

Unintended pregnancy predicts feelings that parenting is a burden

July 23 2007

The relationship between a mother and her infant is believed by many to be the foundation of healthy childhood development, but researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia have found pregnancy acceptance to be the first step in forming the mother/child bond.

Analyzing data collected from the national evaluation of the Early Head Start program, Jean Ispa, professor and co-chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Human Environmental Science (HES), and her colleagues, found associations between how accepting mothers were of being pregnant and their toddlers' security of attachment. In the study, 173 young, low-income black mothers, who either were pregnant or had delivered within the past 11 months, were questioned regarding their feelings about pregnancy. When children were about a year old, their attachment security to their mothers was assessed.

"The relation between mothers' pregnancy acceptance and toddler attachment security is noteworthy because if attachment problems continue into the later years, the child could have self-esteem problems, difficulty learning and a harder time forming relationships," Ispa said.

The researchers also found that mothers who were not accepting of their pregnancies had a greater tendency to later feel that parenting is burdensome. These findings suggest a need for policies that support reproductive education, according to Ispa. In addition, pregnant women who struggle to accept motherhood may benefit from policies that

encourage social service professionals to screen for low acceptance of pregnancy and provide extra support to women who are not happy to be pregnant.

"Making services, such as childcare, available to low-income mothers is a major way we can help relieve stress that can negatively affect children. Overall, mothers want what is best for their children," Ispa said.

Ispa notes that her other research indicates that most mothers, even those whose pregnancies were unintended, enjoy their children. She also points out that while pregnancy acceptance predicted feelings that parenting is burdensome, it did not predict the degree to which mothers said they enjoyed interacting with their children or the level of warmth observed in their interactions. Apparently, mothers were able to separate their feelings about being trapped by the responsibilities imposed by childrearing from their feelings about their toddlers.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Unintended pregnancy predicts feelings that parenting is a burden (2007, July 23) retrieved 24 April 2024 from

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