***Child's behavior linked to father-infant interactions***

**Children whose fathers are more positively engaged with them at the age of three months have fewer behavioural problems at the age of twelve months, according to new research funded by the Wellcome Trust. The study suggests that interventions aimed at improving parent-child interaction in the early postnatal period may be beneficial to the child's behaviour later in life.**

Behavioural disorders are the most common psychological problem affecting children. They are associated with a wide range of problems in adolescence and adult life, including academic failure, delinquency, peer rejection, and poor psychiatric and physical health. Research suggests that the roots of enduring behavioural problems often extend back into the preschool years.

Epidemiological studies have identified several risk factors for the onset and continuity of behavioural problems. Among these, parenting characteristics and patterns of parent-child interaction seem to be particularly important. However, studies of parental factors usually focus on the role of the mother.

In a study published July 19 in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, researchers at the University of Oxford studied 192 families recruited from two maternity units in the UK to see whether there was a link between father-child interactions in the early postnatal period and the child's behaviour.

Dr Paul Ramchandani -- a researcher and clinical psychiatrist now based at the Academic Unit of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Department of Medicine, Imperial College London -- led the study, which assessed father-infant interactions in the family home when the child was aged three months and compared them against the child's behaviour at the age of twelve months.

The researchers found that key aspects of the father-infant interaction, measured very early in children's lives, were associated with an increased risk of behavioural problems in children at an early age. This is the first time that this apparent influence has been demonstrated for observed father-infant interaction and such early onset behaviour problems.

"We found that children whose fathers were more engaged in the interactions had better outcomes, with fewer subsequent behavioural problems," explains Dr Ramchandani. "At the other end of the scale, children tended to have greater behavioural problems when their fathers were more remote and lost in their own thoughts or when their fathers interacted less with them. This association tended to be stronger for boys than for girls, suggesting that perhaps boys are more susceptible to the influence of their father from a very early age.

"We don't yet know whether the fathers being more remote and disengaged are actually causing the behavioural problems in the children, but it does raise the possibility that these early interactions are important."

The researchers believe there are several possible explanations for the association. The lack of paternal engagement could reflect wider problems in family relationships, with fathers who are in a more troubled relationship with their partner finding it more challenging to engage with their infant.

Alternatively, it may reflect a broader lack of supervision and potentially care, for the infant, resulting in an increase in behavioural disturbance. Another possibility is that the infant's behaviour represents its attempt to elicit a parental reaction in response to an earlier lack of parental engagement.

Dr Ramchandani adds: "Focusing on the infant's first few months is important as this is a crucial period for development and the infant is very susceptible to environmental influences, such as the quality of parental care and interaction.

"As every parent knows, raising a child is not an easy task. Our research adds to a growing body of evidence that suggests that intervening early to help parents can make a positive impact on how their infant develops."



Exploration in toddlers activated by fathers

A new study has found that fathers give toddlers more leeway and that allows them to actively explore their environments, according to a new study on parent-child attachment published in Early Child Development and Care.

Daniel Paquette, a professor at the Université de Montréal School of Psychoeducation, says the 'activation theory' is just as important as the 'attachment theory.' The latter was the prevailing 20th-Century notion that children usually connect with their primary caregiver since they fulfill their emotional needs and guarantee their survival.

"In attachment theory, a child seeks comfort from a parent when he or she is insecure. This theory underestimates the importance of exploratory behavior in children," says Dr. Paquette, who completed his study with Marc Bigras of the Université du Québec à Montréal.

As part of the investigations, kids aged 12 to 18 months (accompanied by a parent) were placed in three different risky situations: social risk (a strange adult entered his or her environment), physical risk (toys were placed at the top of a stairway), and a forbidden activity (parents were forbidden to climb the stairs after the child succeeded the first time).

"We found fathers are more inclined than mothers to activate exploratory behavior by being less protective," says Paquette. "The less the parent is protective, the more activated is the exploratory behavior in the child. Children who were optimally stimulated, meaning they were exploratory yet respective of the rules, were 71 percent boys. Meanwhile, 70 percent of children who were risk averse were girls."

The parent's behavior was measured by the distance they kept from their child as he or she climbed the stairs. "For a child to become self-confident, the parent mustn't be too far or too close," says Paquette. "The ideal distance seems to be an arm's length. This distance was statistically significant with fathers yet not with mothers."

According to Paquette, classical attachment theory doesn't highlight these differences between boys and girls. This is why he feels his theory is better adapted to evaluate the role of the father while factoring in the temperament of the child and the level of protective parenting, both of which trigger the activation relationship.

Paquette is convinced that mothers and fathers intervene differently in the education of a child and these complementarities benefit a child. "Even if both parents change diapers and give the bottle, they don't do it the same way," says Paquette. "By stimulating exploration, controlled risk-taking and competition, fathers provide something different to the child who will benefit greatly from this singular contribution."