

Babies' interest in human faces linked to callous and unemotional traits

16 October 2014, by Dr Claire Hastings



Scientists at King's College London, the University of Manchester, and the University of Liverpool have found that an infant's preference for a person's face, rather than an object, is associated with lower levels of callous and unemotional behaviours in toddlerhood.

The study, published in *Biological Psychiatry*, assessed if 213 five-week-old infants spent longer tracking a person's face compared to an inanimate object – in this case a red ball. The researchers showed that greater tracking of the face relative to the ball was linked to lower callous unemotional behaviours measured using questionnaires when [children](#) were two and a half years old. The study also showed that if a mother responds more sensitively to their baby during playtime, then the child is less likely to display callous unemotional behaviour as a toddler.

Callous and unemotional behaviours include a lack of guilt and empathy, reduced concern for other's distress and difficulties with understanding emotions. In older children and adults, callous unemotional traits have been associated with reduced attention to important social features such as other people's faces and eyes. This study is the first to examine whether such a relationship is present from the first few weeks of life.

This is the latest finding from the Medical Research Council (MRC) funded Wirral Child Health and Development Study, an ongoing interdisciplinary investigation into the interplay of social and biological factors in the emotional and cognitive development of children. The children are currently being followed to test whether face preference in infancy can predict callous unemotional behaviour through to middle childhood.

Dr Rachael Bedford, a Sir Henry Wellcome Postdoctoral Fellow at the Biostatistics Department, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, says: "Callous and unemotional behaviours in children are known to be associated with an increased emotional burden on families as well as later criminality and antisocial behaviour. This study takes us a step further in understanding the earliest origins of callous and unemotional behaviours. An important next step will be to seek replication of the findings before working towards developing early interventions."

Dr Jonathan Hill, University of Manchester, says: "While our findings are interesting, we don't yet know how stable callous unemotional behaviours are. Our follow-up work will assess how these early indicators affect children in later life."

More information: Rachael Bedford, Andrew Pickles, Helen Sharp, Nicola Wright and Jonathan Hill "Reduced face preference in infancy: a developmental precursor to callous-unemotional traits?" published in *Biological Psychiatry*: www.biologicalpsychiatryjournal.com/article/S0006-3223%2814%2900745-8/abstract

Provided by King's College London

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