A mother's sensitivity may help language growth in children with autism spectrum disorder

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A new study by researchers from the University of Miami shows that maternal sensitivity may influence language development among children who go on to develop autism. Although parenting styles are not considered as a cause for autism, this report examines how early parenting can promote resiliency in this population. The study entitled, "A Pilot Study of Maternal Sensitivity in the Context of Emergent Autism," is published online this month and will appear in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

"Language problems are among the most important areas to address for children with autism, because they represent a significant impairment in daily living and communication," says Daniel Messinger, associate professor in the department of psychology at the University of Miami (UM) College of Arts and Sciences and principal investigator of a larger study of infants at-risk for autism, which includes this study.

Maternal sensitivity is defined in the study as a combination of warmth, responsiveness to the child's needs, respect for his or her emerging independence, positive regard for the child, and maternal structuring, which refers to the way in which a mother engages and teaches her child in a sensitive manner. For example, if a child is playing with colored rings, the mother might say, "This is the green ring," thus teaching the child about his environment, says Messinger.

In this study, maternal sensitivity (and primarily, sensitive structuring) was more predictive of language growth among toddlers developing autism than among children who did not go on to an autism diagnosis. One possible explanation is that children with autism may be more dependent on their environment to learn certain skills that seem to come more naturally to other children.

"Parenting may matter even more for children with developmental problems such as autism because certain things that tend to develop easily in children with typical neurological development, like social communication, don't come as naturally for kids with autism, so these skills need to be taught," says Jason K. Baker, a postdoctoral fellow at the Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, who conducted the study with Messinger while at UM.

For the study, 33 children were assessed in the lab at 18, 24, 30 and 36 months of age. Some of the children had an older sibling diagnosed with autism and were considered high risk for autism.

At the 18-month assessment, the researchers videotaped a five minute period of mother and child free play in which the mothers were asked to play as they would at home. Aspects of maternal sensitivity were scored on seven-point scales ranging from absence of sensitive behavior to extremely sensitive behavior. Children's language was assessed at 2 and 3 years. At the 3 year visit, when the children were old enough to be evaluated, 12 of children from the high risk group received an autism-spectrum diagnosis.

The study was funded by the National Institutes of Health. Its findings parallel previous treatment research indicating that when children with autism increase their connection to the environment they do much better, Baker says. Understanding the benefits of sensitive structuring in the development of language among young children with emergent autism

provides scientific support for early intervention programs that focus on parent-child interactions. "We know that parenting doesn't cause autism. The message here is that parents can make a difference in helping their children fight against autism," Baker says.

Provided by University of Miami