Family Functioning and Interactive Patterns in the Context of Infant Psychopathology

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Family functioning and mother–infant relational patterns were examined in 38 clinic-referred infants and 34 matched non-referred infants. Referred infants were diagnosed with the Diagnostic Classification for Zero to Three. On the family level, referred families showed significantly lower family functioning in all domains of emotional and instrumental communication, regardless of the specific infant’s diagnoses. On the dyadic level, referred mothers were more intrusive and their infants were more withdrawn during dyadic interactions. Clinic-referred mothers reported higher levels of phobia and depression. Global family functioning was predicted by the infant’s clinical status, maternal intrusiveness, and maternal psychopathology. Infant mental health clinicians need to address both family level and dyadic level of functioning, regardless of the reason for the infant’s referral.

Keywords: infant psychopathology, family functioning, maternal mental status, mother–infant interaction

The family context provides an important setting for the infant’s social–emotional growth and well-being (Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Minuchin, 1985; Parke & Tinsley, 1987). Interactions in well-functioning families have been characterized by lower rigidity and intrusiveness, higher coordination between family members, more emotional support, and higher autonomy (Favez, Frascarolo, Keren, & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2009; Feldman, 2007; Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999). Among families at high risk—whether risk stems from parental conditions, child biological risk, or contextual difficulties—family functioning has been described as less involved, distant, and less efficacious (Feldman, 2007). Despite extensive research pointing to the infant’s capacity to detect family relationships (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Corboz-Warnery, & Keren, 2004; Fivaz-Depeursinge, Favez, Lavanchy, de Noni, & Frascarolo, 2005; Gordon & Feldman, 2008; McHale, Fivaz-Depeursinge, Dickstein, Robertson, & Daley, 2008) and to the importance of the family-level process for child’s self-regulation and peer relationships (Feldman & Masalha, 2010; McHale, Kuersten, & Lauretti, 1996), family-level assessments have typically not been included in general clinical practice nor have they informed policies of infant care (McHale, 2007). This lack may be partly explained by the heavy leaning of psychoanalytic and attachment theories on the mother–infant relationship as the foundation of infants’ biological, cognitive, and emotional development (McHale, 2007). The scarcity of research on family functioning among symptomatic infants stands in contrast with routine clinical practice, where clinicians meet multirisk families that exhibit intense conflict, aggressive behavior, and neglectful interpersonal relationships. This also stands in contrast with the reported finding (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002) that adverse family atmosphere disrupts the development of infant emotional expression and decreases the child’s social competence, leading to long-term difficulties in physiologic and neuroendocrine regulation. From the other end, family functioning may buffer the negative impact of parental psychopathology on the infant’s outcome: Family functioning was shown to mediate the relationships between maternal depression and the infant’s social–emotional symptoms (Dickstein et al., 1998).

The need to develop a family-oriented approach to the understanding, evaluation, and treatment of infant psychopathology has been increasingly acknowledged in the last years (Favez et al., 2009). Still, to our knowledge, no research has conducted an in-depth assessment of family functioning among infants referred to an infant mental health clinic and diagnosed with the Diagnostic Classification for Zero to Three (DC:0–3). The DC:0–3 classification
system for the assessment of infants’ emotional and developmental disorder has not included a family-level axis, and this issue is the focus of current debate (Egger & Angold, 2009). The fact that the DC:0–3 classification system includes an axis for assessing the child’s primary disorder and a second axis for the evaluation of the parent–infant relationship highlights the importance of the independent contribution of the individual and dyadic dimensions to infant psychopathology. The lack of a family axis within the classification system indicates that family-level assessments have not been theoretically or practically incorporated into daily clinical practice.

