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Intervention with At-Risk Infants Increases Children's Compliance at Age 3

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Promoting Compliance in Children Referred to Child Protective Services: A Randomized Clinical Trial

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Children who are maltreated often develop problems complying with directions and expectations of parents and other authority figures. Lack of compliance can lead to other problems, including difficulty regulating anger and academic troubles. A new study tested a home-visiting intervention for parents of children referred to Child Protective Services (CPS). The study found that children whose parents took part in the intervention demonstrated significantly better compliance than children whose parents did not, and that parents' sensitivity also increased.

The study was done by researchers at the University of Delaware and appears in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development. The researchers are now at the University of Delaware, as well as the University of California, San Diego, the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center, and Stony Brook University.

"Overall, our findings demonstrate that a brief, preventive intervention in infancy can have long-lasting effects on the compliance of children referred to CPS," according to Teresa Lind, postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Diego, and the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center in San Diego, and lead author of the study. "The intervention helped increase parents' sensitivity, and this change played a role in the changes in the children."

Led by Mary Dozier, professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Delaware, researchers examined whether a 10-week home-based intervention called Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) could enhance compliance in children whose mothers received either the intervention or a control intervention when the children were infants. The parents of the children had been involved with CPS due to concerns related to domestic violence, parents' substance use, homelessness, or neglect. The children were, on average, 9 months old at the start of the study.

ABC, designed by Dozier and her team, aims to help parents increase sensitivity by following their children's lead, nurturing children when they are distressed, and avoiding frightening behaviors (e.g., yelling) to enhance children's self-regulation and compliance. The control intervention also lasted 10 weeks and was similar in structure to ABC but focused on enhancing children's motor, cognitive, and language skills.

When the child participants were about 3 years old, the study assessed their compliance: while parents filled out questionnaires nearby, an experimenter told children they were allowed to read a book but were not allowed to touch the toys placed on a nearby low shelf.

Children whose parents took part in ABC demonstrated significantly better compliance than children whose parents took part in the control intervention:

- Specifically, fewer children in the ABC group touched the toys than in the control group, and children in the ABC group also touched the toys for shorter periods of time and waited longer before touching the toys than children in the control group.
- Additionally, parents who took part in the ABC intervention showed significantly higher levels of sensitivity a month after the intervention than parents who participated in the control intervention. And there was some evidence that parents' sensitivity partially mediated the effect of the intervention on their children's compliance at age 3.

"These results point to the enduring effects of the ABC intervention on children's ability to control their behavior under challenging conditions," explains Dozier. "We know that controlling one's behavior—for example, being able to sit at one's desk and pay attention to the teacher—is critical to success in school."

The National Institute of Mental Health funded the study.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, *Promoting Compliance in Children Referred to Child Protective Services (CPS): A Randomized Clinical Trial* by Lind, T (University of California, San Diego, and Child and Adolescent Services Research Center), Bernard, K (Stony Brook University), Yarger, H (University of Delaware), and Dozier, M (University of Delaware). Copyright 2019 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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