



# Motherhood in adolescent mothers: Maternal attachment, mother–infant styles of interaction and emotion regulation at three months



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## ABSTRACT

Early motherhood is considered a risk factor for an adequate relationship between mother and infant and for the subsequent development of the infant. The principal aim of the study is to analyze micro-analytically the effect of motherhood in adolescence on the quality of mother–infant interaction and emotion regulation at three months, considering at the same time the effect of maternal attachment on these variables. Participants were 30 adolescent mother–infant dyads compared to 30 adult mother–infant dyads. At infant 3 months, mother–infant interaction was video-recorded and coded with a modified version of the Infant Caregiver Engagement Phases and the Adult Attachment Interview was administered to the mother. Analysis showed that adolescent mothers (vs. adult mothers) spent more time in negative engagement and their infants spent less time in positive engagement and more time in negative engagement. Adolescent mothers are also less involved in play with their infants than adult mothers. Adolescent mother–infant dyads (vs. adult mother–infant dyads) showed a greater duration of negative matches and spent less time in positive matches. Insecure adolescent mother–infant dyads (vs. insecure adult mother–infant dyads) demonstrated less involvement in play with objects and spent less time in positive matches. To sum up adolescent mother–infant dyads adopt styles of emotion regulation and interaction with objects which are less adequate than those of dyads with adult mothers. Insecure maternal attachment in dyads with adolescent mothers (vs. adult mother infant dyads) is more influential as risk factor.

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## 1. Introduction

Motherhood in adolescence and early adulthood is seen as a significant risk factor both for the development of the infant and for the subsequent developmental trajectories of the mother. The infants of adolescent mothers have a greater probability of having insecure and disorganized attachment to their mothers in childhood (Broussard, 1995; Flaherty & Sadler, 2011; Frodi, Grolnick, Bridges, & Berko, 1990; Moran, Forbes, Evans, Tarabulsky, & Madigan, 2008; Ijzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999; Ward & Carlson, 1995), less stability in attachment from early to middle childhood (1–5 years) (Lounds, Borkowski, Thomas, Maxwell, & Weed, 2005), a greater probability of suffering abuse (Bolton, 1990) and of having

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behaviour problems, poor academic achievement and delays in cognitive and linguistic development (Moffitt, 2002; Oxford & Spieker, 2006; Pomerleau, Scuccimarri, & Malcuit, 2003; Rafferty, Griffin, & Lodise, 2011). In adolescence and adulthood they display a range of adverse outcomes, such as early school leaving, poor academic achievement, unemployment, early parenthood, and violent offending (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008; Jaffee, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001; Meade, Kershaw, & Ickovics, 2008). Early motherhood, at the same time, limits the subsequent life opportunities of the young women (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Taylor, & Dickson, 2001), leading them to have a low level of education and being underemployed and giving rise to a higher probability of suffering depression (Boden, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2008; Horwitz, Bruce, Hoff, Harley, & Jekel, 1996) and having substance abuse problems in adulthood (Moffitt, 2002).

The double risk, for mother and infant, inherent in adolescent motherhood, is linked to the fact that adolescent mothers have to simultaneously tackle potentially conflicting developmental tasks: the transition to adulthood, involving separation and individuation from parental figures, and to parenthood, involving the nurturing of an infant and caring for his physical and emotional needs (Aiello & Lancaster, 2007; Fraiberg, 1978). This may create strong conflict in the young mother between her need for autonomy and the infant's intense dependency on her, giving rise to depression, parenting stress and low self-esteem and also affecting her ways of relating to and nurturing the infant (Osofsky, Hann, & Peebles, 1993; Reid & Meadows-Oliver, 2007; Secco et al., 2007; Slade et al., 2005).

At the same time cognitive and neurophysiological development in adolescent and young adult mothers still has to be completed (Giedd, 2005; Steinberg, 2005). Such immaturity may be an obstacle for the young mother when she is making choices as to which methods of parenting to adopt with her infant. Mothers under 20 are also less cognitively competent with regard to taking on their parental role (cognitive readiness to parent) and to knowledge of the stages of development of their infants (Whitman, Borkowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001).