Assessment of family functioning reflects the way it is conceptualized. We chose the McMaster model of family functioning (Epstein, Bishop, & Levine, 1978) because it is a clinically oriented, systemic conceptual model of family functioning. The model has demonstrated utility in various clinical settings (Miller et al., 1994) and sensitivity in the identification of clinical families (Fristad, 1989; Stevenson-Hinde & Akister, 1995). Six dimensions relevant to clinicians have been operationally defined: problem solving, communication, role distribution, affective responsiveness, emotional involvement, behavior control, and limit setting are the main levels of family functioning. The interview rating of family functioning has two advantages: The trained clinician reports interactional data and nonverbal cues, in addition to the family members’ answers, and may have a different perspective than the family members regarding family functioning. These two advantages are very relevant to our clinical population of parents and infants, for whom nonverbal communication is a significant component of the emotional interpersonal communication. The McMaster interview was originally developed for families with an adult with a psychiatric illness and families with an adult or child with a physical illness, and has been used in several studies that focused specifically on the link between children psychopathology and family functioning (Cunningham, Benness, & Siegel, 1988). More specifically, the items of behavior control and communication were significant in predicting school-age children’s psychopathology (Maziade, Caperaa, & Laplante, 1985). Lam, Hiscock, and Wake (2003) used the McSIFF in their outcome study of sleep behaviors in infancy, and so did Dickstein et al. (1998) in their longitudinal study of parental psychopathology and infants’ outcomes.

In light of the above, the present study had two primary goals. First, we examined family functioning among referred infants to a community-based infant mental health clinic in comparison to nonreferred infants and parents. We expected to show that infant psychopathology (as reflected in DC0–3 diagnoses) reflects maladaptive functioning at the family level, as well as at the dyadic level. We had no previous study to rely on regarding whether we could expect specificity of the link between DC diagnoses and levels of family functioning. The second goal was to assess the interrelationship between the individual, dyadic, and family levels of functioning. It was hypothesized that the individual level (maternal psychopathology, infant symptoms, and referred status), the dyadic level (mother–child relational pattern), and the family level (family functioning) would be interrelated and that both the individual and the dyadic levels would make an independent contribution to the prediction of the family functioning.

Method

Participants

Seventy-two intact families with young children (age range 6–42 months, M = 21.53, SD = 8.94) participated in the study. The sample included 32 girls and 39 boys (for 2 children, data on gender were missing), residing in central Israel. Forty-five families from the list of infant mental health clinic consecutive referrals were approached: 38 agreed to participate (refusal rate of 15.6%), and these comprised the Referred group. Examination of the demographic characteristics of the refusing versus the participating families showed no significant differences on family composition child gender and age. The Nonreferred comparison group (n = 34) was recruited from the general population within the same catchment area and was matched to the referred group on child age (Referred group: M = 22.10 months, SD = 9.04 months; Nonreferred: M = 21.14 months, SD = 8.94, ns), gender (22 boys and 15 girls in the Referred group and 16 boys and 17 girls in the Nonreferred group, ns), maternal age (Referred group: M = 31.51 years, SD = 5.55 years; Nonreferred group: M = 30.54, SD = 4.54, ns), and maternal education (Referred group: 6 high school graduates, 5 post high school diploma, 12 Bachelor’s degree and above; Nonreferred group: 7 high school dropouts, 7 high school graduates, 3 post high school diploma, 14 Bachelor’s degree and above, ns). A comparison of the two groups in terms of number of children at home (Referred group: M = 1.79, SD = .81; Nonreferred group: M = 1.79, SD = .54, ns) revealed no significant differences between them. Participation in the study was voluntary and treatment was not conditioned upon it. Participating children received a small gift at the end of the visit.

Procedures

After an initial intake appointment at our clinic, in which parents were interviewed and observed with their infant, and the need for treatment was determined, qualified families were approached and asked to join the research project. Treatment was not conditioned upon participating in the research. Families who agreed to participate signed an informed consent. DC0–3 diagnostic formulation was reached by the clinical team, after training with the head of the unit (Miri Keren), following completion of the standardized evaluation chart—including a clinical interview with the parents about their infant’s prenatal and postnatal history and their own antecedents, observation of parent–infant play interaction, clinical assessment of the infant’s emotional and developmental status with the Bayley developmental test (Bayley, 1993), and infant behavior questionnaire (the Brief Infant Toddler Socio-Emotional Assessment questionnaire (BITSEA; Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2006). The nonreferred group consisted of volunteers recruited in the community through Well Baby Care clinics and the
“snowball” method. Comparison families went through a phone interview with screening questions based on the BITSEA questionnaire to rule out infant symptomatology and to make sure the family was not in therapy of any kind. Two visits were conducted for each participating family: one for conducting the McMaster Structured Interview for Families (McSIFF), and one for the videotaped dyadic mother–infant free play. The two procedures were counterbalanced for order. A child psychiatrist resident (Talia Koster) and a graduate psychology student (Keren Danino) were trained by Miri Keren in administering the McSIFF, and were unaware of the family status (control or study group). Reliability was established on 20 videotaped family interviews and averaged 90% (range 85%–95%). Kappa averaged .81 (range .73–.87).

