

Attachment Issues: Mother and Infant Bonding

Presented by

Katharine Leslie
Ph.D. CFLE, TLCS

www.brandnewdayconsulting.com

336-376-8366

Drug Use

- Alcohol, heroin, and marijuana abuse has remained relatively stable over the past twenty years.
- Cocaine and crack use is growing dramatically, affecting approximately 1 in 10 pregnancies (higher in urban areas).
- From 80%–90% of infants born to addicted mothers are physiologically addicted and experience passive signs of drug withdrawal

What's Worse...

- Prenatal alcohol and tobacco exposure have direct (e.g., biological, physiological) deleterious consequences on the development of the fetus and infant.
 - premature birth and low birth weight
 - delays in brain development
 - poor infant interactive capacities
 - This vulnerable predisposition causes the infant to experience even low levels of relational stress as traumatic.
 - Limitations in social responsiveness may be aligned with parental avoidance, rejection and/or physical abuse of the infant.

- Cocaine or heroin exposure have not been shown to have the same direct consequences. However, addiction to these drugs indirectly affect the child's development if they cause the parent to act neglectful or abusive.

- Addicted mothers have a greater number and more serious range of parenting deficits (e.g., neglect, physical and emotional abuse, excessive control and punishment, inconsistent discipline and lack of emotional involvement; Mayes, 1995) compared to non-addicted mothers

- Evidence indicates that in the United States the most serious maltreatment occurs to infants under 2 years of age (National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect). Homicide and traumatic head injury are the leading causes of death for children under 4.

Why are Infants of Addicted Mothers at High Risk?

- Oxytocin, is a hormone elicited during sexual intercourse, pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding, and is involved in maintaining close relationships. It is commonly referred to as the “love” hormone.
- “A sudden release of oxytocin creates an urge toward loving which can be directed in different ways depending on the presence of other hormones, which is why there are different types of love. For example, with a high level of prolactin, a well-known mothering hormone, the urge to love is directed toward babies” (Science of Mother Love, Cori Young).

- High levels of oxytocin predict mother's bonding behaviors including her desire to support an exclusive relationship with her infant (i.e. singing a special song to the infant, or bathing and feeding in a special way) and preoccupation with thoughts of checking on the infant, the infant's safety, and the infant's future (Feldman, etal).

Also

- Scientists at Baylor College found that when mothers saw their own infants' faces, key areas of the brain associated with reward lit up.
- The areas stimulated by the sight of their own babies were those associated with the neurotransmitter dopamine.
- These brain areas are the same areas that are associated with drug addiction; The opioid system is involved in pleasure, pain, addiction and social bonding.

- Certain factors interfere with the production and release of oxytocin and other maternal/paternal hormones.
 - Mental illness
 - Teenage status
 - Drug and alcohol addiction

Furthermore...

- Some researchers are speculating that the origins of a predisposition to addiction lie in prenatal exposure to maternal drug use during pregnancy (Jacobson et al., 1996; Espy et al 1999) and postnatal relational stressors (Connor, Sigman, & Brill, 1987). This is also referred to as “Relational Trauma” (Schoore).

More about Relational Trauma

- Relational Trauma refers to embedded, cumulative stress in the early parent-child relationship (e.g., child's needs go unmet for long periods of time).
- Relational trauma has both immediate and long-term effects.

Relational Trauma

- Relational trauma causes the same long term negative consequences on developmental processes as inadequate nutrition during the brain growth spurt (Levitsky & Strupp, 1995; Mendez & Adair, 1999), biological pathogens or chemical agents that target developing brain tissue (Connally & Kvalsvig, 1993), and direct physical trauma to the baby's brain (Anderson et al., 1999).

Why is Infancy/Early Childhood So Susceptible to Relational Trauma?

- All brains physically change in response to experiences that it has processed and stored. But the infant brain is more flexible and more vulnerable than an adult brain.
- During infancy the brain experiences a rapid and unique growth of synaptic connections leading to extensive neuronal pathways.

Continued

- Within seven to eleven months after birth, an individual's cognitive and emotional capacities are established.
- By the age of 12 to 24 months his motivational, interpersonal, and communicative styles are defined.
- By the age of three, approximately 90 percent of the baby's neurological growth is complete, meaning the foundation of the brain's capacity is in place.

How Do Mothers Help?

- Mother's self-care, interest in her unborn child, and feelings of competence at impending parenthood, along with genetic and hormonal factors influence fetal development and future capacities.
- After birth, an infant actually cues his mother (e.g., crying, rooting, smiling, gazing, molding, reaching, accepting) to elicit behaviors in her that will secure his survival and optimal development.
- The mother's attunement and contingent responsiveness to these cues are critical to the infant's brain development and acquisition of secure attachment skills.

- Mother's tactile stimulation, vocalizations, rocking and other movements, eye contact , and attunement are absolutely necessary to reinforce her baby's normal motivational and emotional drives.
- Without her attunement and contingent responsiveness reinforcing these drives, they will disappear and the child will fail to develop normally.

Relational Trauma Also Inhibits Attachment Development

- ◉ Attachment develops within the interaction between the infant's genetic, psychobiological predisposition and the environment (caregiver experience).
- ◉ Being securely attached to a specific other is the primary task of infancy and early childhood and is fundamental to healthy and optimal neural development.
- ◉ Parent-infant interactions of affective synchrony serve to construct an internal control/coping system in the infant, which is central to the infant's future capacity for self regulation of emotion states when in interactions with other humans and when alone (Schoore).
- ◉ Attachment is the primary mechanism that propels cognitive development and lays the ground work for future exploratory skills, emotion regulation, communication style, ego resilience, social competency, etc (Fonagy).

Processes Negatively Affected by Relational Trauma

- Physiological
 - Activity/rest states
 - Circulation
 - Elimination/digestion
 - Respiration
- Neurosensory processes
 - Organizing, planning,
 - Attention, concentration
 - Working memory
 - Sensory integration
 - Auditory and language comprehension

And...

- Social/Emotional
 - Perceiving and adjusting to social cues
 - Learning from previous experience
 - Motivation and intention
 - Social competency
 - Emotion regulation/modulation
 - Ego Integrity/Identity/Personality
 - Object Relations

Furthermore: Scientists at the Baylor College of Medicine Found:

- Children who don't play much, or who are rarely touched, develop brains 20% to 30% smaller than normal for their age.
- Babies who are neglected or abused produce brain wave patterns that alter the expression and regulation of emotion.
- Children who are abused early in life develop brains tuned to danger—faced with even a slight threat, the child's heart races and stress hormones surge.

- Factors that interfere with a parent's capacity to attune to the infant...
 - Mental illness
 - Teenage status
 - Drug and alcohol addiction

- Research is now able to correlate the absence of positive early learning experiences with adult brain pathology (e.g., severe difficulties in stress management and dissociative behavior).

The experiences of the prenatal fetus and the postnatal infant will influence her whole future potential to:

LIVE

LOVE

LEARN