

# Impact of Parental Representations and Related Parenting Behavior on Children

## *Ebeveynlerin Çocuğa Yönelik Temsillerinin ve İlgili Ebeveyn Davranışlarının Çocuğa Etkileri*

© Cansu Öztürk<sup>1</sup>, © Halime Şenay Güzel<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Yüksek İhtisas University, Ankara

<sup>2</sup>Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara

### ABSTRACT

Parental representations tend to be formed in the prenatal period and affect the child- parent relationship in the long term. Therefore, in the clinical environment, it is important to define parents' representations to increase the success of therapeutic interventions and prevent childhood psychopathologies with various intervention programs. With this concern, the aim of this review was to summarize the literature about parental representations and their relationship between parenting behavior, and childhood developmental problems. Related to this purpose, this review includes the definition and categories of parental representations, the factors which contribute to parental representations, and the relations between parenting and childhood developmental problems.

**Keywords:** Parental representations, child rearing, parent child relationship, developmental psychopathology

### ÖZ

Çocuğa yönelik temsiller doğum öncesi dönemde oluşma eğiliminde olup uzun vadede ebeveyn- çocuk arasındaki ilişkiyi etkileyebilmektedir. Anne babanın çocuğa yönelik temsillerinin değerlendirilmesi, aile ve çocuğa yönelik terapötik müdahalelerin başarısını artırma ve çeşitli müdahale programlarıyla çocukluk çağı psikopatolojilerini önlemek açısından önem taşımaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu derlemenin amacı anne babanın çocuğa yönelik temsilleri ile bunların anne babalık davranışları ve çocuk üzerindeki etkileri hakkındaki literatürü özetlemektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda derleme, anne babanın çocuğa yönelik temsillerinin tanımını, bu temsillere etki eden faktörleri, çocuğa yönelik temsillerin anne babanın davranışlarına etkisi ve çocuk üzerindeki sonuçlarını içermektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Ebeveyn temsilleri, çocuk yetiştirme, ebeveyn çocuk ilişkisi, gelişimsel psikopatoloji

## Introduction

In the developmental psychopathology research field, the parent-child relationship -especially parental representations- is one of the topics that attracts the attention of researchers and clinicians in terms of its clinical implications (Zeanah et al. 1994, Benoit et al. 1997a). Especially, the representational model is one of the important models which aims to present the pathways leading to developmental psychopathology in individuals, emphasizing the value of representations and subjectivity in the parent-child relationship (Zeanah and Anders 1987, Lewis 2014). Representations also named as "internal working models" by Bowlby, include representations of one's self, environment, life plans, thoughts and emotions, and allow us to make predictions about individuals' attachment behaviors (Maysseless 2006). Bowlby (1982) states that internalization processes of representations occur via the experiences with the attachment figures. When an infant's needs and signals are consistently responded to, the infant internalizes that relationship as safe and caring. On the other hand, if the infant's needs are not responded to effectively, the child tends to perceive his relationship with others as insecure, and he evaluates himself as undesirable (Zeanah and Anders 1987). Additionally, the internal representational model includes the information level about the one's relationship with an attachment figure. Informational level consists of two types of knowledge as factual knowledge and affective knowledge (Crittenden 1990). While factual knowledge represents existent knowledge about one's own and another's attachment behaviors in the relationship; affective knowledge represents the feelings which are related with the relationship. This affective content may vary from fully satisfaction to fear, anger, anxiety, and hopelessness (Crittenden 1990). Zeanah and Anders (1987) state that children internalize their relationships with their caregivers in a gradual process as their cognitive and memory capacities develop. Especially when they reach the

**Address for Correspondence:** Cansu Öztürk, Yüksek İhtisas University Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Speech and Language Therapy, Ankara, Türkiye **E-mail:** cansuozturk@yiu.edu.tr

**Received:** 28.06.2022 | **Accepted:** 10.10.2022

18th month, they begin to associate their feelings and expectations for the future in the light of past memories and current experiences. It is also emphasized that internal working models have a dynamic structure and that these internal models can be reshaped with new experiences (Mayseless 2006). For this reason, it can be said that sensitive and loving care is important in the whole process for the child to develop a healthy internal working model.

