**Introduction**

Greater infant fear is associated with increased risk of anxiety later in childhood (e.g., Garstein et al., 2010), making factors that influence the emergence of fearfulness important to understand.

Two known contextual risk factors for heightened early fearfulness are poor interparental relationship adjustment (e.g., Crockenberg, Leerkes, & Leeka, 2007) and low positive parenting (e.g., Pauli-Pott, Mertesacker, & Beckmann, 2004).

In addition, higher levels of positive parenting have been shown to exert a protective influence on the development of early fear in infants (Krishnakumar, Gartstein, et al., 2010), making factors that influence the development of early fearfulness important to understand.

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Method

**Participants**

- Mothers (N = 100) participated with their infants (56% male)
- Maternal ethnicity: 72% Caucasian, 12% Hispanic, 11% African American 2% Native American, and 3% other
- Mothers mean age: 29 years (SD = 6.37)
- Maternal relationship status: 74% married, 15% living with their partner, and 11% in a relationship
- Mean income-to-needs ratio: 2.36 (SD = 1.93), 24% of participants below the poverty line (INR > 1).

**Measures**

- Interparental relationship adjustment was measured using a composite of the construct's mean score and satisfaction (r = 0.83) scales from the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) and the relationship satisfaction scale from the Parenting Stress Inventory (PSI; α = 0.68). Internal consistency of the composite measure was 0.85.
- To measure positive parenting, mothers were asked to engage with their child in a five-minute unstructured free play task. Interactions were audio and video recorded and later coded using the Parent Child Early Relational Assessment (PCERA) coding scheme.
- The positive parenting scale (α = 0.89) consists of 11 positive parenting behaviors on a scale from 1 to 5 (intraclass correlation = 0.74).
- Baby temperament, such as self-regulation, was measured using the Bayley Scales of Infant Development

**Hypotheses**

- Main effects: It was expected that low levels of positive parenting and poor interparental relationship adjustment would each directly predict heightened infant fear.
- Moderation effects: Additionally, positive parenting was expected to moderate the effects of interparental relationship adjustment on infant fear, such that children who experienced both low positive parenting and poor interparental relationship adjustment would show the highest levels of fearfulness, while children who experienced high levels of positive parenting would be buffered against the negative effects of poor interparental relationship adjustment on fearfulness.

**Procedure**

- At 4 months postpartum, mothers completed the RDAS, PSI, CHAOAS, and demographic information. Past or current maternal major depressive episodes were assessed using the SCID-IV.
- At 8 months postpartum, mothers participated in an unstructured free play interaction task with their infant.
- At 10 months postpartum, mothers completed the BQ-R.

**Data Analytic Procedure**

- Primary regression analyses were conducted in SPSS and multiple imputation was used to estimate missing data using 10 imputations.

**Main Effects**

- Contrast to hypothesizes, no main effect of positive parenting on 10 month infant fearfulness was observed (b = -0.01, p > 0.05).
- There was also no main effect of interparental relationship adjustment on infant fear at 10 months (b = 0.01, p > 0.05).

**Moderation Effects**

- An a priori hypothesis, there was a significant interaction between interparental relationship adjustment and positive parenting predicting infant fear at 10 months (β = 0.07, p < 0.05).
- Simple slope analysis indicated that lower interparental relationship adjustment predicted higher infant fear when positive parenting was low (1 SD below mean; t = -2.71, p < 0.01) but that poor interparental relationship adjustment did not predict higher levels of infant fearfulness when positive parenting was high (1 SD above mean; t = 2.12, p > 0.05).

**Conclusions**

- Findings of the current study indicate that interparental relationship adjustment and positive parenting do not directly impact infant fearfulness at 10 months of age.
- Moderation analyses indicated that positive parenting moderates the relationship between interparental relationship adjustment and infant fearfulness, acting as a buffer of the negative effects of poor interparental relationship adjustment on infant fearfulness.
- Strengths of the study include the use of an observational measure of positive parenting, a diverse sample, and the use of a longitudinal design.
- In terms of limitations, this study used only maternal reports of interparental relationship adjustment. Future studies may wish to include an objective measure of interparental relationship adjustment, such as a coded interparental conflict discussion task. Additionally, utilizing both maternal and paternal reports of interparental relationship adjustment may provide a more accurate measure of relationship quality.
- Future research should examine whether interparental relationship adjustment or positive parenting have effects on other aspects of infant temperament, such as self-regulation or positive affect.
- Finally, these results indicate that family process interventions should focus on both relationship adjustment and parenting.

**References**


