

Reflective Functioning – parents of term and preterm infants' experiences

Meegan Kilcullen¹, Anne Swinbourne¹

¹ College of Healthcare Sciences, James Cook University, Australia

Email: meegan.kilcullen@jcu.edu.au

1. Objective/Background: Secure attachment is characterised by the ability of a sensitive caregiver to mentalise their emotional and cognitive experience and help to develop the self-organisation of their child's own experiences (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2002; Fonagy & Target, 1997). Premature birth and its associated changes to early parenting practice may interrupt the social and emotional interactions that underpin attachment. It may be that experience of preterm birth changes or impacts upon the parent's capacity for reflective functioning due to associated stressors and distress of early birth. Currently, there is limited research and literature regarding attachment in the neonatal context. This study explored parent's experiences of parenting in the child's first five years of life. Specifically, the study compared experiences of parents of term infants with parents of preterm infants.
2. Method: 161 parents completed a paper or online survey exploring reflective functioning. There were 122 term parents and 39 parents of preterm children under the age of 5 years who completed the survey.
3. Results: Overall, most term and preterm parents reported high levels of good reflective functioning. Preliminary results indicate no significant differences in reflective functioning between parents of term and preterm infants.
4. Conclusion/Discussion: Although this is a small study, results are encouraging for existing practices that support attachment in the neonatal context. It will be important to conduct further research in a larger sample to replicate these findings. These findings provide novel insights into our understanding of attachment in the neonatal context and will guide work practices of neonatal staff with a view to optimising outcomes for neonates and their families.
5. Key words: attachment; neonatal; reflective functioning
6. References

Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., Jurist, E. L., & Target, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of self*. London: Karnac Books.

Fonagy, P. & Target, M. (1997). *Attachment and reflective function: Their role in self-organisation*. *Development and Psychopathology*, 9, 679-700.