

A systematic review of parent–infant interaction in infants at risk of autism

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By investigating the development of infant siblings of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), we now know that those infants who later go on to be diagnosed with the condition (compared to those who do not) may show early social and communicative differences or delays beginning in the second half of their first year. Further, these early differences may alter how social partners (e.g. parents) respond to them and vice versa. This ultimately shapes the social experience that is likely to play an important role in the infant's social development. We reviewed published studies to understand what is currently known about how these infant siblings (referred to as 'at-risk' infants) and their parents may differ in their play interactions. We identified 15 studies, which together found some differences in parent-infant interactions emerging in the later part of the first year. This was especially in at-risk infants' use of gestures and the quality of the overall interaction. At-risk infants who went on to be diagnosed with ASD showed the most differences with interaction. Also, the parents of at-risk infants, irrespective of later ASD, may provide more of specific types of social or communicative input. Whether these have a positive effect on the child or otherwise is not yet known. A few studies hinted at a link between aspects of parent-infant interaction in at-risk infants and their later language competence. We discuss what the results may mean for working with parents and at-risk infants to maximise infant social and communicative development.