



Poor infant soothability and later insecure-ambivalent attachment: Developmental change in phenotypic markers of risk or two measures of the same construct?

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ABSTRACT

Using data from the Durham Child Health and Development Study ($n = 148$), the current study examines the associations between child and parenting variables at 6 months and child attachment quality at 12 months of age and maternal report of child self regulation at 24 months of age. Child and parent variables predicted distinct forms of insecure attachment relationships. Observations of infant soothability during the reunion session of the Face-to-Face Still Face Paradigm at 6 months differentially predicted children with later insecure-ambivalent attachments from those with secure attachments. Observations of maternal negative intrusiveness at 6 months of age differentially predicted children with insecure-avoidant attachments from those with secure attachments. Maternal sensitivity at 6 months was associated with maternal report of child affective problems at 24 months, but this association was moderated by infant negativity during soothing and later moderated by child attachment quality. Collectively, these results suggest the following two mutually exclusive possibilities regarding infant soothability and later ambivalent attachment quality: either infant soothability is a unique and distinct predictor of later ambivalent attachment quality and this cascade represents a developmental shift in child risk during the first year of life, or that infant soothability following a stressful task at 6 months of age is itself an early indicator of ambivalent attachment behavior with the mother. The data from the current study could not provide differential support for one possibility over the other.

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Research suggests a broad range of influences on the formation of early parent–child attachment quality, with a majority of studies identifying the independent and joint influences of parental sensitivity and child temperament. However, the development of a secure attachment is not a developmental end point but rather a period of transition in the cascading development of the child's early social and emotional functioning (Cox, Mills-Koonce, Propper, & Gariepy, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that the interplay between child characteristics, parenting behaviors, and parent–child attachment quality has been associated with multiple domains of socioemotional functioning, including the development of self-regulation (Cassidy, 1994; Isabella, 1993), empathy (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986), attention processes (Atkinson et al., 2009), internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Lyons-Ruth, Easterbrooks, & Cibelli, 1997), and peer relationships (Booth, Rose-Krasnor, & Rubin, 1991; Kerns, 1994). In the current study we examine child and parental precursors of attachment quality at 1 year of age, as well as the interplay among these variables in the prediction of child affective problems one year later. An emphasis

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is placed on situating the emergence of the parent–child attachment relationship within a broader developmental cascade leading to early self-regulatory abilities.

1. Child and parent factors associated with parent–child attachment quality

Research on early temperament and parent–child attachment formation has produced largely equivocal results. Some studies have found direct associations between early temperament and attachment quality (Kochanska, 1998; Mangelsdorf, McHale, Diener, Goldstein, & Lehn, 2000; Susman-Stillman, Kalkose, Egeland, & Waldman, 1996); others find indirect or moderated associations (Isapa, Fine, & Thornburg, 2002; Velderman, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Juffer, & van IJzendoorn, 2006), and some find no associations whatsoever (Bokhorst et al., 2003; Kochanska, Aksan, & Carlson, 2005; Pauli-Pott, Haverkock, Pott, & Beckmann, 2007; Scher and Mayseless, 2000). Although a review of over 50 published studies of infant temperament and attachment by Vaughn, Bost, and van IJzendoorn (2008) led to the authors' conclusion that individual differences in attachment quality (secure vs. insecure) could not be explained by temperament constructs, it is possible that some of the mixed findings in the current literature stem from methodological inconsistencies as well as a focus on secure vs. insecure analyses instead of differentiating subtypes of insecurity (avoidant vs. ambivalence).

Methods for assessing infant temperament generally include one or some combination of the following: (1) parental report of infant behavior, (2) standardized laboratory measures, or (3) home observations of child behavior. Furthermore, they may reflect temperamental constructs as varied as duration of orientation, distress to limitations, positive affectivity, activity level, soothability, and fear. Of the available evidence for an association between difficult child temperament and attachment insecurity, a disproportionate number of studies report that child fearful and reactive temperament specifically differentiates children with secure attachment from those with insecure-ambivalent attachments (see Crockenberg, 1981; Niederhofer & Reiter, 2003; Susman-Stillman, Kalkoske, Egeland, & Waldman, 1996), while far fewer studies report that temperament differentiates children with insecure-avoidant attachments from those with secure attachments (Lewis & Feiring, 1989; Mangelsdorf, McHale, Diener, Goldstein, & Lehn, 2000). This notion is supported by meta-analytic evidence from 18 studies that found small, but significant, effects of temperament as a predictor of insecure-ambivalent attachment behavior only (Goldsmith & Alansky, 1987). Furthermore, non-optimal neurological status on 7- and 10-day Brazelton NBAS assessments has been found to specifically predict insecure-ambivalent attachments (Crockenberg, 1981; Waters, Vaughn, & Egeland, 1980), as have in utero experiences (such as exposure to cocaine, opiates, and other substances) (Seifer et al., 2004).

In contrast to the mixed findings relating early temperament and attachment quality, greater parental sensitivity has repeatedly predicted an increased likelihood of a secure parent–child attachment relationship (for meta-analysis see De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Bowlby (1969) posited that the caregiving system provides a secure base by fostering a sense of mastery through encouragement and support of exploration when the child's exploration system is activated, and by providing comfort and regulation of negative affect when the child's fear system is activated. From this perspective, the construction of a secure attachment relationship rests on a history of sensitive care characterized by contingent, unconditional responsiveness to the activation of the needs of the child whenever they are expressed over time and across contexts. Indeed, empirical research has repeatedly found maternal sensitivity to be one of the most reliable predictors of attachment security (Bretherton, 1990; Isabella & Belsky, 1991; Sroufe, 1985) across socioeconomic (Diener, Nievar, & Wright, 2003) and cultural groups (Arace, 2006; Vereijken, Riksen-Walraven, & Kondo-Ikemura, 1997), although it should be noted that more specific conceptualizations of non-optimal parenting, such as frightened/frightening caregiving (Hesse & Main, 2006; Main & Hesse, 1990) or disrupted affective communication (Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, & Parsons, 1999) are better predictors of attachment disorganization.

2. The interplay among parenting, child factors, and attachment quality in the development of emotional and affective problems

Heightened and prolonged levels of negative affectivity in young children have been identified as a risk factor for the development of poor/maladaptive emotion and emotion regulation (Belsky, Friedman, & Hsieh, 2001; Eisenberg, Fabes, Bernzweig, Karbon, Poulin, & Hanish, 1993; Hagekull & Bohlin, 2003; Stifter & Spinrad, 2002). When children are predisposed to high levels of negative affect and are unable to independently regulate or co-regulate (with the help of a caregiver) this negativity may lead to an increased likelihood of maladaptive developmental outcomes. A sensitive and supportive caregiver, however, influences the way a young child reacts to various situations by helping to alleviate negative emotions, reinforcing positive ones, and structuring the environment that solicits the emotional experience (Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1994). As such, maternal sensitivity to infants' signals and affective expressions during the first year of life has been found to play a crucial role in the formation of infants' ability to regulate their own emotion (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2004; Haley & Stansbury, 2003; Moore et al., 2009), which in turn has been related to successful self-regulation in later years (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992; Shulman, Elicker, & Sroufe, 1994; Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999). Furthermore, poor emotion regulation and uncontrolled emotionality has been associated with later psychopathology, such as depression, aggression, and social withdrawal (Calkins, 1994; Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995; Izard, 2002).

The effects of parenting behaviors on emotional development, however, are not independent of child variables. Multiple studies have identified the interaction between sensitive caregiving and child temperament as a critical component of

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