, and a group of moderately premature infants (N = 64) and their mothers. At 3 months, the infants were observed with the Alarm Distress Baby Scale (ADBB) and the mothers completed the Edinburgh Post-natal Depression Scale (EPDS). At 12 months, the mothers filled out questionnaires about the infants' social emotional functioning (Infant Toddler Social Emotional Assessment and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire-Social Emotional). At 3 months, as we have previously shown, the premature infants had exhibited more withdrawal behavior and their mothers reported elevated maternal depressive symptoms as compared with the full-born group. At 12 months the mothers of the premature infants reported more child internalizing behavior. These data suggest that infant withdrawal behavior as well as maternal depressive mood may serve as sensitive indices of early risk status. Further, the results suggest that early maternal depressive symptoms are a salient predictor of later child social emotional functioning. However, neither early infant withdrawal behavior, nor gestational age, did significantly predict social emotional outcome at 12 months. It should be noted that the differences in strength of the relations between ADBB and EPDS, respectively, to the outcome at 12 months was modest. An implication of the study is that clinicians should be aware of the complex interplay between early infant withdrawal and signs of maternal postpartum depression in planning ports of entry for early intervention.

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, POB 1094, 0317 Oslo, Norway.
E-mail address: vibeke.moe@psykologi.uio.no (V. Moe).

1. Introduction

At one year of age, infants usually show a distinctive pattern of social emotional behaviors. At this age level the primary regulation pattern of approach and avoidance has differentiated into the early emotions of interest, joy, surprise, sadness, anger, disgust and fear (Izard, Huebner, Risser, McGinness, & Dougherty, 1980; Lewis, 2014). These early emotions are difficult to capture in a snapshot, but are more conspicuous when a parent is asked to describe the infant's predominant emotional functioning in a social context. There is, however, a dearth of knowledge of the precursors of infant social emotional functioning around the first birthday. This paper takes a look at the subdued side of a conjectural precursory mechanism: infant sustained withdrawal behavior at age 3 months and its maternal counterpart, i.e., the mothers' concurrent self-reported depressive symptoms.

The question of how early in infancy one may identify possible precursors of later child social emotional development is central in developmental psychopathology. One may ask if there is an association between early infant affective reactivity and maternal emotional functioning as observed when the baby is about 3 months old, and infant social emotional behavior nine months later, at a time when the emotions have become integrated parts of action patterns tied to particular situations. A related question concerns the saliency of infant versus parental factors when looking for an association between possible predictors very early in the first year of life and later child development. For example, it has been found that symptoms of post-partum depression affect 10–15% of mothers in the first months after birth (Eberhard-Gran, Slinning, & Rognerud, 2014; O'Hara & Swain, 1996), and that infants exposed to maternal life stressors and depressive symptoms in the first months of life are at risk for early social withdrawal (Braarud et al., 2013; Burtchen et al., 2013; Guedeney, Marchand-Martin, & Cote, 2012) and adverse social emotional development later (Goodman et al., 2011). Further, Stein et al. (2014) in a review of the recent literature showed that maternal depression and other mental disorders in the perinatal period are associated with increased risk of psychological and developmental disturbances in children. More related to maternal depression specifically, Goodman et al. (2011)'s meta-analytic review examined the strength of the association between mothers' depression and children's behavioral problems or emotional functioning. They found that maternal depression was significantly related to an array of later adverse social emotional development, such as internalizing and externalizing behavior. However, none of these studies reported on the relative importance of early infant withdrawal versus maternal postpartum depressive symptoms to later social emotional functioning.

Together with maternal postpartum depressive symptoms, a variety of factors may be associated with social withdrawal behavior in infancy, such as malnutrition, childhood abuse, mental retardation, intrauterine alcohol exposure, autism spectrum disorders and prematurity. Infant social withdrawal may also be associated with temperamental dispositions, relationship difficulties, attachment disorders and parental mental health issues (cf. Guedeney & Fermanian, 2001; Guedeney, Matthey, & Puura, 2013). Rather than constituting a diagnosis, social withdrawal might be viewed as an alarm signal for both organic and relationship disorders. In order to provide a systematic means to assess withdrawal behavior in infants aged 2–24 months, Guedeney and Fermanian (2001) constructed and validated an observation method, the Alarm Distress Baby Scale (ADBB).

Studies of the validity of ADBB have shown that the scale differentiates between clinic referred and non-referred infants (Dollberg, Feldman, Keren, & Guedeney, 2006), and between full-term and premature infants (Braarud et al., 2013). Braarud et al. (2013) found that premature infants had significantly higher ADBB composite scores at 3 and 6 months of age (but not at 9 months), as compared with full-term infants. In the large population-based EDEN-study it was found that preterm birth and low birth weight were associated with social withdrawal at 12 months. Social withdrawal was also associated with maternal and paternal vulnerabilities (Guedeney et al., 2012).

In the Braarud et al. (2013) study a significant relation between maternal depressive symptoms at 3 and 6 months, and infants' social withdrawal at 9 months was found in the full-term group. It should also be noted that concurrent associations between the two measures were found at 6 and 9 months. In a study by Matthey et al. (2005) infants 3–12 months old were observed during a routine physical examination; ADBB scores were obtained from videotaped interactions with a health professional. In addition, the parents' self-reported depressive symptoms and perceived mental health since birth were obtained. It was found that mothers who reported feelings of irritability, anxiety and sadness had infants with significantly higher ADBB scores, as compared with mothers who did not report such feelings. However, Matthey et al. (2005) observed that infant social withdrawal was associated significantly only with mothers' retrospective reports of mood difficulties since birth, not with concurrent depressive symptoms as assessed on the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS; Cox, Holden, & Sagovsky, 1987).

Longitudinal stability has been an issue in many areas of developmental research, but few studies have been able to establish a firm connection between infant withdrawal and later behavioral phenotypes. Therefore, in the present context it is of special interest that this question was investigated in a study of the longer-term impact of social withdrawal among infants (Milne, Greenway, Guedeney, & Larroque, 2009). Infants were assessed for social withdrawal at 6 months. Participants were seen again at age 30 months, at which time the children were assessed on Bayley-III (Bayley, 2005), and the mothers completed a questionnaire about their child's social emotional behavior with the Behavior Assessment System for Children (Reynold & Kamphaus, 2004). The results showed that infant withdrawal behavior was associated with maternally reported atypicality and attention problems at 30 months. Milne et al. (2009) also reported that infants' ADBB scores were negatively related to later cognitive and language Bayley scores.

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