### 1.1. *Motherhood in adolescence and risk factors*

Motherhood in adolescence is also often associated with other risk factors for parenthood such as low socio-economic status (SES) and educational attainment, characteristics which are also well-known to be correlated to poor parenting. However, a number of studies have shown that even if the effect of such variables is controlled, adolescence is still, per se, a high risk fact for a mother's parenting skills (Berlin, Brady-Smith, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Rafferty et al., 2011).

Other risk factors are considered as characteristics of adolescents or of their family environment which are predictive of early motherhood. Of these some authors highlight disorderly conduct (Bardone, Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, & Silva, 1996), aggressive and delinquent behaviour and bullying in pre-adolescence (Gaudie et al., 2010; Lehti et al., 2012) and depression prior to pregnancy (Lehti et al., 2012). A history of childhood abuse and maltreatment (Jaffee, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Taylor, et al., 2001; Madigan, Vaillancourt, & Mckibbon, 2012; Valentino, Nuttall, Comas, Borkowski, & Akai, 2012) and having a mother who gave birth during adolescence (Meade et al., 2008) are also predictive of early parenthood. Other risk factors in the post-partum period may also be associated with that of being an adolescent or young mother. They include post-natal depression (Birkeland, Thompson, & Phares, 2005; Secco et al., 2007), being a single mother, social isolation (Birkeland et al., 2005) and perceived poor social support (Logsdon, Birkimer, Simpson, & Looney 2005).

A further important risk factor, albeit little studied, is the greater likelihood of adolescent mothers having insecure attachment models than adult mothers (Figueiredo, Bifulco, Pacheco, Costa, & Magarinho, 2006; Madigan, Moran, & Pederson, 2006). Insecure maternal attachment is a risk factor for the development of secure attachment in the infant (Main, 1995; Steele, Steele, & Fonagy, 1996), as well as for maternal adequate parenting (Bifulco, Moran, Jacobs, & Bunn, 2009) and for the development of early mother–infant interaction (Biringen et al., 2000; Haft & Slade, 1989; Riva Crugnola et al., 2013). Insecure maternal attachment is also frequently associated with other risk factors for parenthood such as pre and postnatal depression, more adverse social conditions and disrupted childhood experiences in the mothers (Bifulco et al., 2004).

### 1.2. *Motherhood in adolescence and infant–mother relationship*

The risk factors inherent in early motherhood affects styles of interaction, responsiveness and, more generally, the parenting methods they adopt with their infants, all of which are less adequate than those of adult mothers. In caring for their infants these mothers use more instrumental behaviour (cleaning the infant, fixing clothes, etc.) and less affectionate behaviour than adult mothers (Krpan, Coombs, Zinga, Steiner, & Fleming, 2005). They are also more likely to adopt harsh parenting, accompanied by both physical and verbal abuse (Andreozzi, Flanagan, Seifer, Brunner, & Lester, 2002; Lee & Guterman, 2010; Whitman et al., 2001). An adolescent mother's potential for child abuse is significantly higher than that of adult mothers also in association with her having been victims of abuse in childhood (Zuravin & Di Blasio, 1996).

Various studies have found, on the whole, intrusiveness and little affection, although there was certain variability in the samples studied (Driscoll & Easterbrooks, 2007; Easterbrooks, Chaudhuri, & Gestsdottir, 2005). Some studies have shown that adolescent mothers demonstrate less expressiveness towards their infants and that there is greater expression and sharing of negative emotions and less expression of positive emotions in young mothers than in adult mothers (Barnard, 1997; Culp, Osofsky, & Osofsky, 1991; Stevenson Barratt & Roach, 1995). These ways of expressing emotions affect their infants who display a poorer capacity for affective communication (Osofsky, Eberhart-Wright, Ware, & Hann, 1992).

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