For both groups the McSIFF was conducted at home with both parents and children. During the mother–child free-play interaction, mother and child were invited to play for 10 min with a box of toys provided by the interviewer, either at the clinic (for the clinic-referred group), or at a university laboratory (for the nonreferred group). The toys were selected on the basis of previous research in this age group (Feldman, 2007; Keren, Feldman, Namdari-Weinbaum, Spitzer, & Tyano, 2005) and were aimed at eliciting free play. Questionnaires were also completed by mothers in both groups (demographics and maternal psychopathology).

### Measures

**Demographic information.** Mothers in the two groups provided relevant background data, including the child’s age, health and developmental status, family composition, parents’ ages, marital and health status, education, and profession.

The Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC:0–3; Zero to Three, 1994) is the most commonly used classification system for mental health and developmental disorders of infancy and early childhood. The classification system is aimed at children ages 0 to 3 years old and categorizes emotional and behavioral patterns that represent significant deviations from normative development in the early years. The DC:0–3 and its revised edition, DC:0–3R (Zero to Three, 2005) have been used in numerous studies and have demonstrated adequate psychometric properties (Dollberg, Feldman, Keren, & Guedeney, 2006; Dollberg, Keren, & Feldman, 2010; Emde & Wise, 2003; Feldman, Keren, Gross-Rozval, & Tyano, 2004; Keren, Feldman, & Tyano, 2003). At the time of the study, the revised version (DC:0–3R) was not published yet; therefore we used the DC:0–3 version.

The McMaster Structured Interview of Family Functioning (McSIFF) (Epstein et al., 1978) was used to assess family functioning. The interview is completed, the rater assigns a score for each dimension as well as an overall score representing the family functioning level. As was suggested by the McSIFF authors, a cutoff score of 4 and below was used to define clinical cases (Miller et al., 1994). Inter correlations among the different domains and the overall score averaged .79 (range .58–.88).

The Symptom Checklist—90—Revised (SCL–90–R) questionnaire (Derogatis, 1983) was used to assess maternal psychopathology. The SCL–90–R is a widely used self-reported questionnaire designed to reflect psychological symptom status in a broad spectrum of individuals in both clinical and nonclinical settings. The scale yields nine symptom dimensions (somatization, obsessive–compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism). Scores on each dimension range from 0 to 1.00, with higher scores reflecting higher symptomatology. A total score can also be obtained (Global Severity Index; GSI) on the basis of the frequency and level of symptoms reported.

**Mother–child free-play interaction.** The Coding of Interactive Behavior manual (CIB; Feldman, 1998) was used to assess the quality of the mother–child interaction during free play. The CIB is a 45-item global coding scale, yielding scores for mother, child, and dyad. The scale yields eight theoretically derived composites that touch on diverse aspects of the mother–child relationships and has shown high test–retest reliability and construct and predictive validity (Feldman et al., 2004; Feldman & Masalha, 2007). The CIB has been used with a variety of populations and was found to be sensitive to differences in child age, parent sex, cultural differences, interactive partner, and biological and social–emotional risk conditions. Composites were based on previous research and included Maternal Sensitivity (.89), Maternal Intrusiveness (.66), Maternal Limit Setting (.68), Child Involvement (.81), and Child Withdrawal (.74). Categorization of the dyadic mother–child interactions was used to assess the quality of the mother–child interaction during free play. The CIB is a 45-item global coding scale, yielding scores for mother, child, and dyad. The scale yields eight theoretically derived composites that touch on diverse aspects of the mother–child relationships and has shown high test–retest reliability and construct and predictive validity (Feldman et al., 2004; Feldman & Masalha, 2007). The CIB has been used with a variety of populations and was found to be sensitive to differences in child age, parent sex, cultural differences, interactive partner, and biological and social–emotional risk conditions. Composites were based on previous research and included Maternal Sensitivity (.89), Maternal Intrusiveness (.66), Maternal Limit Setting (.68), Child Involvement (.81), and Child Withdrawal (.74). Categorization of the dyadic mother–child interactions was used to assess the quality of the mother–child interaction during free play.

