

Positive parenting

Dr. Esther M. Leerkes is an associate professor of human development and family studies. Growing up as one of the oldest in an extended family with more than 30 cousins, she was interested in the variety of child personalities and parenting skills she observed. Educated as a developmental psychologist, she calls herself a "parenting scholar" and, with three children, she knows whereof she speaks. This 2012 Research Excellence Award winner's multiple research studies have received more than \$5 million in grants from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN My research primarily focuses on links between parenting behavior and children's adjustment and on what enhances the quality of parenting. I am particularly interested in identifying the skills that help mothers respond effectively to their infants when the infants are upset.

WHEN THE NEW BABY COMES HOME There is no way to predict what a new baby will be like. New babies don't always fit expectations, preferences or existing routines which can be quite a challenge. You don't know in advance if you will have a temperamentally reactive baby who cries often and easily and is difficult to comfort. Also, parenting is a profoundly emotional act. We tend to focus most on the positive side of that; the intense love, pride and joy inherent in parenting. But, there are times most parents will experience frustration, anxiety and embarrassment related to parenting. One of the goals of my research is to understand how mothers' experiences of negative parenting-related emotions, and their ability to regulate those emotions, is related to the quality of their parenting.

WHEN BABIES CRY Crying is an unpleasant sound that puts almost anybody on alert, and it is magnified when it's your own baby. When a baby cries, a mother has to notice her baby is upset, figure out why, clarify her short-term and long-term goal, consider the pros and cons of various responses, and then decide how to respond, if at all. This process requires a variety of skills, all of which can be compromised by the mother's emotional state. One of our exciting recent findings shows that mothers who better regulate their physiological stress responses to the sound of crying are more likely to focus on their infants' feelings and needs than their own – which is linked with more rapid and sensitive responding to their infant. This suggests that efforts to help mothers learn to regulate their arousal may be an effective way to promote positive parenting and may be especially important for mothers who have infants that are temperamentally prone to frequent and intense crying.

MOTHERS' BEHAVIORS AFFECT THEIR CHILDREN We have known for a long time that parenting is predictive of child outcomes. Evidence shows that children have better outcomes – more secure attachment to the mother, better emotion regulation skills, better social competence and less likelihood of being aggressive or depressed later in childhood – if their mothers respond to them quickly, consistently and warmly. One of the unique aspects of my research is that I have demonstrated that what mothers do when their babies are upset is particularly predictive of these outcomes. This suggests that although most children are upset for a relatively small portion of the day, what we as parents do in those moments are of profound importance for children's healthy development.

OTHER STUDIES I've been fortunate to collaborate with a number of colleagues and students on this work and other research as well. In the School Transition and Academic Readiness Project we are studying child and parent factors that promote preschoolers' positive transition into school. Recently, we found that mothers' emotional support in problem solving tasks is more predictive of their kids' later academic skills than how they directly tried to teach their child. Well-intentioned parents believe it's all about helping them to learn their numbers, letters and colors. That's likely true, but the quality with which you do it really matters. Helping children maintain their interest and enthusiasm and control their frustration during learning tasks is especially important. In The Women, Work and Wee Ones study, we are examining non-standard work schedules (anything other than 9 to 5) among low-income mothers. Our concern is that these jobs are stressful, and we hope to identify the supports that help women in these jobs cope in a manner that supports their well-being, positive parenting and healthy infant development.

LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. ESTHER LEERKES' RESEARCH AT
www.uncg.edu/hdffacultystaff/Leerkes/Leerkes.html

