

Early family system types predict children's emotional attention

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

The type of family system during pregnancy and the baby's first year predicts the way the child processes emotional information. The results of a ten-year longitudinal study conducted at the University of Tampere highlight the importance of the whole family system in children's emotional development in addition to the early mother-child

relationship.

The participants in the study were 79 ten-year-old children from different family types. In the experimental setting, the children were shown emotionally positive pictures of happy faces and threatening pictures of angry faces. The research used a technique called the dot probe task, which is based on reaction speed. The task assesses whether the child focuses his or her attention towards or away from [emotional stimuli](#). Such attentional biases indicate automatic and often unconscious ways of dealing with emotion.

It was typical of the children in cohesive families (families where the parents have a good [marital relationship](#) and both parents have a close relationship with the baby) to first pay attention to the threatening stimuli, but subsequently disengage from such stimuli. Sensitivity to threatening stimuli may facilitate taking into account other people's emotional states. Furthermore, disengaging from threatening stimuli also demonstrates an efficient and flexible ability to regulate negative emotional experiences.

However, in disengaged families (in families where the marital relationship is strained and there is little affection), the children first focused their attention towards the threatening stimuli, but then, unlike the first group, moved their focus away from the stimuli rather than disengaging from them. This kind of attentional avoidance is often associated with automatic attempts to regulate negative experiences and limit the processing of threat provoking information. The child may have developed this disposition in order to regulate his or her own feelings in a conflictual and emotionally distant [family environment](#).

Children in enmeshed families (in families where the parents have difficulties in maintaining family boundaries and lack self-confidence as parents) focused their attention towards the threatening stimuli and kept

their attention on them. Getting stuck on threatening stimuli is often associated with difficulties in regulating [negative emotional experiences](#). The child may have developed this trait in order to heighten his or her emotional experiences and get attention and care in an insecure family environment.

The results were interpreted from the point of view of emotional regulation.

"The children may have developed these emotional regulation strategies in order to adapt to their family environment. This adaptation may partly explain the children's later risk for anxiety disorders and difficulties in social relationships," says researcher Jallu Lindblom.

"This research opens up new avenues of investigation since the family system types have not been previously modelled over time. Longitudinal analyses on [emotional regulation](#) after the child's first year are also rare."

"This research widens the scope of the dominant conception in attachment theory, which highlights the importance of the mother-child relationship. The [family](#) should be regarded as a whole, including early parenting by fathers and the marital relationship. This is something that should be taken into account in child health clinics and antenatal classes."

More information: J. Lindblom et al. Early family system types predict childrens emotional attention biases at school age, *International Journal of Behavioral Development* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0165025415620856](#)

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