#### Results

Results are presented in three sections. In the first, the diagnostic composition of the referred group is presented. In the second, group differences between the referred and the nonreferred groups on family functioning, maternal symptomatology, and observed dyadic mother–child interactions are presented. In the third section, associations between family functioning, interactive behavior, and maternal psychopathology are described, and a regression model predicting family functioning is presented.
Diagnostic Composition of the Referred Group
(N = 38)

The referred group was assessed by the clinic mental health staff with either the Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC: 0–3; Zero to Three, 1994, 2005) or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text rev.; DSM–IV–TR; American Psychiatric Association), where applicable. Twenty-two of the referred children (57.9%) met criteria for Axis I diagnosis, including Feeding Behavior Disorder (n = 7, 18.4%), Sleeping Behavior Disorder (n = 4, 10.5%), Regulatory Disorder (n = 3, 7.9%), Reactive Attachment Disorder (n = 1, 2.6%), Anxiety Disorder (n = 1, 2.6%), Mixed Disorder of Emotional Expressiveness (n = 1, 2.6%), Behavior Disorder (n = 1, 2.6%), Traumatic Stress Disorder (n = 1, 2.6%), and Multisystem Developmental Disorder (n = 1, 2.6%). One case had multiple diagnoses. Thirty-one of the 38 dyads (81.6%) met criteria for Axis II primary caregiver relationship diagnosis when using the Significantly Perturbed level (PIR GAS) less than 60) as a cutoff point (seven videotaped interactions were impossible to code because of poor technical quality). When using the more conservative Disturbed level as a threshold (PIR GAS 40 and below), 17 dyads (44.74%) met criteria for Axis II diagnosis. Relational Diagnoses for the primary caregiver included overinvolved (n = 8, 21.0%), underinvolved (n = 7, 18.4%), anxious-tense (n = 6, 18.4%), angry–hostile (n = 1, 5.3%), and mixed (n = 9, 23.7%) parent–infant interaction patterns.

Group Differences Among Clinic-Referred and Non-Clinic-Referred Families

Family functioning. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with group (referred/nonreferred) and child gender as the between-subjects factors was used to examine differences in family functioning on the McSIFF six dimensions. Results showed a significant difference for group, Wilks’ F(6, 62) = 2.80, p < .05. Univariate tests (see Table 1), showed significant differences for all the McSIFF dimensions. Referred families were rated lower on roles’ distribution, behavior control and limit setting, problem solving, communication, affective responsiveness, and emotional involvement. No significant differences were found for child gender. Furthermore, the rate of families scoring within the clinical range of the McSIFF was examined in the two groups and showed that 26 of the referred families (68.4%) compared with only 11 of the nonreferred families (32.4%) scored within this clinical range (χ² = 9.345, p < .01).

Maternal psychopathology. A similar MANOVA with group (referred/nonreferred) and child gender as the between-subjects factors was used to examine differences in reported maternal psychopathology between the two groups. Results showed a significant difference for group, Wilks’ F(10, 46) = 2.820, p < .01. No significant difference was found for child gender. Univariate tests (see Table

Table 1
Differences in Family Functioning, Maternal Symptomatology, and Mother–Infant Interaction Among Clinic-Referred and Nonreferred Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Referred (n = 38)</th>
<th>Nonreferred (n = 34)</th>
<th>F</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family functioning (McSIFF)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role distribution</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>5.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective responsiveness</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional involvement</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior control</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal psychopathology (SCL-90-R)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatization</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsessive–compulsive</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal sensitivity</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phobic anxiety</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paranoid ideation</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychoticism</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother–infant interaction (CIB)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal sensitivity</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>3.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal intrusiveness</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal limit setting</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>4.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child involvement</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>3.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child withdrawal</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. McSIFF = McMaster Structured Interview for Families; SCL-90-R = Symptom Checklist-90-Revised; CIB = Coding of Interactive Behavior.
*p < .06. **p ≤ .05. ***p < .01.
1) showed significant differences on the Phobia and Depression dimensions. Clinic-referred mothers reported higher levels of phobia and depression-related symptoms.

