

# Infants of mind-minded parents better at regulating emotions

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Most parents want their children to learn to regulate their emotions and, for example, not immediately give up after a disappointment or become hysterical when they don't get their way. New research by a team of child development experts and psychologists from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) reveals that parents who are able to manage the physical and emotional states of their baby – so-called 'mind-minded'

parents – contribute greatly to the development of infants' emotion regulation capacity. The researchers' results were published on 19 June in the journal *Developmental Science*.

The capacity to regulate emotions during the first year of life largely depends on how parents deal with a baby's emotions. After all, infants are fully dependent on their environment. "This led my colleagues and I to wonder about the extent to which certain parental traits contribute to healthy [emotion regulation](#) in infants," says Moniek Zeegers. "We particularly wanted to know whether parents' mind-mindedness influences the development of an infant's physiological – and emotion regulation throughout the first year of life."

## **Manageable emotions**

Mind-minded parents are constantly considering which of their baby's independent feelings, thoughts, desires and preferences might explain his or her behaviour. Zeegers: "A mind-minded parent, for example, can see when their child is overstimulated because of a peek-a-boo game or knows what his or her favourite book is." It is believed that such a parent is better able to respond in a sensitive manner to the signals given by his or her baby. The parent can more sharply perceive what the baby wants, thinks, feels and needs, and will, for example, put down a rattle if the child is overstimulated." Because the parent helps to co-regulate the baby's internal experiences, the infant learns to experience emotions not as overwhelming or overpowering but as manageable. In this way, the co-regulation between parent and baby can slowly develop into a healthy degree of self-regulation in infant, toddler and child.

To find out whether the [babies](#) of mind-minded parents are better able to regulate their emotions, Zeegers and her fellow researchers studied 116 parental couples and their new-borns. They did this in the period that the babies were between 4 and 12 months old. Mind-mindedness was

measured by analysing the extent to which parents' language was focused on expressing the baby's inner state during moments of play. In addition, the researchers examined how well the parents' words matched their baby's behaviour and were an accurate reflection of his or her inner [emotional](#) state. The babies' emotion regulation was measured on the basis of heart rate variation during a quiet moment as well as a stressful situation (being picked up by a stranger). Heart rate variation provides information on how flexibly the body can process incoming stimuli (emotions). A higher heart rate frequency signals 'good' emotion regulation capacity.

## Delayed effect in fathers

Zeegers: "We found that mothers who displayed a high degree of mind-mindedness were more likely to have a baby with a higher heart rate variation during quiet moments, and thus an enhanced emotion regulation capacity. This was found both at 4 and 12 months. The same effect was measured in fathers, but then only at 12 months."

In addition, the researchers discovered that in fathers the effects of mind-mindedness were partly passed on through their sensitive parenting behaviour. The results suggest that both [parents](#) play an important role in the development of a young child's emotion [regulation](#) capacity. The maternal impact is possibly visible sooner because mothers generally – at least the mothers in this study – spend more time with their newborns than fathers, partly on account of breastfeeding and maternity leave. Follow-up research will show if the effects of mind-mindedness remain visible in the self-regulating capacity of older children.

**More information:** Moniek A.J. Zeegers et al. Mothers' and fathers' mind-mindedness influences physiological emotion regulation of infants across the first year of life, *Developmental Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/desc.12689](#)

Provided by University of Amsterdam

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