

Mother's affection at 8 months predicts emotional distress in adulthood.

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Abstract

Background Long-standing theory suggests that quality of the mother's (or primary caregiver's) interaction with a child is a key determinant of the child's subsequent resilience or vulnerability and has implications for health in adulthood. However, there is a dearth of longitudinal data with both objective assessments of nurturing behaviour during infancy and sustained follow-up ascertaining the quality of adult functioning. **Methods** We used data from the Providence, Rhode Island birth cohort of the National Collaborative Perinatal Project (mean age 34 at follow-up, final N=482) to conduct a prospective study of the association between objectively measured affective quality of the mother-infant interaction and adult mental health. Infant-mother interaction quality was rated by an observer when infants were 8 months old, and adult emotional functioning was assessed from the Symptom Checklist-90, capturing both specific and general types of distress. **Results** High levels of maternal affection at 8 months were associated with significantly lower levels of distress in adult offspring (1/2 standard deviation; $b=-4.76$, $se=1.7$, $p<0.01$). The strongest association was with the anxiety subscale. Mother's affection did not seem to be on the pathway between lower parental SES and offspring distress. **Conclusion** These findings suggest that early nurturing and warmth have long-lasting positive effects on mental health well into adulthood.

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