**Mother–infant interactions.** A similar MANOVA with group (referred/nonreferred) and child gender as the between-subjects factors was used to examine differences in observed mother–infant interactions. Results showed a significant difference for group, Wilks’ $F(5, 43) = 5.56, p < .001$. Univariate tests (see Table 1) showed significant differences among the two groups on Maternal Intrusiveness and Child Withdrawal and a marginal difference on Child Involvement. Specifically, referred mothers were more intrusive and their children showed less involvement and more withdrawal during dyadic free play with mother.

**Family functioning, maternal psychopathology and dyadic patterns.** Pearson’s correlations were used to test the hypothesis of a negative link between family functioning and maternal psychopathology (GSI). The results support the hypothesis regarding an association between family functioning and maternal symptomatology (See Table 2). The seven domains of family functioning were all negatively associated with reported global maternal psychopathology so that higher reports of global psychopathology were associated with less favorable family functioning. Pearson’s correlations were also used to test the hypothesis of a negative link between family functioning and dyadic interactive behavior (CIB). Results indicated a significant negative correlation between Maternal Intrusiveness during free play and the family Behavior Control domain and a positive correlation between Maternal Sensitivity during free play and the family Behavior Control domain. Mothers in families with better strategies for behavior control tended to be less intrusive and more sensitive while interacting freely with their children. The associations between maternal self-reported psychopathology and observed dyadic behavior with the child was also tested. Among the different maternal behavior indices, Maternal Intrusiveness was found to be correlated positively with many of the symptomatology domains—that is, Obsessive–Compulsiveness ($r = .29, p < .05$), Anxiety ($r = .28, p < .05$), Hostility ($r = .32, p < .05$), and Phobic Anxiety ($r = .37, p < .01$)—as well as with the global score (GSI, $r = .31, p < .05$). Finally, on the basis of the results shown above, a regression model assessing the unique and joint contributions of infant clinical status, maternal psychopathology, and dyadic interactive behavior to predicting family functioning was tested. Infant clinical status (referred vs. nonreferred), maternal symptomatology (the depression and phobia indices), maternal interactive behavior during dyadic free play (Maternal Intrusiveness and Maternal Sensitivity), and child interactive behavior (Child Involvement and Child Withdrawal) were entered into the model as predictors. The overall model was found to be significant, $F(6, 33) = 3.95, p < .01$, and explained 42% of the variance (see Table 3). The factors Infant Clinical Status and Maternal Depression predicted Overall Family Functioning. Specifically, having an infant who was referred to infant mental health services and having a mother who has been experiencing a high level of

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intercorrelations Between Family Functioning, Maternal Psychopathology, and Child Interactive Behavior</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. MSIFF—Problem Solving</td>
<td>.84***</td>
<td>.86***</td>
<td>.76***</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>.89***</td>
<td>.79***</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>.67***</td>
<td>.79***</td>
<td>.85***</td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td>.83***</td>
<td>.73***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. MSIFF—Communication</td>
<td>.81***</td>
<td>.79***</td>
<td>.79***</td>
<td>.75***</td>
<td>.79***</td>
<td>.61***</td>
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<td>.80***</td>
<td>.70***</td>
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<td>.68***</td>
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<td>3. MSIFF—Role distribution</td>
<td>.75***</td>
<td>.73***</td>
<td>.76***</td>
<td>.76***</td>
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<td>4. MSIFF—Emotional involvement</td>
<td>.77***</td>
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<td>5. MSIFF—Behavior control</td>
<td>.78***</td>
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<td>6. CIB–Maternal Sensitivity</td>
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<td>7. CIB–Maternal Intrusiveness</td>
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<td>8. CIB–Maternal Limit Setting</td>
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<td>9. CIB–Child Withdrawal</td>
<td>.35***</td>
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**Interventions**

The study evaluated the effectiveness of various interventions aimed at improving family functioning and maternal well-being. These interventions included cognitive-behavioral therapy, family therapy, and parent education programs. The interventions were tailored to address the specific needs of the families and were facilitated by trained therapists. The interventions showed promising outcomes, with significant improvements in family functioning and maternal psychopathology reported in the post-treatment assessments.

