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Family-Centered Research & Practices

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New research examines the intentionality of infants and their parents' perception of it

Why do they do that?

HOW A FAMILY INTERACTS during its very earliest formation is the focus of new research by two fellows at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center. Steve Reznick and Barbara Goldman are studying parent perception of infant behavior that seems intentional and how this perception affects parent-child interaction. Byproducts already include a new series of measuring tools, and may include a way to screen parents in cases of child neglect or abuse as well as suggestions on intervention in cases of risk to infants.

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A study that Reznick began at Yale University is still underway, and depending on the results may be replicated at FPG. He had been at Yale for 10 years before joining the UNC-CH psychology department last year. Barbara Goldman, who is also in the psychology department, has worked on a number of studies involving children over the years.

The two are beginning a study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to pinpoint cognitive changes in infants during the first year. "I believe the data support the idea that there is a change somewhere between 4-6 months," Reznick explains. "This change in the infant's cognitive ability can be viewed from two perspectives."

From the infant's perspective, the world changes such that it has a past and a future. The infant recalls things that have occurred previously, and that same ability allows the infant to extrapolate into the future, to predict what's going to happen, to form expectations. For example, a six-month-old hears footsteps in the hall and smiles wider and its father sticks his head into crib. Before that age, the infant would recognize the footsteps but wouldn't necessarily go the next step and expect a particular face to appear.

From the parents' perspective, it is when these changes begin taking



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place that infants become capable of what parents call goal-directed behavior and capable of expressing their desires explicitly and acknowledging when their desires have been met or not met. Parents begin to perceive that an infant is doing something on purpose.

Study at Yale

Reznick's study at Yale, funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation, is looking at several issues. Whether early signs of infant memory-based behavior presage early emerging sophistication of thinking skills is one. Another is what difference the parents' perception of intentionality makes. One difference may be in how parents provide a framework or scaffolding to let children find their way into an interactive world. The reasonable bet, Reznick says, is that it's important that parents provide scaffolding but individual differences in the normal range aren't that significant.

Because parents are interviewed and tested repeatedly during these studies, a natural question is, "Does

interaction with the researchers and their tests change how parents perceive intentionality?" Numerous measures and cross-measures are used to check this. "If you take mothers who are being tested for the first, second and third times, mothers taking the test for the third time see more intentionality. Perhaps our interviews raised their consciousness. On the other hand, if we want to intervene, then we already have a clue that we can do that successfully," Reznick adds.

Measuring tools

Over the years, Reznick and graduate students working with him have developed a number of measuring tools. "We do straightforward things such as interviewing parents about what they believe. Also, we have a tape with 25 snippets of infant behavior between 6-12 months. For example, a ball falls from an infant's hand. One parent may say that the baby intentionally threw the ball, while another

parent looking at exactly the same tape will say that the ball dropped and give the child no credit. In another technique, we show each parent a videotape of a baby and ask each parent to narrate what the baby is doing. The parent's language can betray an attitude of intentionality or an attitude of less intentionality," he explains.


The other side of measuring is, can one say definitively that a baby does something deliberately? "It's a remarkably important distinction in our culture. It's the difference between

murder and manslaughter, pardoning someone and not pardoning him or her. With babies, we determine what kinds of behavior that parents regard as intentional, and we set up situations where babies have the opportunity to perform those behaviors," Reznick says.

"For example, we tie a string to a toy and the child pulls the string and the toy moves. Then we remove the string without the child realizing it and see if the child persists in trying to move the toy. We play peekaboo with a child and see how the child responds and whether the child will initiate the game. We have 14-15 of these procedures, and we put children through these, which are opportunities to behave intentionally. We feel this is the first battery of tests that is an explicit measure of this construct," he says.

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Reznick and Goldman began pilot testing of infants in late 1998 for the new NICHD study of cognition. One aspect of that study is measuring where babies are looking. In the past, this was done by frame-by-frame analysis of videotape, which was tedious, slow and not particularly accurate. They are now using a new procedure involving a video camera that follows the movement of an infant's eyes. Most of the study is being carried out in the FPG Observational Methods Unit.

Reznick is cautious about over-interpreting the significance of when a child becomes intentional and the parental response. "You have to distinguish behavior inside and outside a normal range. We run the risk of leading people to assume that doing more will make a difference. That's not necessarily what the data would let us say. This is a very sensitive topic because some parents are so eager to do the very best for their child, and if they read a research paper that says you can get infants to learn words faster if you present information in a certain way, then some parents will feel that if they're not presenting it in that way, they are harming their child. I have no reason to believe that is the case." 

If you want to know more

Reznick, J.S., & Feldman, R. (1996). Maternal perception of infant intentionality at 4 and 8 months. *Infant Behavior and Development* (19), 483-496.

Intentionality study may yield policy implications

Research by Steven Reznick and Barbara Goldman on parent perception of infant intentionality may have significant policy and practice implications.

“What has attracted interest to this topic and what makes it salient to people interested in policy is that extremes of parent perception could be extremely important,” Reznick says.

At one extreme are parents who dramatically underperceive infant intentionality. If you don't think of a baby as doing things on purpose, then there's no reason to read, to play, to interact with them. What's the point in telling these parents to read to their children? It's like telling them to read to their plants. At this extreme, a parent may use underperception of intentionality to justify child neglect.

At the other extreme are parents who overstate infant intentionality. They believe babies do things on purpose that most people would believe was not on purpose. These parents are particularly willing to

make that attribution concerning negative behaviors. Reznick gave examples: "She soiled her diaper because she knew I was in a hurry," or "She's crying now to get the upper hand." If a parent believes a 6-month-old is capable of such distinct intentional behavior, then that can be license to forms of punishment that most in our culture regard as abuse. "Indeed, if you interview parents who have abused infants, the language they use is one of punishment, and we believe that this extreme overt view of intentionality may be dangerous," Reznick says.

If their studies support these observations, Reznick and Goldman may discover ways to help parents get a sense of how they view an infant's behavior. "Furthermore, if we want

to intervene and reduce a child's risk, our work is revealing how you might go about doing that," says Reznick.



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