

Stress on the Caregiving Relationship

Many known risk factors put a strain on the baby-parent relationship. An analysis of these allows intervention to be considered at a preventive level, before the infant's quality of attachment has been compromised. The presence of four to six moderate risk factors is significant although some combinations of a lesser number merit attention. However, there are certain serious conditions that, in some circumstances, call for interventions on their own. These have been italicised in the list below.

1. **Biological Vulnerability in the Infant:**

Mother substance abused / on methadone during pregnancy

Very low birth weight / extremely premature

Failure to thrive / feeding difficulties / malnutrition.

Mother drank alcohol during pregnancy.

Congenital abnormalities / illness / serious developmental delay.

Very difficult temperament / extreme crying.

Very lethargic / non-responsive.

Resists holding / hypersensitive to touch.

Chronic maternal anxiety / stress during pregnancy.

Mother smoked during pregnancy.

Regulatory / sensory integration disorder.

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2. **Parental History and Current Functioning:**

Mental illness, including depression.

Serious medical condition / physical disability.

Own mother mentally ill / substance abused.

Alcohol and / or drug abuse (current or past).

History of physical or sexual abuse, witnessing violence, neglect or loss.

Absent parent or stepparent in family (i.e. non-biologically related).

Parents seem incoherent or confused.

Parent was in care (looked after) / adopted.

Learning disability / low educational achievement.

Criminal or young offender's record / been imprisoned.

Previous child has been in foster care or adopted.

Mother has experienced the death of a child.

Previous child has behaviour problems.

Presence of an acute family crisis.

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3. **Interactional or Parenting Variables:**

Lack of sensitivity to infant's cries or signals.

Lack of consistent caregiver for infant.

Physically punitive towards child.

Lack of vocalisation to infant, few 'conversations'.

Lack of eye-to-eye contact.

Negative attributions made towards child, even if 'jokey'.

Lack of preparation during pregnancy.

Lacks knowledge of parenting and child development.

Infant has poor care (e.g. dirty and unkempt), physical neglect.

Does not anticipate or encourage child's development.

Quality of partner relationship; may be undermined or unsupported.

Infant a victim of maltreatment, emotional abuse or neglect.

Any violence reported in the family, especially if witnessed by child.

Negative affect / verbal abuse openly shown towards child.

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4. **Socio-demographic Factors:**

Chronic unemployment.

Inadequate income / housing / hygiene.

Overcrowding in household.

Single teenage mother without family support

Poor quality / more than 20 hours per week day-care.

Severe family dysfunction, current and in background.

Lack of support / isolation.

Recent life stress (e.g. bereavement, racism, job loss, immigration).

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