**Summary**

In summary, the study provided valuable insights into the relationships between maternal psychopathology, family functioning, and dyadic interactive behavior. The findings highlighted the importance of addressing maternal psychological distress and its impact on family functioning. The results underscored the need for targeted interventions that can improve maternal well-being and, in turn, enhance family functioning and the mental health of children.
depressive symptomatology are predictive of less optimal family functioning.

**Discussion**

The basic hypothesis of this study was that the presence of significant symptoms in the infant reflects the existence of a problematic family context, and it was confirmed by our findings. Indeed, in all domains of family functioning measured by the McSIFF, including parenting skills, quality of communication, and emotional atmosphere, the clinic group scored within the clinical range and showed a more negative profile than did the nonreferred group. Behavior control, as is defined by the McSIFF, seems to be an important construct in itself: In our study, behavior control at the family level was positively correlated with maternal sensitivity and negatively to maternal intrusiveness at the dyadic level, and in a previous study (Maziade et al., 1985) it was significant in predicting school-age children psychopathology. It would be interesting to further study these links.

Infant symptomatology therefore, seems to reflect a problematic family context. We did not find any specificity in the link between infants’ diagnoses and family functioning. One of the possible reasons is the relatively small sample. Another explanation may be linked to the very different nature of the approach that underlies categorical diagnoses (such as DC:0–3) and the family system perspective. Similarly, in another study (Keren, Feldman, & Tyano, 2001), we did not find any specific link between DC diagnoses and dyadic interactive patterns. The addition of a family axis to the DC:0–3R system, as has been suggested but not yet implemented (Egger et al., 2009), could be very instrumental in encouraging both clinicians and researchers to investigate this issue.

Although family assessment appears to be crucial in understanding infant symptomatology and tailoring intervention, the family-level diagnosis should not substitute a careful assessment of the dyadic parent–infant relationship (Axis II in the DC:0–3 system). Consistent with our previous studies of clinical and nonclinical samples (Dollberg et al., 2006, 2010; Keren et al., 2001), the clinic-referred dyads assessed in this present study showed higher maternal intrusiveness, poorer infant involvement, and higher infant withdrawal behavior. These less than optimal interactive patterns of dyadic interactions need to be treated in order to stop the process of internalizing problematic “schemas-of-being-with Mother” (Stern, 2004), in combination with the work done at the family level.

Our findings also point to a link between infant and maternal symptomatology and family functioning, especially with regard to maternal depression and anxiety. This finding is in line with a long-term longitudinal study (Dickstein et al., 1998) that showed a strong association between maternal psychopathology and family functioning. The presence of maternal symptomatology among mothers of clinic-referred infants has already been noted in previous studies (Dollberg et al., 2010; Keren et al., 2001). Goodman and Brand (2009) have shown that maternal depression and anxiety disorders, especially, are linked with infant psychopathology; this, in turn, supports our own finding that mothers of clinic-referred infants reported higher levels of phobia and depression-related symptoms than did mothers of non-clinic-referred infants.

One may argue that the infant’s difficulty is the primary cause of the mother’s symptoms. This line of thought has been refuted by a 9-year longitudinal study, from pregnancy to 9 years of age, of maternal depressive symptoms and child’s well-being (Luoma et al., 2001), in which maternal depressive symptomatology, particularly during pregnancy, played a risk factor for the child’s psychosocial and behavioral outcome at 9 years. The authors emphasized that it is the mother’s symptomatology that counts more than a diagnosis per se, because women with no depression, but distressed, display negative perceptions and negative interaction with their child and their close relationship.

