



# Infant Parent Project: Reaching Milestones

## Study Results Presented at Recent National Conference

Regan Beaudry and Dr. Leerkes presented a research paper about the development of **parenting alliance**, or how well parents believe they work together as a team and communicate about parenting, at the Conference on Human Development this April.

Other researchers have found that a positive parenting alliance promotes healthy child adjustment, but relatively little is known about what helps parents form a positive parenting alliance when they become parents.

We examined the extent to which the quality of the marriage before the child was born and subsequent aspects of the parenting context predicted how well parents felt they worked as a team in raising their infant at 6 months of age. We also wanted to see if the patterns were similar or different for mothers and fathers.

**Mothers** rated the quality of the parenting relationship and

the marital relationship as separate from one another. Having a satisfying marriage before the baby was born did not necessarily mean they would be happy with their parenting alliance with their partner. Rather, mothers who felt that fathers shared parenting responsibilities equally with them were happiest with their parenting alliance. Mothers who felt their infant had an "easy" temperament were also more satisfied with their parenting alliance.



**Fathers**, on the other hand, seemed to view the marital relationship and parenting relationship similarly: fathers

with happy marriages before the baby was born were more likely to be satisfied with their parenting alliance with their partner. The quality of the marriage even protected fathers from the negative effect of having an infant with a "difficult" temperament.

That is, having a difficult infant undermined the parenting alliance only if the marriage was strained before the baby was born. If the marriage was strong, fathers of difficult infants were highly satisfied with their parenting alliance. This suggests that couples who have a positive marital relationship may mobilize as a team and communicate effectively to meet the needs of their challenging infants making them feel closer as parents. Feeling that parenting responsibilities were shared fairly also made fathers feel more positively about their parenting alliance, but this association was not as strong as it was for mothers.

## Upcoming Events

We are examining parents' beliefs about emotions, where these ideas come from and how they relate to parent and child behavior. Look for these results in our next newsletter!

We hope to see your child one final time when he or she is 3½-years-old. We appreciate all of your help so far and hope you will stick with us a little longer.

**In the meantime, if your address or phone number changes, or if you have any questions about the project so far, please call us at (336) 334-3561.**

## Research Team Updates

**Dr. Leerkes** and her husband are expecting their 2nd child in September. She is grateful to have learned from your experiences as she prepares to have an infant in her home again! **Regan Beaudry** got married June 11<sup>th</sup> and is enjoying being a newlywed. She is also working on her thesis. **Kathy Siepak** is spending time with her daughter. **Ani Vosbikian** is working on her dissertation. **Stephanie Parade** recently got engaged and purchased her first home! Undergraduate assistants **Allison Myers**, **Amina Smith**, and **Geralynn Sylver** graduated in May. Allison has begun a career as a human resources recruiter. Amina will pursue a Masters degree in community/clinical psychology beginning this fall. Geralynn is considering several wonderful national and international options. **Mike Berwanger** graduated in December and is currently employed as a research assistant at the UNCG Family Research Center. We will miss them all and wish them well. Undergraduates **Jennifer Butler** and **Andrea Locke** joined our team this summer. Welcome!

## What is Infant Temperament Anyway?

Infant temperament is a biologically based characteristic that is stable over time and determines how infants respond to their environment. It has two components: **reactivity** or the intensity of their emotional reactions and **regulation** or how they control these reactions. In this study, we have measured both in relation to two different emotions: fear and anger.

When your infants were 6-months-old, we asked you to describe how they responded to emotional situations in normal daily life using a questionnaire and we observed how they responded to a potentially frightening situation (the unpredictable truck) and a potentially frustrating situation (having their arms held immobile) in our research playroom.

Here is what we observed.

### During the anger (arm) task:

- 96% of infants were upset and 80% cried at least part of the task ranging from a few seconds to the entire time
- 84% were happy part of the task
- 88% tried to pull their arms free
- 90% tried to distract themselves in a playful way (e.g., making noises or spit bubbles)
- 71% tried to soothe themselves by sucking on things or making gentle repetitive motions; girls did this more often than boys
- 100% looked at their mothers

At 16 months, we observed the same things during the "Shrek task" and the "Phone in a jar task". We are coding those videotapes now and we will be able to see how stable your child's responses were over time. We will also determine which regulation behaviors are most effective in reducing distress at both times.

- There were no differences in how intensely boys and girls responded during either task or in how parents rated boys' and girls' temperaments.
- The intensity of responses during the two tasks were unrelated to each other. Being easily frightened did not mean an infant was easily frustrated demonstrating that these are two different emotional systems. But the types of behaviors infants used to control their emotions were somewhat related across tasks. For example, if an infant self-soothed in the fear task, they also tended to use that behavior in the anger task.
- Your reports of infant temperament at home correlated with our observations of temperament demonstrating stability in temperament across different settings.

### During the fear (truck) task:

- 90% of infants were upset and 44% cried at least part of the task ranging from a few seconds to the entire time, and 25% were startled by the truck
- 69% were happy part of the task
- 42% tried to move away from the truck
- 64% tried to touch the truck or move closer to it; boys did this more often than girls
- 91% tried to distract themselves
- 60% tried to soothe themselves
- 99% looked at their mothers



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Mailing Label

 Just for Fun!

Here are some of our favorite children's books. Maybe your child will like them too! Dr. Leerkes: [Blueberries for Sal](#) by Robert McCloskey · Regan: [Big Red Barn](#) by Margaret Wise Brown · Kathy: [James and the Giant Peach](#) by Roald Dahl · Ani: [Chicka Chicka Boom Boom](#) by Bill Martin, Jr. & John Archambault · Stephanie: [The Rainbow Fish](#) by Marcus Pfister