

Infant Learning Project

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Thank You

We thank our families for your participation. Without your support, our research would not be possible!

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Mothers' anxiety levels may influence infants' temperament

By Brittney McCormick

Many mothers cope with anxiety due to the stress of daily life, parenthood, or psychological disorders. A group of researchers (Henrichs et al., 2009) studied the relationship between maternal anxiety and infant temperament – or the individual differences in how babies react to their environments. An infant's temperament usually falls into one of three categories: *easy*, *slow-to-warm-up*, and *difficult*.

- Babies with *easy* temperaments are generally happy and easy going. They adjust quickly to new situations and faces. They eat and sleep on a regular schedule and are able to calm down quickly.
- *Slow-to-warm-up* babies need time to warm up to new people and experiences. They are hesitant and tend to watch what is going on around them, often shy, but with time and familiarity they become more comfortable.
- Babies with *difficult* temperaments are frequently upset and highly reactive to new situations. They are restless and easily distracted. They are hard to soothe when fussy and demand a great deal of attention from parents. The way parents respond to their babies depends on many factors, such as the baby's temperament, the parents' personality, and the resources available to help parents.

Henrichs and his colleagues looked at mothers' experiences with temporary and chronic anxiety during the periods before and after their infants' birth. These periods during pregnancy and shortly after are physically and mentally demanding and often increase one's stress and anxiety. Almost 3,000 mothers answered questions about *pregnancy-specific* anxiety as well as *general* anxiety symptoms during the prenatal period and at six months after the baby's birth. Temperament

characteristics of the infant were also obtained through maternal report using the Infant Behavior Questionnaire when the baby was 6 months of age. Results showed that different types of maternal pre- and postnatal anxiety were



not related to temperamental difficulties in the infant. Instead, mothers with anxiety only *perceived* temperamental difficulties in their infants. That is, mothers with anxiety described their infants as having higher activity levels, more distress, fearfulness, and sadness, compared to mothers without anxiety. In addition to those findings, mothers who had chronically high levels of general

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Our Lab Students: Fall 2011

We are happy to welcome one new student, Ramisa, as well as our returning students:

- Lindsey Collins, B.S.
- Brittney McCormick, B.S.
- Ramisa Rahman
- Sarah Salomon, M.S.
- Kate Shepard, M.S., CCC-SLP



(Anxiety & Temperament, continued from page 2)

anxiety during the pre- and postnatal period believed their infants displayed the highest activity level and negative affectivity. The researchers suggest infants are affected by their mothers' anxiety due to more negative interactions with the infant, more stressors in the home, or even inherited tendencies to having anxious personalities. While it is possible the anxious mothers only perceived more difficult temperaments in their infants, it is best to consider mothers' anxiety to be unfavorable for the developing infant. Infant temperament not only affects mother-child interaction, but may also predict behavioral problems in childhood and adolescence. **For this reason, it is best for mothers to find ways to reduce their anxiety levels during pregnancy and during those crucial months after their baby is born.**

Go to the source:

Henrichs et al. (2009). *Maternal and pre- and postnatal anxiety and infant temperament. The Generation R Study.* *Infant and Child Development*, 18, 556-572.

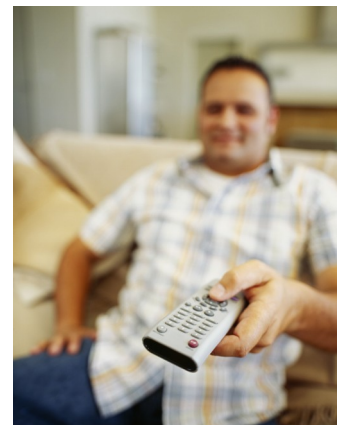
How Does Background Television Impact Your Child?

Lindsey Collins

Infants' and young children's exposure to television is becoming more and more frequent with the gaining popularity of infant- and child-directed programming. With this increase in television exposure, researchers have been looking at the possible effects this exposure has on infant and child development. Many studies have looked at the effects of children's' direct exposure to child- and adult-directed programs, but few have looked at the impact of background television.

