

Research Project Overview

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Purpose: Doctoral Dissertation

Institution: Portland State University

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Brief Description/Title:

**"Mother/Infant Interaction in the
Context of Four Maternal Risk
Factors"**

Abstract

Mother/Infant Interaction in the Context of Four Maternal Risk Factors

Social-emotional skill acquisition in *infancy* can effect positive outcomes in all developmental domains as the child matures. Caregiver/infant interaction is the critical context for positive social-emotional development in the infant. Within interaction, three areas of infant social-emotional development are fostered by the dyadic relationship of caregiver and infant (a) attachment, (b) emotional regulation, and (c) communication. However, infant skill acquisition within these areas of social-emotional development may be interrupted by risk factors in the caregiving environment. The outcomes for infants in a disrupted dyadic interaction are negative mental health issues as the infant matures.

A review of the research literature links risk factors of the caregiver to disruptions in the positive aspects of the interactive dyad. Research findings, regarding the risk factors of maternal mental health, maternal age, and maternal poverty, are associated with a negative impact on infant social-emotional skill acquisition. Maternal literacy level is also linked to early interaction skill ability of the mother and her infant. When a caregiver is exposed to more than one of the risk factors, cumulative risk occurs and becomes even more detrimental to caregiver/infant interaction. Risk factors are additive, with four factors shown to have a more negative impact on child outcomes compared to less than four risk factors (Sameroff& Fiese, 2000: Sanson et al., 2000). Therefore, caregiver/infant interaction that takes place in a context of multiple risk (i.e., four or more risk factors) is more likely to be associated with a lack of positive social-emotional skill acquisition in the infant. The research literature, however, does not provide an association or link between cumulative risk and caregiver/infant interaction. Additional research is needed to increase knowledge of caregiver/infant behaviors during interaction when at least four maternal risk factors are present.

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge about the impact of cumulative risk as it pertains to mother/infant interaction. The potential outcome of psychosocial or mental health disorders, in adulthood, is linked to the number of risk factors in an infant's environment and the duration of exposure to risk factors as the infant matures. Positive social-emotional skill development in infancy is dependent upon positive interaction with a caregiver. The interaction ability of the caregiver in responding to infant cues is critical in a multiple risk environment to ensure infant progress toward positive social and emotional development. Therefore, it is important to identify behaviors of the caregiver and the infant in order to support positive elements and infant development within interaction.

A descriptive research study will be employed using both qualitative and quantitative data to answer the following questions:

- *\What do maternal and infant behaviors look like during playing and feeding within a caregiving context of cumulative risk that includes, at the least, the four risk factors of (a) maternal mental health, (b) maternal adjudication, (c) maternal age, and (d) maternal poverty.
- *What are additional personal history factors (i.e., family, education) that may impact the interaction abilities of a population of teen mothers?

The mother's attending L.A.M.P. will be interviewed to understand factors that may be part of their family and school histories. Mother and infant interaction will be observed and videotaped on the campus of L.A.M.P. The *Infant Care giver Interaction Scale (JCJS)* will be used to assess behaviors during interaction (Munson & Odom, 1995). Results will be examined to determine any behavioral trends that emerge when infants and their caregivers, who have at least four environmental risk factors, interact during play and feeding. Through interviews (including a survey), observations, videotaping, and demographic information the impact of cumulative risk, on mother/infant interaction, will be increased. With an increased understanding of early social-emotional development within the context of multiple risk it may be possible to identify ways to improve parenting curriculum and infant services, leading to more positive developmental outcomes for children.