

Parents Gone Wild? Study Suggests Link Between Working Memory and Reactive Parenting

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We've all been in situations before where we get so frustrated or angry about something, we will lash out at someone without thinking. This lashing out — reactive negativity — happens when we can't control our emotions. Luckily, we are usually pretty good at self-regulating and controlling our emotions and behaviors. Working memory is crucial for cognitive control of emotions: It allows us to consider information we have and reason quickly when deciding what to do as opposed to reacting automatically, without thinking, to something.

For parents, it is particularly important to maintain a cool head around their misbehaving children. This can be challenging and sometimes parents can't help but react negatively towards their kids when they act badly. However, chronic parental reactive negativity is one of the most consistent factors leading to child abuse and may reinforce adverse behavior in children.

To avoid responding reactively to bad behavior, parents must be able to regulate their own negative emotions and thoughts. In the current study, psychologists Kirby Deater-Deckard and Michael D. Sewell from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Stephen A. Petrill from Ohio State University, and Lee A. Thompson from Case Western Reserve University examined if there is a link between working memory and parental reactive negativity.

Mothers of same-sex twins participated in this study. Researchers visited the participants' homes and videotaped each mother as she separately interacted with each twin as they participated in two frustrating tasks (drawing pictures with an Etch-A-Sketch and moving a marble through a tilting maze). In addition, the mothers completed a battery of tests measuring various cognitive abilities, including working memory.

The results, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that the mothers whose negativity was most strongly linked with their child's challenging behaviors were those with the poorest working memory skills. The authors surmise that "for mothers with poorer working memory, their negativity is more reactive because they are less able to cognitively control their emotions and behaviors during their interactions with their children." They conclude that education and intervention efforts for improving parenting may be more effective if they incorporate strategies that enhance working memory skills in parents.