
Mother-infant bed-sharing and infant stress resilience

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Abstract

During early sensitive periods, touch shapes an infant's stress response (Liu et al., 1997). Most caregiving research has focussed on daytime parenting, omitting night-time practices (Barry, 2019). Bed-sharing is when a caregiver and infant share the same sleep surface (Ball, 2009), increasing opportunities for touch (Mitchell & Scragg, 1993). In adults, bed-sharing may improve stress resilience, with touch as a possible mechanism (Van Puyvelde & Mairesse, 2022). Whilst some infant bed-sharing research has investigated touch (e.g., Lerner et al., 2020), it has not done so with a knowledge of affective touch mechanisms.

Objective: To understand the impact of bed-sharing on infant stress resilience, as mediated by touch.

Participants: A subsample from the Liverpool Night-time Caregiving Project (a longitudinal study on infant sleep, touch behaviours, and behavioural outcomes) will be recruited. Previously-collected data will allow for (i) identification of 'high' bed-sharing ("HB"; N=30) and 'low' bed-sharing (i.e., mainly solitary-sleeping; "LB"; N=30) mother-infant dyads, and (ii) the impact of control variables, including: touch behaviours, demographics, infant feeding, maternal mental health, social support, and sleep quality.

Methods : We will compare physiological responses to an acute stressor (The Still Face Paradigm, "SFP", Tronick et al., 1978) between HB and LB infants. We will collect infant ECG, respiration, and cortisol.

Analyses: Analyses will focus on the impact of infant sleep location and other variables on infant ECG, respiration, and cortisol using multilevel modelling. We hypothesise that HB infants will show better stress resilience (i.e., recovery during the 'reunion' phase of SFP) than LB infants.

Keywords: infant sleep, co, sleeping, bed, sharing, Still Face Paradigm, stress, caregiving, affective touch

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