

Close ties between parents and babies yield benefits for preschoolers

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Having close ties with parents is obviously good for preschoolers, but what does that really mean? It means that the preschoolers are better able to control their own behavior by showing patience, deliberation, restraint, and even maturity.

That's the finding of a new study conducted by researchers at the University of Iowa and published in the January/February 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers looked at 102 mostly white families—mothers, fathers, and babies—who had volunteered for the study from the time the children were 7 months old until they were almost 4 and a half years old. Repeated observations were carried out in the families' homes and in a laboratory. In the first two years, the researchers observed how parents and children related to each other, particularly whether they were in sync, picked up on each other's cues, communicated well, and enjoyed each other's company. In short, they gauged whether the parents and children had developed a close, positive, reciprocal, cooperative, and mutually responsive relationship.

When the children were 4 years and 4 months old, the researchers observed how the children responded when they were told not to do something by a parent when the parent then left the room. They also observed how the preschoolers did on tasks that called for self-regulation—patience, deliberation, restraint, and maturity of impulses—such as being asked to hold a small piece of candy in their

mouths without eating it.

The study found that children who had developed a close, positive, reciprocal, and mutually responsive relationship with their mothers in the first two years of their lives did much better in both respects—responding to their mothers’ requests not to do something and regulating their own behavior--than children who hadn’t developed such ties.

The researchers also explored how mutually responsive relationships between mothers and children worked. When mothers and babies develop this closeness in the first two years, the study found, mothers don’t need to use forceful discipline later to get their children to do what they ask and refrain from other behaviors. And in turn, subtle control on the part of the mothers leads to better, more compliant, and more self-regulated behavior when the children are at preschool age.

Some of these findings were similar for fathers and children. Mutually responsive, positive relationships between fathers and children in the first two years of life also were associated with children’s better performance in tasks that called for self-regulation when the children were 4 and a half. However, in contrast to mothers and children, the reasons for the father-child link were less clear. Relationships between fathers and children in general have been studied much less than those between mothers and children, and more research is needed to understand their dynamics.

“Most parents know that when they interact with their infant and young toddler, they are laying important foundations for the child’s future development,” according to Grazyna Kochanska, Stuit Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Iowa and the lead author of the study. “Now we have a better understanding of what that really means. Your investment in building a mutually responsive, positive,

close relationship early on will generate considerable payoff several years later.”

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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