

Study to explore maternal bond

May 1 2008

University of Manchester researchers are studying the bond between mothers and their babies to see if levels of sensitivity towards the child are different for healthy women and those with mental health problems such as post-natal depression and schizophrenia.

It is hoped that the findings will lead to the development of a therapy for mothers who are struggling to bond with their baby.

Research shows that impaired bonding and poor maternal sensitivity during the first years of life can have a detrimental effect on the future psychological development of the child. Studies have shown that a depressed mother's poor interaction with her child interferes with emotion and attention regulation in early infancy and these effects are still evident in middle childhood with academic and behavioural problems. Other studies have shown behavioural and cognitive difficulties in four and five-year-old children of depressed mothers.

A past history of depression, a lack of support, financial worries, an unplanned pregnancy or unrealistic expectations about motherhood can lead to women developing post-natal depression. With this the woman might carry out basic functions, such as nappy changing and feeding, but struggle to interact properly with her infant. This will be shown by a lack of eye contact or not talking to the baby. On the other hand, women experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia may have intrusive interactions with the infant and not react appropriately to the infant's cues.

Dr Anja Wittkowski and her clinical psychology team will study the

relationships and interaction of women and their babies to find out exactly how this differs and what can be done to improve it in the Mother-Infant Relationship and Mentalisation (MIRAM) study.

Dr Wittkowski explained: “We want to see if the level of bonding differs between the groups. We are interested in how mothers with mental health problems understand and predict thought processes and intentions in other people - including their own babies. We want to see how this affects the mother-infant relationship and if there are any changes in these abilities over a three-month period.”

The team is recruiting healthy women, women with post-natal depression and women with a diagnosis of schizophrenia from across the North West. They will be asked to fill in questionnaires about themselves, their medical histories and their relationship with their baby as well as comment on some pictures tasks. They will also be videoed playing with their baby for five minutes. The whole process, which takes half an hour, will be repeated three months later to see if there has been any improvement.

Dr Wittkowski, who is based at the University of Manchester as well as at the Mother and Baby unit at Wythenshawe Hospital, said: “Women are often expected to take to motherhood ‘like a duck to water’ but that is not always the case. We hope to explore the psychological processes that contribute to different interaction styles in the mother-infant relationship and then develop an intervention to help mothers who need it.

“The women who take part will not only find it interesting and help other mothers, they will be able to keep the video of them and their child playing together. And if they are experiencing problems relating to their baby, I can use the video to give them feedback and advise them on how they can improve their situation.”

Source: University of Manchester

Citation: Study to explore maternal bond (2008, May 1) retrieved 8 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-05-explore-maternal-bond.html>

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