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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature of the infant social world. Infants develop attachments to both parents. Father-child and mother-child relationships are qualitatively different. They involve different types of experiences and have different implications for the child's personality development. The fathers' sex-differentiating behavior focuses the children's--especially the boys'--attention on the same-sex parent. Early parent-infant interactions may facilitate gender role acquisition. Siblings seem to play an important role in facilitating infant mastery over the inanimate environment. It appears that infants are not attached to their preschool-aged siblings. Yet siblings may still exert an important impact on infant development. Parent-infant and sibling-infant relationships both underscore the need for theory and research on the complexity and multidimensionality of the infant social world. (Author/JLL)

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THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MOTHERS, FATHERS,
INFANTS AND SIBLINGS IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF LIFE

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For the last three years, I have been engaged in research aimed at describing the nature of the infant social world. My initial focus was on family-infant relations, although my students and I have since turned our attention to extrafamilial relationships as well.

When I embarked on this program of research, we were cresting a wave of research and theorizing concerning the mother-infant relationship. In the eyes of contemporary psychologists, nothing existed in the infant's world save its mother. As a result, the first study was a home-based longitudinal investigation of the development of infant-mother and infant-father attachments (Lamb, 1976b, 1977c, 1977d). This project had two major goals: to determine whether young infants developed equivalent attachments to both parents and whether the mother-infant and father-infant relationships were qualitatively similar or different.

To address the first question, we recorded the occurrence of a variety of behaviors which should, according to attachment theorists, be directed to attachment figures more often than to non-attachment figures. The frequencies with which these behaviors were directed to mothers, fathers, and an unfamiliar investigator were then compared. The results were quite clear cut. Between 7 and 24 months of age, the infants showed preferences for both parents over the visitor on the attachment behavior measures. More importantly, they showed no preference for either parent over the other between 7 and 13 months of age. From 15 months, they showed significant and consistent preferences for their fathers.

These data illustrate quite convincingly that infants develop attachments to both their parents, although the data concerning preferences deserve further comment. Ainsworth has stated--and I agree with her--

that true preferences among attachment figures are unlikely to be revealed in stress-free settings such as those sampled by my home observation procedure. Under stress, however, babies should reduce the amount of interaction with subsidiary attachment figures, and focus their behavior more narrowly upon primary attachment figures. In stressful laboratory situations at both 12 and 18 months, in fact, we found that infants overwhelmingly turned to their mothers when they had the choice (Lamb, 1976a, 1976b). When they did not have the choice, they organized their behavior identically around whichever parent was with them. This confirmed that the infants were attached to both parents although mothers were clearly preferred.

The fact that babies are attached to both parents may be relatively unimportant if one relationship is redundant. The implicit assumption of those who urge that attention be focused on the father-infant relationship is that the father-child and mother-child relationships are qualitatively different--that they involve different types of experiences and hence have different implications for the child's personality development (cf. Lamb, 1976c). To test this assumption, we focused on two important interactional contexts--those centered around holding the infant, and those involving parent-infant play. Analysis of the home observation transcripts revealed that fathers and mothers indeed provided very different types of experiences for their infants. Mothers held their infants primarily to initiate some caretaking activity or to restrain them. When they played, it was typically a conventional game (like peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake) or else involved brief toy stimulation. Fathers, by contrast, typically picked up their babies to play with them, and played physically stimulating or unpredictable games. Not surprisingly, the babies responded more positively to play and physical contact with

their fathers.

These data are important, for they indicate that mothers and fathers represent different types of experiences for their infants. If one assumes that different types of experiences are associated with different outcomes, then it seems likely that the mother-infant and father-infant relationships may have independent and differentiable implications for the course of personality development. You will note, furthermore, that the types of experiences the parents represent are related to the sex-roles they assume. This suggests that the differences between the mother-infant and father-infant relationships may be especially important in the development of sex roles. Some other evidence supports this. First, we found that the fathers were twice as active in interaction with their sons as with their daughters during the second year. Further, they were twice as active in interaction with their sons as were the mothers, who did not differentiate between sons and daughters in this way. Although the timing was inconsistent, making empirical verification difficult, the observers also reported a temporary withdrawal of fathers from their daughters during the second year (Lamb, 1977e).

