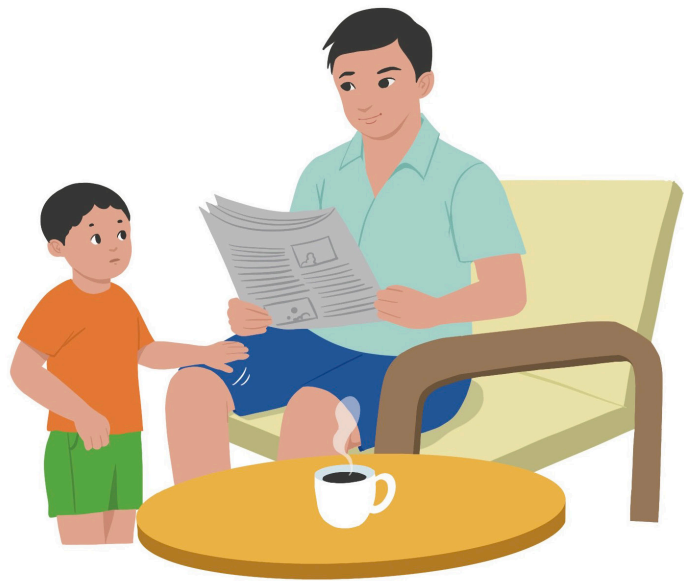


The Importance of Caregiver Sensitivity for Children's Development



- A sensitive caregiver is able to recognise their child's bid for attention, particularly when the child is distressed, and respond in a manner that meets their needs, even in the presence of other competing demands.

- Children of sensitive caregivers are more likely to show positive outcomes in several areas of development. These include:

Development of a secure attachment (emotional bond) with caregivers: This helps children to develop a secure self, explore their environment more confidently, and be confident that their physical and emotional needs will be responded to.

Social-emotional development: Singapore research has shown that early exposure to sensitive caregiving behaviours helps regulate a child's response to fear. Children of sensitive parents are less likely to show internalising problems (e.g. sadness, anxiety) or externalising problems (e.g. hyperactivity). They are also better able to develop strong self-identity, self-control, and social skills.

Brain development: Research in Singapore has demonstrated that maternal sensitivity affects development of the child's brain in regions linked to memory, emotion, and executive function. Positive cognitive outcomes are also observed.

Language development: Four- to six-year-old Singaporean children with more sensitive mothers are less likely to show language difficulties, likely due to mothers having greater emotional presence during interactions, which facilitates verbal and non-verbal communication.

- Sensitive caregiving behaviours are influenced by the caregiver's characteristics (e.g. mental well-being) and wider contextual factors such as their access to social support. Caregivers experiencing depression or

who are overwhelmed by demands on their attention tend to show less sensitive behaviours. On the other hand, caregivers who receive more help from family and friends are better able to bond with their baby after birth. Having social support may give caregivers more time and energy to respond in a more sensitive manner to their child.

- Caregiver sensitivity can be enhanced through population-wide interventions such as programmes that include opportunities for caregivers to learn about sensitive caregiving and receive feedback on their own behaviours. More intensive guidance can be provided to parents with higher risk profiles. Interventions should be contextualised to the target population and its specific needs, culture and environment.

- Interventional programmes can be promoted through public health promotion messages or community parenting organisations, and delivered by trained practitioners during child assessment appointments or at other easily accessible places. Information resources for parents can also be distributed at the same time.

- Government policies need to recognise the importance of caregiver sensitivity for holistic child development. This could include providing additional caregiver support during parental leave, increasing the flexibility of parental leave length, fostering more family-friendly work environments, and improving social support for new parents.

- Additional research focused on non-maternal caregivers (e.g., fathers, grandparents and domestic helpers) within the Singaporean context is needed to better inform sensitive caregiving practices.

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