Parents' active involvement with their children during play has been linked to positive outcomes in cognitive development, language development, and social competence (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). Engaging in verbal communication and responding to your child during play are especially important. Many families report having the television on in the background often while interacting with their child. Some research suggests this may negatively impact parent-child interactions, which may influence children's development.

A study performed by Kirkorian and colleagues (2009) examined the effects of background television on parent-child interactions. In this study, interactions between parents and children were observed for 30 minutes with a television on in the background and for 30 minutes with the television off. Results of this study showed that when the television was on, parents tended to communicate less and be less attentive to their child compared to when the television was off. Results also showed that children were less likely to initiate interactions with parents while the television was on. The researchers



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suggested that parents may unintentionally divide their attention between the television and their child, making them more distracted, and decreasing the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions. It is important that parents understand that although the television may only be on “in the background”, it may still affect the way parents respond to and interact with their children, which may limit high-quality interactions that foster development.

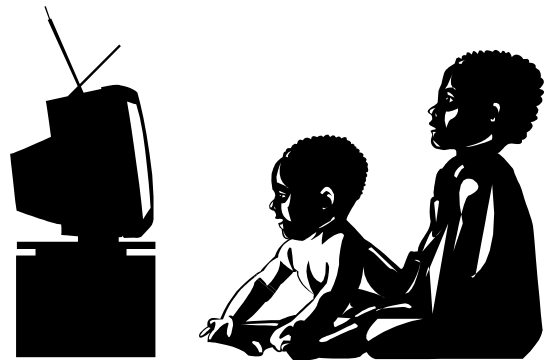
Go to the source:

Kirkorian, H. L., Pempek, T. A., Murphy, L. A., Schmidt, M. E., & Anderson, D. R. (2009). *The impact of background television on parent-child interaction*. *Child Development*, 80 (5), 1350-1359.

TV Found to Have Negative Impact On Parent-Child Communication and Early Literacy Compared to Books and Toys

Ramisa Rahman

Many families choose to allow their young children to watch television, in addition to enjoying reading books or playing with toys together. At Ohio State University, researchers Amy Nathanson and Eric Rasmussen (2011) compared mother's communication with her child (ages 16 months—6 years) while watching television, reading a book, or playing with toys. Maternal communication was the highest when the mother and child read books together, and it was relatively frequent as they played with toys. However, mothers communicated the least during television viewing.



"Maternal responsiveness describes the quality of responses that a mother provides to an infant when they interact," said Nathanson. "When a mother and child are focusing on the same object, be that a book, toy or TV show, the mother's response can have an important impact on their child's understanding and self perception" (Nathanson & Rasmussen, 2011).

When a parent and a child are engaged in a conversation, the parent has the freedom to present thought-provoking questions, or to encourage the child with smiles and words of praise. The parent can help the child enjoy and be involved in the activity they are doing together. When a parent is communicating with the child, the child begins to feel a connection with the parent and begins to develop a positive self-perception. This also sets the basis for their relationship as the child learns to trust and love the parent as they communicate more.

Reading a book allowed the child to learn new words, ask questions, and improve their grammar. On the other hand, television viewing did not allow for such strong communication and intellectual growth.

"Reading books together increased the maternal communication beyond a level required for reading, while watching TV decreased maternal communication. This is significant when we consider the amount of time young children spend watching TV. In some cases children are left alone to watch TV, missing out on any parental communication at a critical stage in their development," concluded Nathanson (Nathanson & Rasmussen, 2011).

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(Television and Communication, continued from p. 4)

Therefore, it is imperative that parents spend ample amounts of reading time with their children to foster a well-developed relationship and to ensure positive development of language and literacy skills. Television should not be completely eliminated from a child's life, because there is a lot to learn from educational TV shows; however, there must be a balance to how much television a child is watching in comparison to how many books he or she is reading. It is also critical that parents watch television shows with their children, not only to interact with them but also to monitor the types of information being displayed.

Go to the source:

Nathanson, A., & Rasmussen, E. (2011). TV viewing compared to book reading and toy playing reduces responsive maternal communication with toddlers and preschooler. *Human Communication Research*, 37(4), 465-487.



Is there a research question we should address in our next newsletter?

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