



Infant Parent Project: Growing Up

Responding Sensitively to Infant Crying Promotes Emotion Regulation in Toddlerhood

Knowing how to respond when an infant cries is extremely difficult. Mothers in this and other studies have expressed concern that if they always respond to crying they might spoil their babies or might undermine their babies' efforts to control their own emotions.

Researchers have investigated children's ability to regulate or cope with their emotions, linking this ability to important outcomes. For example, children with good emotion regulation skills tend to have better peer relationships, fewer behavior problems, and perform better on cognitive tasks and in school than children who struggle to control their emotions. One goal of our study has been to understand what parents can do to help cultivate emotion regulation skills in their young children.

Recent graduate, Kathy Siepak, addressed this question in her doctoral dissertation. She examined the link between how mothers responded when their infants were distressed during our laboratory visit at 6 months and how these children regulated their own emotions during the laboratory visit at 16 months. At both times, the children were exposed to activities that were potentially frightening and frustrating in order to observe their responses.

Infant temperamental reactivity, or how easily and intensely infants become upset, was observed and rated by mothers. Two types of adaptive emotion regulation behaviors were measured at 16 months. *Independent emotion regulation* included trying to solve the problem, self-distraction, etc. *Mother-oriented emotion regulation* included asking the mother for help or approaching the mother for comfort.

Two sets of results demonstrate that mothers' early behavior is important for children's subsequent emotion regulation. First, mothers who were good at distracting their infants during the distressing activities at 6 months of age, had infants who used more independent emotion regulation behaviors at 16 months. It is likely that distracting infants from an upsetting event teaches them important lessons about how to control their attention independently. Looking away from an upsetting event or engaging in something else is an excellent strategy to remain calm. This finding suggests that mothers can help their children learn to do this. Common distracting behaviors mothers engaged in included playing peek-a-boo with their infants, showing them pleasant toys and books, and making funny faces and sounds.

Second, mothers' responses to crying at 6 months were especially important for infants who were temperamentally reactive, commonly known as "difficult babies." Mothers who tended to respond quickly and helpfully to this type of infant when distressed at 6 months by calming them or distracting them had toddlers who were more likely to use mother-oriented emotion regulation strategies at 16 months. This suggests that responding quickly and appropriately to infant crying teaches children that they can rely on their mothers for help. Other studies have demonstrated that temperamentally reactive infants have a particularly hard time learning to regulate their emotions. Kathy's findings suggest that mothers can help these infants in the early years.

Kathy's results indicate that responding quickly and sensitively to infant crying during emotionally distressing times benefits infants over time. This information may help future parents make decisions about how to respond to their own crying infants.

When our final wave of data collection is complete, we will examine associations between early parenting and how preschoolers regulate their emotions to see if these positive effects persist.

Research Team Updates

- ◆ **Dr. Leerkes** recently submitted a \$1.8 million dollar grant to the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to follow up on this study in a much larger sample. On the home front, she and her husband are expecting another child this spring.
- ◆ **Regan Burney** recently moved into a new house in Raleigh! This fall she will be teaching her first college class and finish collecting her dissertation data.
- ◆ **Stephanie Parade** defended her thesis and obtained her Masters of Science degree and is now preparing for her dissertation.
- ◆ **Kathy Siepak** completed her PhD in Human Development and Family Studies! She is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Youth, Family and Community Partnerships, assisting Head Start teachers with their Child Development Associate certification and is teaching an undergraduate course in Lifespan Development.
- ◆ Undergraduate assistant, **Jennifer Butler** graduated in May and will begin working on her Masters degree in Counseling at UNCG this fall.

Current Events

Many preschoolers are still coming in for their final 3 ½ year visits. 80 families have visited our playroom so far, but we are still hoping to see 20 more families. We appreciate all of your help through the past few years and hope you will visit us one last time if you haven't already.

If we've lost touch with you, or if your child is between 3 ½ and 4 years of age and you haven't already heard from please call us at (336) 334-3561.

Cooking with Kids!

Cooking with your preschooler may seem like an overwhelming task, but allowing them to help you prepare a snack or meal can be a fun and educational experience! Here are some simple and healthy recipes you can try with your preschooler today!

Ants on a Log

What you will need:

- 5 celery stalks
- ½ cup peanut butter
- ½ cup raisins for "the ants"

What you will do:

1. Wash and cut celery stalks in half
2. Spread peanut butter on each stalk of celery
3. Arrange "the ants" on the peanut butter
4. Enjoy!

Growing Up

Many of the children in our study will be attending preschool for the first time this fall. Congratulations! The transition to preschool is an adjustment for both children and their parents. Here are some links to websites that offer suggestions to help parents and children adjust to a new school:

<http://www.parents.com/preschoolers/learning/preparing-preschool/>

<http://school.familyeducation.com/educational-issues/preschool/34394.html>

Fruit Kabobs

What you will need:

- A colorful variety of your favorite fruit
- Wooden skewers

What you will do:

1. Wash and cut fruit into 1-inch chunks
2. Place 6-8 chunks of fruit onto each skewer, encouraging your preschooler to try out different patterns
3. Enjoy!

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Mailing Label

 Just for Fun!

The end of the summer is a great time to enjoy the parks in and around Greensboro. Here are our favorites: • Dr. Leerkes: Bur Mil Park Aquatic Center <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Parks/facilities/regionalparks/burmil/aquaticcenter.htm>
• Regan: Country Park in Greensboro <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/Parks/facilities/regionalparks/country/>
• Kathy: Hagan-Stone Park, Pleasant Garden www.greensboro-nc.gov/Departments/Parks/facilities/regionalparks/haganstone/
• Stephanie: Triad Park in Kernersville <http://www.co.forsyth.nc.us/Parks/triad.aspx>

