The Psychology of Babies: How relationships support development from birth to two

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Influences on development

• Child’s own characteristics- e.g., temperament (especially relevant to emotion regulation and self-control)

• Continuing environment

    Nonetheless

    Early experience can either directly affect development (e.g. language learning) or set the child on a pathway, which then affects how child engages with other people and the wider world
Early development, when infants are helpless, unfolds in the context of social relationships – the ‘Social brain’

Relationships support development in Four key psychological domains

social - understand others, share and cooperate;
attachment - feel secure and resilient;
emotion regulation - manage difficult feelings and learn self-control;
cognitive - develop skills, language, reasoning
In each of these four domains, development by age two-three years predicts later child (and sometimes even adult) functioning.

e.g., Social understanding by two years predicts ‘Theory of mind’ skills and social competence in later childhood

(Thoermer et al., 2012)
• **Attachment** in infancy predicts quality of intimate relationships ([Groh et al., 2014](#)) and experience of depression in adolescence ([Murray et al., 2011](#)).

• **Aggression** that is pervasive and persistent at two-three years predicts violence and aggression in adolescence ([Tremblay et al., 2005](#)).

• **Cognition** (memory/attention/IQ) in infancy predicts academic achievement at 16 and 21 years ([Fagan et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2010; Bornstein, 2012](#)).
‘Specificity of effects’

Each domain of child psychological development involves a different kind of support from the baby’s carers.

This has important implications for interventions
1. Support for social understanding

‘Mirroring’, or imitation games—support ‘core relatedness’

‘Ostensive marking’—helps share connection to the world
Support for social understanding

- Engaging in teasing - baby plays with others’ mental experiences
Support for social understanding

• Pretend play - Imagining others’ mental experiences

• Talking about feelings
2. Support for attachment security

Attachment needs are active when the baby feels vulnerable

- e.g., tired; ill, frightened, alone

Babies develop attachments to the key people who care for them

- e.g., parents, grandparents, professionals

Feel ‘secure’ when attachment needs are met - i.e. when carer responds, supports and understands

Being securely attached doesn’t mean being ‘overly dependent’
Classic signs of attachment

- Separation anxiety
- Stranger fear
- During separation and reunion in an unfamiliar environment
Signs of attachment - separation anxiety

7 months
Signs of attachment - stranger fear

8-11 months
Signs of secure attachment - in separation and reunion 18 months
3. Support for emotion regulation and control
Support for emotion regulation and control

- Mismatch repair
- Body games
- Play fighting
- Dealing with conflicts
- Routines
- Reasoning and discussion
- Encouraging helpfulness
Interactions are NOT perfect - frequent ‘mismatches’
Repairing mismatches supports learning to cope
Body games: extend tolerance and regulatory abilities
Practising risky emotions
Play, or ‘mock’ fighting, supports effortful control
Handling frustration: Routine gives sense of predictability, and therefore control
Managing conflict—flexibility, warmth
consistency
Harnessing impulse to join in encourages cooperation
Explaining and negotiating about spitting
An amicable truce
4. Cognitive development

‘Cognitive’ includes

• Attending
• Reasoning
• Learning
• Language
• And, in babies, actions and motor skills
Learning from action experience
Support through relationships

• Contingency
• Attention regulation
• Facilitation and scaffolding
• Talking and book sharing
Contingency: the Double Video Experiment (Murray & Trevarthen, 1985)
Contingency Disruption-Double Video Experiment: Live sequence

Iris watches her mother who is *contingently* responding to her behaviour.
Contingency Disruption- Double Video experiment: Replay

Iris watches her mother who is not contingently responsive to her behaviour
Infant behaviour in live, replay and live conditions of double video

Murray & Trevarthen, 1985
Helping sustain attention
‘Scaffolding’ new skills
Book sharing

Young babies like to explore

Older babies can learn words
Book sharing

Making links to the baby helps the learning process
Conclusions 1

• Wider background- e.g., economic, regulation of day care and parental leave, mental state-all affect parental (and professionals’) care.

• In turn, that care influences infant development.

• Know from many longitudinal studies of a variety of populations what the key parenting factors are.
Conclusions 2

• Growing evidence base that specific parenting qualities support different domains of children’s development.

• These change as the infant develops.

• Understanding these developmental processes enables us to target interventions in a more focused way, so as to maximize their benefits.