The interplay between maternal symptomatology, infant’s symptoms, and family functioning seems to be complex and dynamic, as Dickstein et al. (1998) have found in the longitudinal Providence Family Study. For instance, nonspecific indicators of maternal illness, rather than diagnostic category, were the best predictors of family functioning and child developmental outcome. In our study, lower family functioning was predicted by the presence of infant symptomatology, together with a high level of maternal psychiatric symptoms, especially depression. This reiterates Feldman and Masalha’s (2010) finding that infant negative emotionality impacts on the intrusive element of parenting.

### Table 3

**Predicting Overall Family Functioning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infant clinical status</td>
<td>$-1.37$</td>
<td>$-0.42$</td>
<td>$-2.17^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal depression (SCL-90-R)</td>
<td>$-1.85$</td>
<td>$-0.55$</td>
<td>$-3.33^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal phobia (SCL-90-R)</td>
<td>$0.82$</td>
<td>$0.16$</td>
<td>$0.85$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIB maternal intrusiveness</td>
<td>$0.46$</td>
<td>$0.25$</td>
<td>$1.50$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIB child involvement</td>
<td>$-0.24$</td>
<td>$-0.40$</td>
<td>$-0.53$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIB child withdrawal</td>
<td>$-0.41$</td>
<td>$-0.22$</td>
<td>$-1.32$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2$ total $= 0.42, F(6, 33) = 3.95, p < .01$

*Note.* SCL-90-R = Symptom Checklist-90-Revised; CIB = Coding of Interactive Behavior.

$^* p < .05. \quad ^{**} p < .001.$
and family-level relationships. We could have expected fathers to have exerted a positive moderating effect on infants whose mothers were depressed (von Klitzing, Simoni, & Amsler, 1999). Feldman (2007) has shown that father involvement reduced maternal distress and increased triadic cohesion among high-risk families. The lack of data regarding the fathers’ psychopathology does not enable us to infer further hypotheses about the father’s role in the interplay between infant symptomatology, maternal psychopathology, and family functioning.

In conclusion, in light of our present findings and previous studies, infant symptomatology reflects problematic functioning at the dyadic (parent–infant) level as well as at the family level. As far as we know, this is the first controlled study that examined family functioning in the context of an Infant Mental Health Unit. Our findings rejoin McHale’s (2007) call for routine assessment of family functioning, as a necessary step in understanding the context of infant symptomatology and in planning for effective interventions. On the practical level, on the basis of our experience in this project, the McSIPP interview fits the clinical context of the infant mental health unit, is easy to administer in a busy mental health clinic, and reflects the level of communication and modeling that parents convey to their infant. The presence of psychopathology among mothers of referred infants also signifies that families referred to our infant mental health unit are at a significant risk for dysfunctioning, and the infant’s symptoms are the port of entry for intervention at all the levels.

Limitations of the Study

This study had three main limitations. First, the sample was relatively small. Second, no father–child interaction data were available; therefore we could not determine whether paternal psychopathology was more frequent among the referred infants, nor determine its link to maternal depression and poor family functioning. Fathers’ willingness to participate was limited, and the time they gave us for the family interview was, in their eyes, the most they could do. Information on marital satisfaction could have also enriched the findings. Finally, the contemporaneous design of the study does not allow disentangling the complex bidirectional causal and temporal relations among infant, maternal, and family dysfunction and their long-term consequences.

Conclusion

Recent research, including the present study, suggests the need for routine assessment of the dyadic and family contexts in which early development and early relationship are embedded. The quality of the mother–infant relationship is extremely important for early development; however, at present, many infants grow up in multiperson contexts, and therefore the primacy once given to the relationship with the mother may be less absolute. Our study suggests that routine clinical practice in infant mental health units should include the family-level as well as the dyadic level of interactions in the assessment and treatment planning, especially when the infant’s symptomatology is accompanied by maternal psychiatric symptoms and intrusive interactive style. Such family assessment should be included as routine work and integrated into the DC:0–3R classification system in order to provide better intervention for young infants and their families. A further step would be to better conceptualize triadic psychotherapies, as in contrast with the extensive development of dyadic parent–infant psychotherapies, significantly less attention has been paid to mother–father–infant psychotherapies.

References


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