Increasing secure base script knowledge of high-risk mothers with an attachment-based parenting intervention

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The attachment working models concept: Among other things, we build script-like representations of secure base experiences

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The Secure Base Script

1. Constructive engagement
2. Obstacle and distress
3. Signal for support
4. Support is offered
5. Support is accepted
6. Obstacle is overcome
7. Emotional comfort
8. Constructive re-engagement
Background

• Knowledge of the secure base script is expected to shape a person’s ability to serve as a secure base
  – Studies have focused on parenting outcomes in normative-risk, community samples
  – Is the method valid in low SES samples?

• Aim #1: Evaluate whether secure base script knowledge is associated with sensitive parenting among mothers at risk for maltreatment
Background

- Secure base scripts are theorized to be established during childhood but remain flexible to incorporating new information.

- **Aim #2:** Test whether a parenting-focused intervention facilitates learning the secure base script among mothers at risk for maltreatment.
Attachment & Biobehavioral Catch-up

- 10-session intervention
- Implemented in families’ homes
- Targets parenting behaviors important for children who experienced early adversity
Attachment & Biobehavioral Catch-up

ABC Intervention

Enhanced Parenting

Nurture
“Follow the child’s lead”
Avoid harsh behavior

Attachment security
Biological regulation
Randomized controlled trial

• 82 mothers referred from Child Protective Services when children were infants
  – Randomly assigned to receive ABC (n = 39) or a control intervention (n = 43)
    • Control intervention focused on children’s cognitive and motor development
  – Follow-up visits when children 8 years old
• 79 low-risk parents recruited when children were 8 years old
Attachment Script Assessment

• Mothers told four fictional, attachment-related stories using word prompts

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<th>Doctor’s Office</th>
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<td>Tommy</td>
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<td>mother</td>
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Attachment Script Assessment

- Mothers told four fictional, attachment-related stories using word prompts
- Each story was coded for secure base script knowledge using a 7-point rating scale
- Four ratings were averaged to create a measure of overall secure base script knowledge ($\alpha = .77$).
Sensitive Parenting

- Mothers and children were observed for 5 minutes planning a hypothetical birthday party for the child.
- Sensitive parenting was rated using a 5-point scale:
  - Following the child’s lead during the conversation
  - Appropriately responding to the child’s cues
Is secure base script knowledge associated with sensitive parenting?

Low-risk mothers

High-risk mothers

\[
\beta = 0.26, \quad p = 0.02
\]

\[
\beta = 0.38, \quad p < 0.01
\]
Does the ABC intervention promote secure base script knowledge?
Conclusions

1. A parenting-focused intervention facilitated a greater understanding of the secure base script among CPS-referred mothers.

2. Secure base script knowledge may contribute to these high-risk mothers’ ability to sensitively respond to their children’s signals.
Acknowledgements

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ABC Lab

Theo Waters