

Mother-child attachment, children's temperament play a role in terrible 2 conflicts

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Stories about the “terrible twos” abound in parenting lore. New research published in the March/April 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development* finds that the way mothers and their 2-year-olds relate to each other affects the quality but not the frequency of conflicts when children are two, and that children’s temperament also plays a role.

Researchers at Lehigh University and the University of California-Davis recruited 60 mothers and their children through birth announcements in local newspapers, then observed them in two sessions: one 50-minute lab visit when the children were 30 months old, and one 90-minute home visit when the children were 36 months.

During each observation, the researchers looked at all episodes of conflict, and examined whether they contained compromise, justification, or aggravation (i.e., simple insistence without explanation or threats) by both mothers and children. They also examined whether the conflicts were resolved. Mothers provided information about the children’s temperament and attachment security, or the degree of trust that children have in their mothers’ responsiveness and availability.

The study found that mother-child conflict during both observations was frequent (about 20 times an hour), and there was a lot of variation in the frequency of conflict (from as many as 55 times an hour to as few as 5 times an hour) and in the quality of conflict between mothers and children.

Furthermore, children's temperament was related to the frequency and quality of conflict, that is, children who were highly active and who had problems controlling their behavior had more conflict with mothers than less active children and children who did not have trouble controlling their behavior. In addition, highly active children and children who frequently and intensely experienced negative emotions had less constructive conflict with their mothers, involving less resolution, more aggravation, and less justification, than children who did not have these qualities.

Attachment security was not related to the frequency of conflict between mothers and their children, but to the quality, the study found. Mothers and children who had secure relationships had constructive conflict involving high levels of resolution, compromise, and justification. In sum, both the quality of children's relationships with their mothers and children's personality types were found to shape the nature of conflict between mothers and their children at age two.

“Children with difficult temperaments tend to have more frequent and less constructive conflict with mothers,” according to Deborah Laible, associate professor of psychology at Lehigh University and the lead author of the study. “High-quality relationships between mothers and children were associated with more constructive conflict between mothers and children. In secure relationships, both mothers and children seem committed to maintaining relational harmony by resolving conflict, compromising, and justifying their side of an argument.”

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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