



# Maternal Relational Themes Expressed During Mother-Infant Play and Associations with Trauma Histories



Maegan Calvert, B.S., Sarah M. Ahlfs-Dunn, B.A., and Alissa C. Huth-Bocks Ph.D.  
Eastern Michigan University

## Introduction

Clinical research and theory concerning mother-infant relationships suggests that mothers with unresolved histories of relational trauma, such as childhood maltreatment and domestic violence, are more likely to repeat these experiences with their infants, both in obvious and subtle ways (Madigan et al, 2006; Silverman & Lieberman, 1999; Slade & Cohen, 1996). Infants have the potential to trigger these enactments with their mothers (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 2003); however, aspects outside of the mother-infant relationship may have the same potential.

Researchers have not yet looked at whether certain play materials that are used during typical mother-infant interactions have the potential to trigger mothers to enact relational themes with their infants that are related to their life experiences.

**AIM:** This study sought to investigate whether a mother's use of a toy telephone, which is a common infant toy that is "relational" in nature, would elicit the expression of particular relational themes, and whether expressed relational themes might be associated with maternal histories of interpersonal trauma.

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS:

Participants included 50 primarily low-income women from diverse backgrounds who are participating in an on-going longitudinal study about parenting and mother-infant attachment.

- Age: Mean = 27 (Range = 18 – 42, *SD* = 6)
- Race/ Ethnicity: 50% = African American, 36% = Caucasian, 10% = Biracial, and 4% = Other Ethnic Groups
- Income: Median = \$1,550 (range=\$0-\$10,416)
- Relationship Status: 64% = Single Parents, 26% = married, 6% = separated, and 4% = divorced

### PROCEDURE:

The first panel of data was collected when the participants were in their third trimester of pregnancy. At this time, participants completed questionnaires about various life experiences, including childhood maltreatment and domestic violence during pregnancy. The third panel of data was collected when the participants' infants turned 1 year old, at which time a 12 minute free-play interaction between the mother and infant was conducted as part of a larger assessment.

## Method, continued

### MEASURES:

1 - *Childhood Maltreatment.* The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a 28-item self-report inventory designed to assess experiences of five types of childhood maltreatment: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. Five items make up each of these five scales. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale based on frequency. Higher scores indicate greater severity of childhood maltreatment.

2 – *Domestic Violence.* The Conflict Tactics Scale-2 (CTS-2; Straus, Hamby & Warren, 2003) is a 33-item questionnaire designed to assess partner psychological, physical, and sexual violence, and injury resulting from violence during the last year. Negotiation items were not used for this investigation. The weighting system suggested by the authors was used to score the measure in which values are recoded (1 = 1, 2 = 2, 3 = 4, 4 = 8, 5 = 15 & 6 = 25). Higher scores indicate greater experience of partner violence and abuse.

3 – *Phone Play Coding.* A coding scheme was developed to code the use of the toy telephone by the mother and infant during the free-play interaction, with a particular focus on the mothers' expression of six relational themes through comments, affect, and behaviors. These themes included rejection, reciprocity, jealousy, loss or abandonment, longing for a relationship, and role reversal, and were coded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*theme not expressed*) to 5 (*theme intensely expressed*). Adequate inter-rater reliability between two trained coders was established with inter-correlations ranging from .66-.88. Final scores were resolved through conferencing. Descriptions of each theme are as follows:

*Rejection* was conceptualized as the refusal to accept someone or something. The mother may say "Why don't you want to talk to me?" or state that a third person or baby is too busy to talk or that the phone is busy. The mother may also spontaneously and prematurely end play by saying "Bye" on the phone or by hanging up the phone.

*Reciprocity* was conceptualized as a mutual exchange. This is a back and forth exchange between only the mother and baby via the phone. The mother may say "Hello" and then hand the phone to the baby and wait for a response.

*Jealousy* was conceptualized as a feeling of resentment. The mother may say "Who keeps calling you?" or "Who do you keep calling?"

*Loss or Abandonment* was conceptualized as the expression of having lost something or being left by someone. The mother may call a third person and then indicate that the third person is not there. The mother may also say someone is calling for the baby and then tell that person that the baby is not there.

*Longing for a Relationship* was conceptualized as a desire for a relationship with someone. The mother may say "I wish they would answer the phone." The mother may also suggest a particular person is calling and may include involving the same person repetitiously.

*Role Reversal* was conceptualized as the child taking on the role of the parent. In this code, the mother may tell the baby to answer the phone or expect the baby to be able to call someone without help.

## Results

Pearson Correlations were conducted between each of the themes and mothers' self-report of experiences of maltreatment during childhood and experiences of domestic violence during pregnancy. Significant findings are reported in the following tables.

|                            | Total Childhood Maltreatment | Childhood Emotional Abuse | Childhood Physical Abuse | Childhood Emotional Neglect |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Longing for a Relationship | .385**                       | .301*                     | .430**                   | .363*                       |

|           | Severity of Domestic Violence during Pregnancy | Domestic Violence during Pregnancy- Psychological Aggression | Injury from Domestic Violence during Pregnancy |
|-----------|--|--|--|
| Rejection | .392**   | .429**   | .317*  |

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$

## Discussion

The theory of intergenerational transmission of trauma hypothesizes that trauma and its' impact can be transmitted between generations. Trauma can be passed on through the child being exposed to the parent's trauma symptoms or through the parent's frightening or traumatizing behavior towards the child. In Fraiberg et al. (2003), the authors indicate that a mother's experience with domestic violence, abandonment, or other traumatic experiences limits the mother's ability to respond sensitively to her child, which in turn repeats the mother's painful past. The results of this study suggest that mothers who have experienced relational trauma during childhood and/or pregnancy may be more inclined to express particular relational themes when interacting with their infants, potentially increasing the likelihood of intergenerational transmission of trauma.

## References

- Bernstein, D.P., & Fink, L. (1998). *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire: A Retrospective Self-Report: Manual*. San Antonio: The Psychological Corporation.
- Fraiberg, S., Edelson, E., & Shapiro, V. (2003). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to problems of impaired infant-mother relationships. In J. Raphael-Leff (Ed.), *Parent-Infant Psychodynamics: Wild Things, Mirrors, and Ghosts* (pp. 87-117). Philadelphia: Whurr Publishers.
- Madigan, S., Bakersman-Kranenburg, M.J., van Ijzendoorn, M.H., Morgan, G., Pederson, D.R., and Benoit, D. (2006). Unresolved states of mind, anomalous parent behavior, and disorganized attachment: A review and meta-analysis of transmission gap. *Attachment & Human Development, 8*, 89-111.
- Silverman, R. C., & Lieberman, A. F. (1999). Negative maternal attributions, projective identification, and the intergenerational transmission of violent relational patterns. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 9*, 161-186.
- Slade, A., & Cohen, L. J. (1996). The process of parenting and the remembrance of things past. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 17*, 217-238.
- Straus, M. A., Hamby, S. L. & Warren, W. L. (2003). *The Conflict Tactics Scales Handbook*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.