

# A blind eye in regards to a mother's love

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Aggressive and emotionally cold children literally do not see the love in their mother's eyes, according to new research findings that highlight the significance of poor eye contact in childhood.

Children who rank highly for having what are known as “callous

unemotional” traits make uniquely little [eye contact](#) with their mothers and don't display or respond much to affection, says an international team of researchers led by Professor Mark Dadds, of the UNSW School of Psychology.

“A healthy brain is drawn to biologically relevant cues and the eyes of other people provide so many of those,” says Professor Dadds. “But this is a sub-group of kids who are quite different. They are low on emotion and they don’t connect with authority figures.”

The team – including John Brennan from the UNSW School of Psychiatry, David Hawes from the University of Sydney and colleagues from the Institute of Psychiatry at King’s College, London – is studying children with repetitive patterns of aggressive, hostile and antisocial behavior.

Most are emotionally “hot” - they are impulsive, emotional and given to overly hostile interpretations of the world, but they have normal levels of empathy and are largely reactive in their aggression. Those in the much smaller “cold” group are under-emotional, show problems with empathy and may also be proactive or even predatory in their aggression – many go on to become involved in serious crime, violence and drug-taking.

The team conducted pioneering laboratory experiments using eye-tracking devices and video cameras to record how much eye contact such children made while interacting with their parents.

The studies involved more than 100 British and Australian children aged between four and 16 who were diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and with no other significant mental, medical or developmental issues. They were compared with control groups of children with no mental health or behavioural problems. All the children were from the same regions of rural NSW, Sydney and South London

and from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds.

The experiments were conducted “blind”, meaning that observers were not told to which group each child belonged. Parents and children were discreetly observed by camera and two-way mirrors as they played and talked freely for about 30 minutes in a room equipped with toys and furniture. The mothers were then instructed by telephone to look into their child’s eyes and express their [love](#) in whatever way felt most natural for them.

Mothers’ levels of affection and eye contact did not differ between those with healthy or children with behavior problems. Most of the children showed a natural propensity to “lock gaze” with loved ones, although those with ODD showed lower levels of returned affection than those in the control group. Those with "cold" traits showed little interest in sharing gazes with their [mothers](#) or in returning affection.

The team also found in separate experiments that boys with cold traits have problems recognising fear in other people. This impairment disappears, however, when they are specifically asked to focus on the eye region of faces showing the emotion.

Professor Dadds says the findings support a growing awareness that children with aggressive and antisocial behavior are not a homogenous group and that treatments should vary accordingly: "While the present treatment of choice for ODD is evidence-based, positive-parenting strategies, the new findings suggest that differences in emotionality need to be considered. Other research suggests that the style, stability and quality of parenting have relatively little impact on these 'cold' [children](#). Indeed, the reverse seems to be true – they have a significant impact on their parents.”

Provided by University of New South Wales

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