

Nearly one-third of US parents don't know what to expect of infants

May 4 2008

Almost one-third of U.S. parents have a surprisingly low-level knowledge of typical infant development and unrealistic expectations for their child's physical, social and emotional growth, according research from the University of Rochester. The new findings, which suggest that such false parenting assumptions can not only impair parent-child interactions, but also rob kids of much-needed cognitive stimulation, will be presented Sunday, May 4, at the Pediatric Academic Society meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii.

“There are numerous parenting books telling people what to expect when they're pregnant,” said Heather Paradis, M.D., a pediatric fellow at the University of Rochester Medical Center. “But once a baby is born, an astonishing number of parents are not only unsure of what to anticipate as their child develops, but are also uncertain of when, how or how much they are to help their babies reach various milestones, such as talking, grabbing, discerning right from wrong, or even potty-training.”

Moms and dads often misinterpret behaviors – some parents expect too much of babies too soon and grow frustrated; others underestimate their child's abilities, preventing them from learning on their own.

Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study's Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), Paradis and her colleagues analyzed the average parenting knowledge of a nationally-representative sample of parents of more than 10,000 9-month-old babies. These parents first answered an 11-point survey designed to distinguish informed parents from less-informed

parents (asking questions such as “Should a 1-year-old child be able to tell between right from wrong” and “Should a 1-year-old child be ready to begin toilet-training”). Those who scored 4 or fewer correct answers were considered to have low-level knowledge of typical infant development.

Paradis and colleagues then compared these knowledge scores to both scores from (1) a 73-point videotape analysis of the same families’ parent-child interactions while teaching a new task, and (2) from these parents’ self-reports of how often they engaged their child in enrichment activities (e.g. reading books, telling stories, or singing songs).

The analysis revealed that 31.2 percent of parents of infants had low-level knowledge of infant development, and that this low-level knowledge correlated with lower parental education level and income. Still, even when controlling for maternal age, education, income and mental state (e.g., depression), low-level knowledge of infant development still significantly and independently predicted parents being both less likely to enjoy healthy interactions with their infants during learning tasks and less likely to engage their children in regular enrichment activities

“This is a wake-up call for pediatricians,” Paradis said. “At office visits, we have a prime opportunity to intervene and help realign parents’ expectations for their infants, and in turn, promote healthy physical, social, and emotional development for these children. On the other hand, we still have more work cut out for us – additional research is needed to explore how these unrealistic expectations form in the first place.”

Source: University of Rochester

Citation: Nearly one-third of US parents don't know what to expect of infants (2008, May 4)
retrieved 10 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-05-one-third-parents-dont-infants.html>

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