

Positive parenting reduces risk of callous-unemotional traits

By Dr Jessica K. Edwards

New data published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, from the Wirral Child Health and Development Study (WCHADS) show that a child's responsiveness to other's emotions may be increased by the responsiveness and warmth of their mother during infancy. The study, conducted by Nicola Wright and colleagues, is the first to identify a link between an infant's experience of empathetic emotional attention and lower risk of callous-unemotional (CU) traits.

CU traits include shallow emotions and lack of empathy and guilt, and can identify a subgroup of children who exhibit severe and persistent antisocial behaviours. Data suggest that warm and positive parenting may help reduce the risk of CU traits in children, but little is known about the effects of very early parenting practices during infancy.

Here, Wright et al. proposed that positive parenting during the first year of life is associated with lower CU traits in children several years later. "We predicted that a mother's sensitivity to her infant's distress cues would have a specific role in lowering CU traits because experiencing parental empathy would promote empathy in the child", describes Wright. "We also hypothesized that a link between positive parenting and lower risk of CU traits could be explained by an increase in secure attachment in the children. This is important because early intervention programmes commonly seek to increase secure attachment levels in infants and young children".

The study focused on a stratified subsample of the WCHADS, a longitudinal epidemiological cohort of first-born children from the Wirral, UK, funded by the Medical Research Council. Parenting practice was coded from observing infant play with mothers at 7 months, attachment status was determined using the Strange Situation Procedure at 14 months, and CU traits were assessed via mother report at 2.5, 3.5 and 5 years.

The researchers found that sensitivity to distress did predict lower risk of child CU traits but so also did maternal warmth. In fact, there was an interaction between these two factors: low sensitivity was not associated with CU traits in the presence of warmth, and low warmth was not associated with CU traits in the presence of high sensitivity. Interestingly, this association was not explained by attachment status.

"It is generally believed that the influence of maternal sensitivity on child behavioural outcomes operates through attachment-related processes", says Wright. "However, we did not find this to be the case here in relation to child CU traits". Wright et al. propose

that their findings implicate at least two pathways from maternal sensitivity to later developmental outcomes: one mediated via attachment security may be specific to emotion regulation with a caregiver, and the other may involve promoting emotional and social understanding and responsiveness more generally.

The researchers conclude that responsiveness to distress cues could be implemented as an early intervention for high-risk families. "Prior work has implicated an interaction between low eye gaze and development of CU traits", says Wright. "An important topic for future work is to examine the interplay between maternal parenting characteristics and low eye gaze in samples of heightened CU trait risk across early development".

Wright, N., Hill, J., Sharp, H. & Pickles, A. (2018), Maternal sensitivity to distress, attachment and the development of callous-unemotional traits in young children. J Child Psychol Psychiatr, doi:10.1111/jcpp.12867

