

# Parental and Child Influences on Family Interaction Patterns

Aya Shigeto, Sarah C. Mangelsdorf, Geoffrey L. Brown: University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
 Sarah Shoppe-Sullivan: Ohio State University  
 Margaret Szewczyk Sokolowski: University of Chicago

## Introduction

Using family systems theory as a framework (e.g., Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985, 1988), the goal of the current study was to examine whether parental characteristics, marital adjustment, and child temperament would be predictive of triadic family interaction at 13 months postpartum. Results revealed associations between parental characteristics and family interaction patterns as well as interactions between parental characteristics and difficult temperament. Interestingly, all the interactions indicate that families with difficult children managed to maintain positive interaction patterns regardless of their prebirth and postbirth characteristics. Overall, the findings suggest that prebirth and postbirth parental and child characteristics play important roles in shaping early family interaction patterns

## Questions

**Q1:** What are the direct associations between various predictor variables and postpartum family interaction?

**Q2:** Are there any interactions between prebirth parental characteristics and child temperament in predicting family interaction?

**Q3:** Are there any interactions between prebirth marital adjustment and child temperament in predicting family interaction?

## Participants

55 married or cohabitating couples  
 82% European-American  
 64% first-time parents  
 Predominantly middle-class and well-educated

All the babies were born single, healthy, and full-term  
 • 24 girls, 31 boys

## Methods

### Predictor variables

**Prebirth measures** (during the last trimester of pregnancy)

#### Demographics

Education, prior experience of parenting, family income

#### Marriage

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976)

#### Parental characteristics

Beliefs about paternal roles (a modified version of the Role of the Father Questionnaire; Palkovitz, 1984)

Depression (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961)

### 3.5-month postpartum measures

Infant temperament (ICQ; Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbury, 1979)

• fussy/difficult + unadaptable + unpredictable = difficult  
 Dyadic Adjustment Scale (same as the prebirth measure)

### Dependent variables

#### 13-month postpartum family interaction

• The whole family (i.e., mother, father, child) came to the lab and was instructed to interact with each other for about 20 minutes by using various toys.

#### Scales

- Sensitive Engagement (= Sensitivity + Cohesion - Detachment)
- Family Positive Affect
- Family Negative Affect
- Family Intrusiveness

\* These scales were adapted from the Young Family Interaction Coding System (Paley, Cox, & Kanoy, 2000) and the System for Coding Interactions and Family Functioning (Lindahl & Malik, 2000)

## Results

**Q1.** What are the direct associations between various predictor variables and postpartum family interaction?

Fathers' traditional beliefs about paternal roles were associated with:

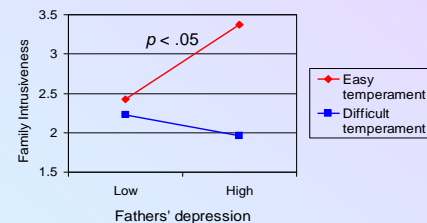
- less Sensitive Engagement,  $r = -.28, p < .05$ .
- greater Family Intrusiveness,  $r = .35, p < .05$ .

Difficult temperament was associated with:

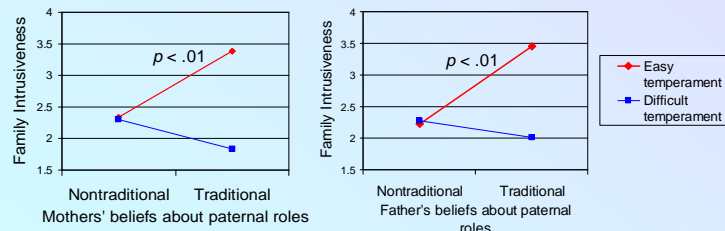
- less Family Intrusiveness,  $r = -.36, p < .05$ .

**Q2.** Are there any interactions between parental characteristics prebirth and child temperament in predicting family interaction?

1. The interaction between fathers' depression and difficult temperament was significant when predicting Family Intrusiveness,  $\beta = -.24, p < .05$ .

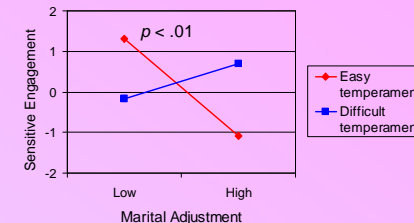


2. The interaction between traditional beliefs about paternal roles and child temperament was significant when predicting Family Intrusiveness for mothers,  $\beta = -.28, p < .05$ , and for fathers,  $\beta = -.28, p < .05$

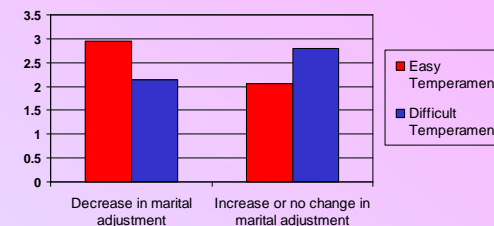


**Q3:** Are there any interactions between marital adjustment prebirth and child temperament in predicting family interaction?

The interaction between prebirth marital adjustment and child temperament was significant when predicting Sensitive Engagement,  $\beta = .26, p < .05$ .



In order to better understand this counterintuitive finding, we investigated the interaction between the change in marital adjustment over the transition to parenthood and child temperament. It was significant when predicting Family Detachment,  $\beta = -1.09, p < .05$ .



## Discussion

These results suggest that prebirth and postbirth parental and child characteristics play important roles in shaping early family interaction patterns, especially when the child is temperamentally easy.

In the current study, when the child was temperamentally easy:

- families with more depressed fathers prebirth showed more intrusive behaviors.
- parents who held more traditional beliefs about the role of the father were more intrusive.
- families whose marital adjustment decreased over the transition to parenthood were more detached, whereas families whose marital adjustment did not change or increased were more detached when the child was difficult.

These results are consistent with the research conducted by several researchers (e.g., Dixon & Smith, 2003; Bloom, 1993) showing associations between difficult temperament and positive parenting styles.