ATTACHMENT INTERVENTIONS:
LESS IS MORE

by Eve Krakow

Is early prevention intervention truly effective in enhancing parental sensitivity and infant attachment security, and if so, what type of intervention is most successful?

To find out the answers to these questions, researchers from the Centre for Child and Family Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands analyzed 70 published studies of attachment-based interventions. Their conclusion: brief interventions focusing on parental sensitivity and starting after the child has reached six months of age are the most effective.

“Brief interventions focusing on the parents’ behaviour are indeed effective in enhancing the parents’ sensitive interactions with their children and their children’s attachment security,” states Marinus van IJzendoorn, who carried out the study along with Marian Bakermans-Kranenburg and Femmie Juffer.

The quantitative meta-analysis included programs that sought to enhance parental sensitivity at the behavioural level, programs designed to alter parents’ mental representations, programs that provided and enhanced social support, and programs designed to enhance maternal health and well-being.

One surprising finding, says van IJzendoorn, was that helping parents become more sensitive to their children does not have to be a cumbersome process that takes years, but can be accomplished in five to 16 sessions of a few hours each. “But the intervention needs to be intensive and focused, creating a mirror for the parent of what he/she is doing well and what is going wrong,” he notes. “Videotaped observations of this parent with this child have been proven to be extremely helpful in providing parents with the feedback they need to develop their strengths as parents.”

He adds that families seem most open to intervention in the second half of the first year of life, when problems become visible, and deviant parenting routines have not yet become engrained in stone.

The study also found that even in families with multiple problems, shorter and behaviourally focused interventions were more effective than longer, broad-band interventions. However, the researchers note that broad-band interventions may have positive effects on other outcomes not measured in this analysis.

Early childhood development specialists at the National Public Health Institute of Quebec drew on these findings to develop a guide to promote secure attachment, as part of the home visiting program offered by the province’s social service centres. “This study helped us see the active ingredients of an intervention, showing us what methods are most effective,” says Johanne Laverdure, Scientific Coordinator at the Institute.

“It confirms that when an intervention is structured, intensive and focused on behavioural strategies, it works well,” adds Julie Poissant, research officer, who also worked on the guide.

While the home visiting program, like many others, has several aims, such as supporting mothers with mental-health problems or helping mothers go back to school, developing parental sensitivity is now a strong emphasis for the child’s first year.