

Secure attachment to moms helps irritable babies interact with others

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Children with difficult temperaments are often the most affected by the quality of their relationships with their caregivers. New research suggests that highly irritable children who have secure attachments to their mothers are more likely to get along well with others than those who aren't securely attached.

These findings, from researchers at the University of Maryland, are published in the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers followed 84 infants from [birth](#) to age 2. About a third were characterized as highly irritable, while two-thirds were characterized as moderately irritable. The study also included their mostly low-income mothers. [Irritability](#) was measured using a test administered in the home within a month of the babies' births; the infants had to react to a series of events, including being undressed and hearing a bell ringing.

The researchers also measured infants' attachment at 12 months, based primarily on the babies' behavior when observed with their mothers. Securely attached infants were able to turn toward mom when distressed and use her for comfort, while insecurely attached infants were not.

When the children were 18 and 24 months, they were observed in a laboratory setting to assess how they responded to being around unfamiliar adults and toys.

The study found that for highly irritable [babies](#), the quality of

attachment between the children and their mothers predicted how the children responded to unfamiliar [adults](#) and toys. Highly irritable newborns were the most sociable as [toddlers](#) if they were securely attached and the least sociable as toddlers if they were insecurely attached. In addition, highly irritable infants who were insecurely attached were the least able to engage in exploration as toddlers. In contrast, the quality of infants' attachment was not related to either exploration or [sociability](#) in toddlers who were moderately irritable as [newborns](#).

These findings suggest that infants who are highly irritable and can't use their mothers as a secure base have the greatest difficulty interacting with both people and objects. But highly irritable infants who can turn to their mothers for comfort and support have a greater tendency to be sociable in such situations.

The researchers suggest that interventions to help children become securely attached to their caregivers may be especially important for children who are highly irritable. Intervening in this way—for example, by using video feedback that helps parents become more aware of their infants' needs and respond sensitively—may be important to irritable children's ability to explore the world around them and engage with others.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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