The net impact of the fathers' sex-differentiating behavior was to increase their relative salience in the eyes of their sons, and the relative salience of their wives in the eyes of their daughters. In other words, the fathers' behavior served to focus the children's--especially the boys'--attention on the same sex parent. They were apparently successful in this endeavor. Analyses revealed that by 24 months, 90% of the boys interacted preferentially with their fathers while the majority of the children preferring their mothers were girls (Lamb, 1977e).

The facts a) that parents behave in sex-stereotyped fashion

b) that fathers act in a way that increases the relative

saliency of the same-sex parent in the infant's eyes and
c) that infants do in fact focus attention on the same-sex
parent

all suggest that early father-infant interactions may greatly facilitate gender role acquisition.

Mothers and fathers, then, may play significant and differentiable roles in the psychosocial development of their children. Whatever the difference, however; both relationships involve adults whose explicit responsibility it is to socialize their children. Siblings may represent important relationships of an entirely different type, yet their role has been ignored almost completely.

Thus far, we have conducted four studies of sibling-infant interaction (Lamb, 1977a, 1977f, 1977g, 1978a). These have involved 12, 18, and 21 month old infants interacting with siblings who were 20-40 months older than them: All observations have been made in standardized laboratory settings in which infants have access to their parents as well as to their siblings.

The findings have been revealing. First, there is very little direct interaction between siblings in the novel laboratory setting. Both infants and preschoolers interact more with their parents than with their siblings. However, when we examine the types of interaction, we find some interesting asymmetries in the patterns of interaction. The older children do not direct much of their behavior toward infant siblings. When they do acknowledge the others, they are most likely to vocalize or to proffer toys. The infants, by contrast, appear to be inordinately interested in their siblings' activities. They monitor them and their activity and take the primary responsibility for maintaining proximity. Infants watch their siblings' acts rather than the siblings themselves, whereas the reverse

is true of the older children. Further, the infants are far more likely than the older children both to take over toys recently abandoned by the other and to imitate the others' behavior.

These facts all suggest that siblings play an important role in facilitating mastery over the inanimate environment. Peers appear to play a similar role (cf. Rubenstein & Howes, 1976), although we find that infants interact mainly with their siblings when they are able to choose among siblings, siblings' peers, and peers (Lamb, 1977g).

Clearly, parents and siblings appear to influence very different aspects of development during infancy. Some other data are relevant also. Usually, the entrance of a third person reduces the amount of interaction between the members of a dyad (Lamb, 1978b). However, the entrance of a sibling does not affect the levels of parent-infant interaction like the entrance of a parent does (Lamb, 1977a). Similarly, the entrance of a parent reduces the amount of parent-infant interaction but has no effect on the amount of sibling-infant interaction (Lamb, 1978a). These data provide confirmatory--albeit circumstantial--evidence that parents and children indeed represent different interactional systems.

Using all traditional criteria, one would have to conclude from our data and those gathered in rural Kenya by Carolyn Edwards (Edwards & Whiting, 1976) that infants are not attached to their preschool-aged siblings. This does not mean, however, that siblings are unimportant. They may be unimportant as attachment objects, as sources of security, and as caretakers, yet they may still exert a rather important impact on the infants' development. More generally, the data we have gathered concerning both parent-infant and sibling-infant relationships underscore the need for theorists to go beyond the simplistic notion that the most important task in research on infant social relations is to identify the

infant's attachment figures. Equally apparent is the need to acknowledge, in both theory and research, the complexity and multidimensionality of the infant social world (Lamb, 1977b).

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