The Meaning of Maternal Support and its Effect on the Complexity of Play for Children with Cognitive Deficits

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ABSTRACT

- The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the complexity of children’s play and mothers’ emotional availability in children with normal vs. below average cognitive functioning.
- The participants were 87 biological mother-child dyads referred to Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) for treatment of the child’s disruptive behaviors. Dyads were separated into two groups based on the child’s cognitive level: 45 with low cognitive ability and 42 in the average range.
- Results of analyses revealed that the relationship between mothers’ passivity and time spent NOT playing differs by cognitive ability. The more passive mothers of children in the Low Cognitive group were, the less time children spent playing (i.e., the more time they spent NOT playing), while children in the Average Range spent more time playing when mothers were passive.

INTRODUCTION

- Pretend play is an important indicator of normal cognitive development. It is typically seen as early as 24 months, increasing until about 48 months, and declining as children enter school (Fein, 1981).
- Previous research at this clinic found differences in the style of children’s play according to their age and cognitive ability (Dao-Tran et al., 2009).
- Warm and sensitive parenting behavior is an important predictor of greater complexity in children’s play (Beckwith, 1985; Fiese, 1990); and the quality of children’s play is strongly related to cognitive development (Smith et al., 2000).
- Studies suggest that children, regardless of cognitive differences, will show increased symbolic play if they have a sophisticated social partner during play (Gleissner & Vaughs, 1995).
- Mothers of children with cognitive deficits have been found to be more controlling and intrusive during play than mothers of cognitively normal children (Gleissner & Vaughs, 1995). However, it is possible that mothers’ controlling behavior is a response to the children’s greater need, encouraging more complex play.
- We do not know whether warm and a supportive presence encourage greater complexity of play in children with cognitive deficits as it does among typically developing children.
- The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the complexity of children’s play and mothers’ emotional availability in children with normal vs. below average cognitive functioning.

METHOD

- Participants were 87 biological mother-child dyads referred to PCIT because of the child’s externalizing behavior problems.
- The complexity of children’s play and mothers’ emotional availability in children with normal vs. below average cognitive functioning were compared.
- Participants were separated into two groups based on the child’s cognitive level: 45 with low cognitive ability and 42 in the average range. The participants were 87 biological mother-child dyads referred to PCIT because of the child’s externalizing behavior problems. Dyads were separated into two groups based on the child’s cognitive level: 45 with low cognitive ability and 42 in the average range. The participants were separated into two groups based on the child’s cognitive level: 45 with low cognitive ability and 42 in the average range.
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RESULTS

- **Table 1: Demographic Differences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Low Cognitive Level (N = 45)</th>
<th>Average Range (N = 42)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity of child (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latins' education level</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% attending high school</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with no education</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse History</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- There were no significant demographic differences between the dyads in the Low and Average Cognitive ability groups with the exception of mothers’ education level and child’s gender.

- **Graph 1: Emotional Availability Scores by Child Cognitive Level**

- **Graph 2: Mothers’ Passivity and Amount of Time in Play by Child Cognitive Level**

- **Table 2: Correlations between Child EA Scales and Time Spent in “NO PLAY” by Child Cognitive Level**

- **Table 3: Summary of Results**

- **Results of analyses revealed that the relationship between mothers’ passivity and time spent NOT playing differs by cognitive ability. The more passive mothers of children in the Low Cognitive group were, the less time children spent playing (i.e., the more time they spent NOT playing), while children in the Average Range spent more time playing when mothers were passive.**

DISCUSSION

- **The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the complexity of children’s play and mothers’ emotional availability in children with normal vs. below average cognitive functioning who were clinically referred for disruptive behavior problems.**
- **We found that mothers of children in the Low Cognitive group were significantly more intrusive (see Graph 1) than other mothers. This finding supports other studies that found mothers of cognitively delayed children to be high in controlling behavior and intrusiveness (Capps & Vaughs, 1995).**
- **Studies suggest that children, regardless of cognitive differences, will show increased symbolic play if they have a sophisticated social partner during play (Gleissner & Vaughs, 1995).**
- **Mothers of children with cognitive deficits have been found to be more controlling and intrusive during play than mothers of cognitively normal children (Gleissner & Vaughs, 1995).** However, it is possible that mothers’ controlling behavior is a response to the children’s greater need, encouraging more complex play.
- **We do not know whether warm and a supportive presence encourage greater complexity of play in children with cognitive deficits as it does among typically developing children.**
- **The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the complexity of children’s play and mothers’ emotional availability in children with normal vs. below average cognitive functioning.**

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

- The findings in this study suggest that parent behavior may have different meanings for children with cognitive deficits compared to children in the average range of ability. Behavior we might normally judge to be a little intrusive may be more optimal for children with delays. It is important to observe the child’s behavior (i.e., their responsiveness and attempts to engage the caregiver) when judging how best to teach in PCIT.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample of children in this study is a at-risk, clinical population; and other factors may be contributing to the findings above. Cognitive deficits may make children more vulnerable to adverse life events. Hence, maltreatment may affect children with cognitive deficits differently than children with average cognitive functioning. This differential vulnerability may mask the true connection between how play is supported by mothers and emotional availability in children with varying levels of cognitive ability.