

# The Importance of Early Nurturance for Social Development

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The lack of ability for empathy and related callous and unemotional (CU) traits is perhaps among the most destructive of human characteristics. Such traits could be at the root of much violent crime and the initiation and prolongation of harmful social conflicts. These traits, known to be precursors of psychopathy, are evident in childhood, with recent work suggesting they can be detectable as early as the preschool period of development.<sup>1</sup> Despite the unusually clear clinical manifestations of these traits and broad consensus on how to identify them, mental health clinicians and those in social welfare have been at a loss on how to effectively treat this condition. Conduct disorder with CU traits and psychopathy have been widely regarded as untreatable for most patients.

In this context, Humphreys *et al.*'s findings from the Bucharest Early Intervention Project provide exciting new promise for early intervention in this elusive domain.<sup>2</sup> This unique randomized controlled trial, which has allowed a comparison between the outcomes of children reared in institutional settings and those randomized early in childhood out of the institution and into therapeutic foster homes, has provided an unprecedented window into the effects of relative emotional neglect on child emotional, behavioral, and neurobiological outcomes. Although many findings from this study have focused on attachment-related outcomes, the study also has informed the effects of early deprivation and neglect on risk for other forms of psychopathology. In this vein, the investigators compared CU traits at adolescent outcomes in those randomized to foster care with those who remained in the institution. An intent-to-treat analysis displayed a markedly decreased prevalence of this characteristic in boys randomized to foster care compared with those who remained in institutions. Specifically, the caregiver's ability to respond to child distress, distinct from caregiver support, which was a nonsignificant factor, served as a mediator of the decreased rate of CU traits in adolescent boys. These findings provide some of the most compelling empirical evidence to date for the importance of the early caregiving relationship in the development of empathic capacities.

This study falls short of providing definitive evidence that early caregiver responsiveness is the essential ingredient toward the prevention of CU traits in adolescence. To test this hypothesis, a study design that randomizes participants based on this characteristic and measures this trait before and after intervention is needed to confirm and

extend the finding. However, these findings do offer a theoretically and developmentally well-grounded lead for future prevention trials in this area, one that is absolutely critical for public health and societal well-being. Further, it might shed new light on the commonly held belief, supported by some evidence, that CU traits are familial,<sup>3</sup> suggesting that perhaps rather than being genetically immutable, this familial transmission might operate at least in part through parenting.

The ability to empathize with another human being requires a level of emotional maturation rooted in the ability to understand, process, and regulate one's own emotional states. It has been well established that these emotion developmental skills are modeled by caregivers, and that learning is enhanced in environments where sensitive caregivers can serve as emotion teachers and coaches for children early in development.<sup>4</sup> Based on this, it would seem logical that the core deficit of the individual with CU is a delay or alteration in emotion development potentially arising at least in part from a deficit in caregiver nurturance, responsiveness, and modeling of these traits. In this context, and supported by findings from Humphreys *et al.*, a greater focus on early caregiving sensitivity to enhance child emotional development in different areas would seem a highly feasible and tangible target in the prevention of psychopathy and other related disorders characterized by core emotion processing and competency deficits. Further, the study findings suggest that early intervention can be critical in the area of CU traits, given that children in the Bucharest Early Intervention Project who showed the decreased rates of CU traits were randomized to foster care relatively early in life. Of direct relevance to current social welfare system practices, the study findings suggest that children with these traits might be in need of interventions quite counter to the harsh and punitive responses that are often used.

The principle that early nurturance provides a critical foundation for healthy child development has been well established in the child-development literature. However, the idea that the capacity for empathy is a teachable skill and that CU traits could be psychosocially modifiable through the early caregiving relationship is a new idea with very significant clinical implications that to date has had little empirical support. Based on this, the findings reported by Humphreys *et al.* provide an important opening into a critical and novel line of early intervention that should become a high-priority research agenda. &

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