NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Sensitivity Scales
History of the construct of parental sensitivity?

Concept coined by Mary Ainsworth

Baltimore study: Looked at
1. Sensitivity versus insensitivity
2. Cooperation versus interference
3. Psychological and physical availability
4. Acceptance versus rejection of infants’ needs
Why these Sensitivity Scales?

Systematic review of “Maternal Sensitivity” found 50 measures of the construct! (Mesman & Emmen, 2013)

Authors identified 8 which were widely used and well-validated, including NICHD Sensitivity Scales

Straightforward and accessible

Strong research backing, highly predictive of attachment security
What is Parental Sensitivity

“A mother’s accuracy in **perceiving and interpreting** her infant’s cues and her ability to react in a **timely and appropriate** manner”

1. attention to infant cues
2. correct interpretation of the cues
3. prompt response to the cues
4. the appropriateness of the responses
The context of assessment

Sensitivity to distress vs sensitivity to non-distress

The importance of early learning

“Blind” rating of videos vs in-depth home observation
The scales…….
Coding Scale

1 = Not at all characteristics

2 = Minimally characteristic

3 = Moderately characteristic

4 = Highly characteristic
Mother Ratings
Sensitivity /Responsiveness to Distress

• How the parent responds to expressed negative affect

1. Proportion of distress signals responded to
2. Latency of response
3. Appropriateness of response

• Both qualitative and quantitative and dimensions and should be evaluated in relation to each other
Mother Ratings
Sensitivity /Responsiveness to Non-Distress

• A sensitive interaction is child centred

• Awareness of child’s needs, moods, interests and capabilities

• Observes child’s behaviours and responds in a timely and appropriate manner – ‘in sync’

• Warm and regulatory
Mother Ratings
Intrusiveness

- Parent centred rather than child focused
- Controlling behaviour
- Lacks reciprocity
- Intrusiveness must be evaluated from the perspective of the child
Mother Ratings
Detachment/Disengagement

• Unaware, uninvolved, unemotional to child's needs

• Lack of synchrony

• Qualitative and quantitative components
Mother Ratings
Stimulation of Development

- Fosters child development
- Scaffolds play to encourage learning
- Enhancing perceptual, cognitive, linguistic and physical development
- Qualitative components must be evaluated in relation to quantitative components
Mother Ratings
Positive Regard for the Child

• Mothers expressed positivity towards the child
  • Verbal behaviours
  • Physical behaviours
  • Affective behaviours
Mother Ratings
Negative Regard for the Child

• Mothers expressed negativity towards the child
  • Verbal behaviours
  • Physical behaviours
  • Affective behaviours

• The amount and intensity of expressed negativity needs to be evaluated in relation to the entire observation
Mother Ratings
Flatness of Affect

• Marked by a lack of animation throughout the observation not just when interacting with the child

• Behaviours include:
  • Blank/impassive facial expression
  • Flat vocal tone
  • Boredom
  • Disassociating
Contentness, pleasure and satisfaction the child has in the interaction.

Balancing out intensity and the amount of time positive behaviours are displayed.
Child Ratings
Negative Mood

• Expressed negativity

• Behaviours include:
  • Crying
  • Fussing
  • Tense body
  • Discontentment
Child Ratings
Activity Level

• Motor activity

  • Speed
  • Frequency
  • Intensity
  • Involvement
  • Negative reaction
Child Ratings
Sociability/ Positive Engagement with Mother

- Active partner in his/her social world
- Behaviours may be initiated by the child or in response to others' behaviour
- Behaviours must be seen to have a positive social intent rather than a simple interaction
Child Ratings
Sustained Attention

- Sustained involvement with people or objects
- Includes focusing on actions or interactions of others
- Must be seen to spend more than a minimal amount of time focusing on person or object
- Quantitatively rated – primarily based on duration of interactions with objects and people