

An Experimental Test of the Effects of Acute and Chronic Stress on Maternal Sensitivity

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Abstract : The positive impact of maternal sensitivity on infant social and emotional development is well-known, as is the notion that stress may impair a mother's ability to provide sensitive care for her infant. Less is known about whether some mothers may be more susceptible to parenting-related stress than others. The effect of acute stressors on maternal sensitivity may depend on the prenatal chronic stress level of the mother. Data from this study come from a sample of 110 women and their 7-month-old infants. Mothers were exposed to either an acute stress task or control task, followed by a face-to-face interaction with their infant (the still-face paradigm). During the interaction, mothers were evaluated for maternal sensitivity. History of chronic maternal stress was evaluated using the UCLA Life Stress Interview, conducted during the third trimester of the mothers' pregnancy. Among mothers who underwent the stress condition, those with a history of higher chronic stress in the past six months showed significantly less sensitivity to their infants during the still-face paradigm than mothers with a history of lower chronic stress. Mothers' past stress levels did not predict maternal sensitivity for those in the control condition. These results suggest that a mother's history of chronic stress during pregnancy may decrease her ability to provide sensitive care while coping with acute, parenting-related stress in the present. This study may help identify which mothers might benefit most from interventions.

Keywords : acute stress, maternal stress, prenatal stress, still-face paradigm

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