



DOCTORATE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

## Major Research Project

The Association Between Early Maternal Responsiveness and Later Child Behaviour: A  
Longitudinal Study

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**Statement of academic probity and professional practice:**

"I certify that all material in this manuscript which is not my own work has been identified and properly attributed. I have conducted the work in line with the BPS DCP Professional Practice Guidelines."

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "P.R.S.", is written on a light grey rectangular background.

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## **Abstract**

A baby's early experiences have a crucial effect on their later development and adjustment. Early maternal sensitivity is a concept which has been associated with a crucial influence on these later child outcomes, including behavioural outcomes. Results from large longitudinal population based studies have provided conflicting evidence in relation to early maternal sensitivity, particularly sensitivity to non-distress, and later child behaviour and a need for further research in this area exists. The current study investigated early maternal sensitivity and its association with later child behaviour in a UK based population sample using data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC). The study used a subsample of 766 mother-infant pairs who had data on observed maternal responsiveness at 12 months and on child behavioural difficulties derived from the Revised Rutter Parent Scale for Preschool Children at 42 months. Data for a number of potentially confounding variables, including maternal and child-based variables were also included in the analysis. Hypotheses were tested regarding an association between lower maternal responsiveness and higher child behavioural difficulties as well as regarding associations with further behavioural subscales of the Rutter scale, including a prosocial behaviour subscale. Results were analysed using a linear regression model with adjustments for groups of confounding variables. There was no evidence to support a relationship between lower maternal responsiveness and higher behavioural difficulties at 42 months although there was suggestion of a trend in the expected direction. Similar results were found for the subscales of the Rutter scale. The conclusion is that maternal sensitivity measured in this way does not have a strong relationship with child behaviour. One interpretation of these results is that there is a need to distinguish between maternal sensitivity to non-distress and to distress and ensure that the appropriate aspect of maternal sensitivity in relation to child behavioural outcomes is assessed. Limitations of the study are discussed and the effects of potential improvements are considered.

**Keywords:** Maternal Sensitivity, Maternal Responsiveness, Child Behaviour, ALSPAC

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