

Preterm birth does not impair parenting behaviour

Having a new baby and taking it home can invoke anxiety and stress for any mother. Now imagine, taking home a baby that has been very ill and for months under nursing care. Parents might feel nervous about taking care of the baby without the support from medical staff. Thus many have speculated that parenting behaviour of mothers of preterm infants may differ from that of mothers of full-term infants. It has been speculated that the stress may lead to less sensitive or responsive parenting of their infant or be more intrusive and controlling. This may interrupt the development of secure mother-infant interaction which is a foundation for babies' healthy development.



Sensitive parenting has been defined as mother's ability to infer infant's signals and respond to them appropriately. When mothers are sensitive, it has been shown that infants can have more favourable cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. On the other hand, when mothers are insensitive, infants tend to be at higher risk of psychological problems in young adulthood. Sensitive parenting might be even more crucial for preterm children to achieve similar outcomes to full-term children.

In our research, we systematically reviewed 34 studies reporting on the differences in sensitive parenting behaviour of mothers of preterm and full-term children that was observed and rated by researchers; this is called a meta-analysis. Furthermore, we investigated whether the following factors would have an impact on the results: degree of prematurity (i.e., very preterm (less than 32 weeks gestation) vs moderate to late preterm birth (32-36 weeks gestation), publication date before 2000 versus after (indicator of recent modern NICU care and open visiting patterns), infant age, and geographical setting of the studies (Europe, North-America). Our findings showed that mothers of preterm children, despite the early stress they experienced did not differ from mothers of term children: they were as sensitive and responsive in interactions with their children. Furthermore, mothers of very preterm children who had experienced the longest time in hospital were still as sensitive with their infants and children in their parenting behaviour. This was independent of whether the studies were conducted in North America or Europe. Also, infant age at the time of measurement and the year of publication of the study did not change our findings.

In conclusion, mothers of preterm infants are able to show similar levels of sensitive and responsive behaviour to mothers of full term children despite their initial shock and stress and the challenges of dealing with a preterm infant. This finding is highly reassuring for parents and health professionals. However, future research is needed to investigate whether preterm infants may need even more sensitive parenting to do as well as term born babies in their development.

Publication

[Maternal Sensitivity in Parenting Preterm Children: A Meta-analysis.](#)

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