

Parents Gone Wild? The Link Between Working Memory and Reactive Parenting

January 01, 2010



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, most people are pretty good at self-regulating and controlling their emotions and behaviors. Working memory is crucial for this cognitive control: It allows us to consider information we have and reason quickly when deciding what to do as opposed to reacting automatically, without thinking. For parents, it is particularly important to maintain a cool head around their misbehaving children. This can be challenging (see the previous Observation). However, chronic parental reactive negativity is one of the most consistent factors leading to child abuse and may reinforce adverse behavior in children. Recently, 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. The results, reported in *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.