

How do parents perceive and utilize knowledge of their infant's mental health? A systematic review

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Acknowledgements

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Background/why?

- Public Health (Public Health England, 2016)
- A critical period for neurological development (Sanes and Jessell, 2013)
- Central to infant mental health is the infant's subjective experience of the world (Zeanah and Zeanah, 2009).
- Quality of infant parent relationship may impact the development of adult psychiatric disorders (Fryers and Brugha, 2013).
- Early experiences and interventions (Allen, 2011)
- Focus upon the parent/usually the mother (Lowe et al., 2015)
- Environment (Irwin, 2007)
- Importance of communities in shaping parenting practice and understanding child development (Rogoff, 2003; Weisner, 2002)

Aims and objectives

Aim: to explore how parents perceive and utilize knowledge of their infant's mental health, with a view to informing professionals about the best way to support them.

Objectives

- Identify what infant mental health means to parents.
- Consider how parents gather knowledge of infant mental health.
- 3 Explore how parents use their knowledge of infant mental health.
- 4. Consider how health and social care professionals can utilize the current evidence to promote infant mental health with parents

Definition: infant mental health

‘the ability of infants to develop physically, cognitively, and socially in a manner which allows them to master primary emotional tasks of early childhood without serious disruption caused by harmful life events. Because infant growth is maximized in a nurturing environment, infant mental health involves the psychological balance of the infant-family system,’ (Fitzgerald and Barton, 2000: 2828).

Search strategy

Population terms: pregnancy, infant, neonate, preschooler, toddler, child, mothers, fathers, parent

Key words: parental, maternal, paternal, attitudes, beliefs, understanding, knowledge, awareness, perceptions, interaction, relationships, behavior, regulation, attachment, bonding, mentalisation, mind mindedness, reciprocity, mental health, attachment, attunement, development, including: social, emotional, language, neurological, motor, visual, auditory, and visual development

Search strategy

Inclusion criteria:

Published in English in peer review journals between January 1992 and December 2017. Research studies based on empirical data from any country. Human parents of any age (including adoptive) caring for children aged between 0-2 years.

Exclusion criteria:

If the focus was upon the professional/breast feeding/postnatal depression. Infants with additional needs. Child in foster care.

Study selection

5487/11 records identified through database search/journals

4147 records screened after duplicates removed

3767/ 277 records excluded title/abstract

103 full text articles assessed for eligibility

- 56 articles excluded with reasons
- 31 articles excluded for quality reasons (Kmet et al., 2004)
- 16 articles included in narrative synthesis

Data abstraction/results

- Heterogeneity
- Characteristics of individual studies were abstracted according to the four research objectives, with groupings and clusters of study characteristics, such as methodology and focus of study
- Data from the studies was synthesised using thematic analysis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2004)
- **9 U.S. 2 Italy, 1 U.K. 1 Australia, 1 Germany, 1 Switzerland, 1 Korea**

Methodology

4 Qualitative: generic using focus group/phenomenology/grounded theory/ethnography

12 Quantitative: 8 cross sectional survey/4 longitudinal

Results

The themes identified from the literature are:

- Influences of society and culture
- Knowledge and understanding of child development
- Interpretation of infant emotions and expressions

Influences of society and culture

Bornstein et al. (2001), Miller and Harwood (2002) and Moscardino et al. (2006) focus upon maternal beliefs and parenting practice in terms of the infant behaviour encouraged.

Harwood (1992) and Harwood et al., (1996) consider maternal beliefs relating to desirable and undesirable child behaviors.

Cultural background influenced maternal perceptions of desirable/undesirable child behaviour and subsequent parenting behaviours.

Adaptation of parenting behaviours to encourage infants to thrive in their environment.

Knowledge and understanding of child development

The research within this theme focussed primarily upon measuring maternal knowledge of child development and the relationship of this to child development outcomes and parenting behaviour.

The focus is on specific groups, related to ethnicity, socio economic status and age.

- higher levels of maternal knowledge regarding child development, linked to children with better developmental outcomes and more positive parenting behaviours (Seo, 2006; Stobier and Houghton, 1993), and more stimulating home environment (Seo, 2006).
- Knowledge of child development may only influence parenting behaviours in specific situations – when engaged in a teaching task (Huang, 2005).
- The importance of social networks in learning about child development (Dallas et al., 2000).

Interpretation of infant emotions and expressions

The research included in this theme focussed upon the ability of mothers to interpret infant emotions and expressions, measured by knowledge of child development and maternal beliefs, reflecting the importance given to the dyadic relationship in research.

- Mentalisation and executive functioning/perceived bonding (Turner et al., 2008).
- Ability to interpret mental states and interpret infant facial expressions (Turner et al., 2008).
- Maternal perception of infant emotion is context dependent (Hane et al., 2006).
- Maternal self efficacy, knowledge of child development and maternal behavioural sensitivity (Donovan et al., 2008).

Interpretation of infant emotions and expressions

- Interaction between parental behaviours of warmth, contingency and sensitivity and maternal communications/attitudes towards their infant (Keller, et al., 2003).
- The supportive behaviours of mothers: ability to engage in cognitive mental state talk/emotional desire state talk, progressive versus traditional parenting behaviours and postnatal depression (Jessee, 2016).
- Maternal experiences of infant crying (Kurth et al., 2014).
- Mothers' beliefs about their infant minds (Degotardi et al., 2008).

Discussion

It is difficult to answer the first three objectives of the systematic review of three reasons:

- The use of definitions to operationalise the concept of infant mental health
- The dominance of developmental psychology in this field (Burman, 2017)
- The positioning of mothers as research subjects (Burman, 2017)

Implications for practice and research

- Research informed awareness of infant mental health
- The role that values play in parenting research
- The subject of infant mental health is value laden
- Further development of emic approaches –for example an ethnographic design that is ecologically positioned (Weisner, 2014).

Quantitative methodologies that use a derived etic approach to design data collection tools (Rogoff, 2003).

- Complexity of parenting behaviours and influences of socio-cultural values
- Family as an ecological system, with an appreciation of the infant within this system.

Next steps

An exploration of the factors that influence maternal perceptions and use of knowledge relating to their infant's mental health.

- Longitudinal ethnography
- Using narrative/observation/photo elicitation