

# Mothers' behavior during playtime linked to young children's engagement with them, researcher says

February 4 2013

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Researchers long have evaluated the roles parents play in children's development. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri have found that mothers' directiveness, the extent to which they try to control the content and pace of young children's play, varies based on the children's ages and the mothers' ethnicities. In addition, the study found that the more directive the mothers were during play, the less engaged children were with them and the more negative emotion the children displayed toward their mothers.

"Children flourish when they have opportunities to make choices about what they do, particularly in play situations," said Jean Ispa, lead author of the study and professor of human development and family studies at MU. "[Mothers](#) who are highly directive do not allow that kind of choice. In our study, the children were playing with some [toys](#), and the very directive mothers were making the decisions about how to play, what to play and how quickly to play."

For example, during play with her child, a highly directive mother might make her toddler put the plastic cow in the toy barn through the barn's door instead of through its window. If a child is playing with a pretend kitchen set, the mom might not let the child touch the fake burners on the stove. Mothers often think they are helping their children by correcting them, but they are limiting the children's [creativity](#) and possibly making their children enjoy being with them less, Ispa said.

"It's often noted that European-American mothers are less directive generally than African-American and Mexican-American mothers, and that's also what we found," Ispa said. "When children were only a year old, on average, African-American mothers were the most directive, Mexican-American mothers were second and European-American mothers were third. As children got older, mothers of all ethnicities displayed less directiveness."

When mothers were highly directive during [playtime](#), children expressed less positive regard for their [moms](#) and more negative feelings toward them, Ispa said. The researchers also evaluated how affectionate the mothers were to their children and found that higher levels of warmth reduced the negative effects of directiveness.

"Even if mothers were very directive, if they were also warm, the negative effects of high directiveness lessened in every one of the ethnic groups we studied," Ispa said. "If mothers were negative or seemed critical of their kids, then the [negative effects](#) of directiveness increased."

To benefit their children's development, mothers should show affection to their children while supporting their play and being careful to limit the extent to which they dictate exactly how their children should play, Ispa said.

"We know that children, regardless of culture, need to feel loved," said Ispa. "Children take in the meaning of what their mothers are trying to do, so if a mom is being very directive and is generally a very warm person, I think the child feels, 'My mom is doing this because she cares about me, and she's trying to do the best for me.' If that warmth is missing, then the child might feel, 'My mom is trying to control me, and I don't like it.'"

Isipa and her colleagues used pre-recorded videos to analyze pairs of mothers and children interacting in [play](#) environments when the children were 1, 2, 3 and 5 years old. The mothers and children in the study all participated in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation project, a federal study of Early Head Start, a nationwide program designed to help the cognitive, social and emotional development of [children](#) from low-income families.

The study, "Patterns of Maternal Directiveness by Ethnicity among Early Head Start Research Participants," was published in *Parenting: Science and Practice*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Mothers' behavior during playtime linked to young children's engagement with them, researcher says (2013, February 4) retrieved 7 February 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-02-mothers-behavior-playtime-linked-young.html>

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