

## Unhappy mothers talk more to their baby boys, study finds

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Credit: Paul Hanaoka/Unsplash

Mothers who are dissatisfied with their male partners spend more time talking to their infants—but only if the child is a boy, according to a new study from researchers at the University of Cambridge.

It is well known that having a child can put a strain on the parents' relationship, but whether this then has an impact on the child's own development in its first few years is not known. The quality of a couple's

relationship is known to be related to developmental outcomes such as their behavior and educational attainment in [school-aged children](#), but has been little studied in relation to parent-infant talk, despite parent-infant talk being important for the child's development.

To examine the relationship between the quality of a couple's relationship and parent-infant talk, researchers from the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge studied 93 first-time, heterosexual parents and their interactions with their [infants](#). The team asked parents about the quality of their couple relationship and how satisfied they were and then gave the infants at age seven months a wearable 'talk pedometer' that recorded naturalistic parent-infant talk for a full day in which both parents were at home.

The researchers used software to provide an automated analysis of the frequency of adult spoken words to their infant and of parent-infant "conversations."

The findings of the research, which was supported by Wellcome and the Economic and Social Research Council, are published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

After taking depression into account (because of its links with both couple relationship quality and parent-infant talk), the researchers found that the more dissatisfied a couple reported their relationship to be, the more the mother spoke to her infant. Mothers who reported the quality of their relationship to be low used around 35 percent more words than a mother whose relationship was average and started around 20 percent more conversations. However, these effects were only found with infant sons, not daughters.

The researchers did not analyze the content of the mother-infant talk, so it is not possible to say whether the mother was complaining to her infant

or talking positively.

"It's possible that the mum is trying to compensate for the poor relationship she has with her partner by putting more time and effort into her relationship with her other close male social partner, her son," says Dr. Elian Fink from the Centre for Family Research and the Faculty of Education.

"What is particularly interesting is that mums only seem to compensate when they have infant sons, not daughters. It could be that [mothers](#) view their daughters as mini versions of themselves rather than of their partners."

Regardless of infant gender, fathers showed significantly less overall talk and initiated fewer conversations than did mothers, even though the fathers are increasingly becoming involved in parenting and the recordings were taken specifically on a day when both parents were at home. However, the amount that they spoke to their infants was unrelated to the quality of the couple's [relationship](#).

"Even when dads spend more time around their infants, this doesn't necessarily mean they are interacting with them more," adds Dr. Fink. "One possible reason may be that there's still an imbalance in who responds to the basic care needs of their infant. So, for example, if it's the mother who still shoulders the burden of changing the nappy, this at least offers an opportune time to engage in direct communication with her infant."

Dr. Fink hopes the findings will encourage parents to make a conscious effort to talk more to their infants, whether they are boys or girls.

"Parent-child interaction is important for a child's development, with conversation playing a particular role for the child's language

development," she says. "Finding time to talk to children is very important. Using opportunities within the [daily routine](#), such as mealtimes and bedtime, to have conversations with your child may help foster later child talk."

**More information:** Elian Fink et al. Couple relationship quality and the infant home language environment: Gender-specific findings., *Journal of Family Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/fam0000590](https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000590)

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