Abstract

Data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development were used to examine factors that affect maternal separation anxiety. Our findings indicate that maternal separation anxiety decreased over the first two years of the child's life. Maternal ethnicity explained differences in MSA with African American mothers having the highest scores. White mothers’ separation anxiety was significantly lower than that of black mothers and mothers of “other” ethnicity. Maternal social support, mother’s extraversion and neuroticism were also significant predictors of separation anxiety. Geographic location also had a main effect on MSA, but this effect disappeared when income-to-needs ratio was controlled. Health problems during pregnancy and child gender did not explain variability in maternal separation anxiety. Implications are discussed.

Background

Maternal separation anxiety (MSA) has been linked with important early outcomes for children, most notably infant-parent attachment security (Scher, Hershkovitz, & Harel, 1998). Infants of mothers who experience less separation anxiety are more likely to develop secure attachments and infants of mothers who experience more anxiety are more likely to be insecurely attached (Stifter, Coulehan, & Fish, 1993; Scher & Maysel, 2000; see also Harrison & Ungerer, 2002). Maternal separation anxiety has also been linked to intrusive maternal behaviors (Stifter, Coulehan, & Fish, 1993) and extremes in sensitivity to infant cues during interactions (Hsu, 2004).

In this study, we build on the early work of McBride and Belsky (1988) and more recent research regarding the factors that influence maternal separation anxiety. We use the NICHD Study of Early Child Care data to consider previously recognized variables such as time, child gender, and maternal social support. This data set allows exploration of a broader range of contextual factors, with a larger national sample, and over a longer period of time than previous studies.

Methods

Initially 1,364 one-month old infants and their mothers were enrolled in the project. 51.7% of the infants were male, 76.4% of the infants were white/not Hispanic, 12.7% were black/not Hispanic, and 6.1% were Hispanic. The category “other” ethnicity included a small portion of children who were Hispanic. The child and parent demographic information collected at one and six months were used in these analyses.

Maternal separation anxiety (see Hock, DeMeis, & McBride, 1987) and social support (see Weiss, 1974 and Marshall & Barnett, 1993) were both measured at 1, 6, 15, and 24 months. Parents’ extraversion and neuroticism was assessed when the child was 6 months old (NEO Personality Inventory, Costa & McCrae, 1985). Mother’s locus of control was measured at 1 month. Child’s temperament was measured at 1 and 6 months.

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Results and Discussion

Time Heals All Wounds, Even Separation Anxiety

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Research Questions

The purpose of the present study is to examine the child, mother, and environmental factors that influence maternal separation anxiety (MSA).

- Child factors include: gender, age, and temperament
- Maternal factors include: ethnicity, age, education, personality, social support, feelings about the pregnancy, and parental locus of control
- Environmental factors include: home state (AR, WA, etc.), SES

We also explore interactions between these variables and if/how maternal separation anxiety changes over time.

Method

As expected, repeated measures ANOVA indicated that mother’s separation anxiety was influenced by time [$F(3,3156)=43.56, p=.000$]. Post hoc analyses revealed significant decreases in separation anxiety at each of the three later reports.

Geographic Location and Income. MSA differed significantly depending on where in the U.S. the family lived [$F(9,1052)=3.11, p=.001$]. Post hoc analyses revealed several significant differences between data collection sites, with the Arkansas parents reporting significantly more anxiety than parents from seven other sites. To determine whether or not this main effect of site was due to differences in average family income at each site, we reran the analyses controlling for total family income [$F(9,1257)=1.94, p=.043$; DV=MSA, IV=site, CV=income at 6 months]. However, the effect of site was eliminated when income-to-needs ratio at 6 months was used as the covariate [$F(9,1258)=1.76, p=.072$]. MSA and income-to-needs ratio are significantly related (r = .30, p=.000).

Maternal Ethnicity. ANOVAs revealed a main effect of mother’s ethnicity [$F(4,1061)=17.61, p=.000$] on separation anxiety over time. Post hoc analyses highlighted a significant difference in reports of separation anxiety made by white and black mothers at all four time periods.

Conclusions

This research contributes to the literature on maternal separation anxiety (MSA) by exploring suspected influences with a larger, slightly more diverse sample and over a longer period of time than most previous studies. It makes sense that experience and the increased abilities of the child to express themselves should help MSA decrease over the first two years. Perhaps the most interesting findings have to do with the kinds of maternal characteristics that appear to influence MSA, particularly maternal ethnicity. Ethnicity appears to influence MSA even when income is controlled. Future research will explore marital, extended family, and social variables to try to explain these differences.

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![Estimated Marginal Means of MSA](image-url)