Related with representational model, parental representations may be thought as parents' significant feelings, thoughts and perceptions about their children and the relationship between them (Benoit et al. 1997b). It can be seen that there are various classifications of parental representations. According to Benoit et al. (1997b)'s classification, representations of parents may be clustered in three categories as "balanced", "disengaged", and "distorted". These categories are presented according to narratives of parents about the characteristics of their children and the relationship (Zeanah et al. 1994). Parents in the "balanced" category accept their children with positive and negative sides, respect them as individuals, think and feel that their relationship is valuable. Secondly, parents in the "disengaged" category are emotionally unavailable, distant from the child, and disinterested with the child and the relationship between them. Lastly, parents in the "distorted" category present narratives which mostly involve incongruity. Parents in this group seem like busy with other aspects of life rather than their children, feel exhausted in the relationship with their children and generally expect higher than the child can achieve (Zeanah et al. 1994, Benoit et al. 1997a, b). According to another classification which takes part in the Maternal Representations Interview (MRI), maternal representations are evaluated according to their consistency, richness, flexibility, and affectivity (Ammaniti 1991, Ilicali and Fisek 2004). "Coherence" represents continuity and relatedness in narratives. In other words, when the stories told by the parents are listened to, a sense of consistency in the story can be obtained. "Richness" represents the tendency for parents to create elaborate narratives about the child and their relationship. "Flexibility" refers to the willingness of parents to accept that there may be other possibilities that they may not have considered, and their willingness to accept new information in the parent-child subsystem. Finally, "Affectivity" refers to the prevalence of emotional intensity in narratives (Ammaniti 1991, Ilicali and Fisek 2004). Parents' representations toward their children can be distributed on the spectrum from being aware of them to being unaware of them; and also they can be verbal and non-verbal (Bat Or 2012).

According to the "Prototype Hypothesis", representations of attachment relationships formed in early childhood can become active in later stages of their life such as parent-child relationships (Madigan et al. 2015), and these internal working models reflect how the individual sees himself/herself, how he/she perceives events, and how he/she makes predictions about future relationships (Ryan et al. 1994). Therefore, it can be said that those activated representations may affect the real interactions between mother and the child and cause to certain attachment style between the mother and the baby. According to Ammaniti (1991) mothers who have detailed and rich representations towards their baby were found to be more sensitive and responsive in their actual interaction with their infant. In contrast, mothers who have rigid representations were found to be less sensitive and responsive to the emotional signals coming from their baby. When the attachment style of these two mentioned groups were investigated it was found that the first group has a secure attachment style and the second group has an insecure relationship.

Related with the mothers' attachment styles, Miljkovitch et al. (2004) also draw attention to the reciprocal relation between attachment style and representations. They indicate that the mothers' attachment style is related to the children's representations about their parents. In their study, to measure children's attachment representations Miljkovitch et al. (2004) use story completion tasks that involve an accidental mistake like spilling a juice, a physical pain such as hurting a knee, fear, separation from caregiver, reunion with the caregiver, and loss of a loved pet. Those mentioned stories are presented to 3-year-old children in a play environment with small human characters with the aim to evoke their attachment representations. According to the children's exhibition during the play, children are grouped in "Security", "Deactivation", "Hyperactivation", and "Disorganization" categories. It is stated that the children in the "security" group exhibit a wide range of emotions and approvals in their play, reflect the guidance and trust of the parents, and are also active in the game. As a second group, children in the 'deactivation' category tend to be more passive and anxious, and their representation towards their parents does not seem rich. However, they do not impose negative emotions and parental attitudes on the parent characters in the narratives. Third, for the "hyperactivation" group, although the children show interest in the task, they do not have the ability to maintain the game and they generally focus on the negative aspects of the parent characters. Lastly for the "disorganization" group, it is stated that children who have disorganized family representations exhibit stories which involve loss of control, bad endings, and they picture the main character as unguarded and vulnerable. Also, they reflect harsh parental attitudes and a disintegrated family picture (Miljkovitch et al. 2004). Furthermore, in the study parents' attachment styles are

determined by “The Adult Attachment Interview” and parents are grouped in “Autonomous/Secure”, “Dismissing”, and “Preoccupied” attachment categories. As a result of the research, it was determined that the children of autonomous mothers scored higher in the security subtype, which indicates that they perceive the family environment as more secure and harmonious (Miljkovitch et al. 2004).

In addition to parents' attachment style, there are other factors that can affect children's representation of their parents and family environment. (Stover et al. 2006, Stadelmann et al. 2010). Shamir et al. (2001) state that marital problems and inter-parental relations are important factors in the formation of family representations of children. It was found that witnessing marital conflict during childhood predicts negative representations which involve insecurity, helplessness, neglect, aggression and hostility etc. toward family environment (Shamir et al. 2001). It has also been shown that negative parental representations of children are associated with some emotional and behavioral problems in children (Stadelmann et al. 2007, Stadelmann et al. 2010, Waters et al. 2015) and that these results may have effects extending into adulthood (Pincus and Ruiz 1997). In a study by Stadelmann et al. (2007) related to negative parental representations, it was shown that 5 - year old children who have negative parental representations exhibit greater behavior problems and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) symptoms. On the other hand, positive representations about parents may serve to positive outcomes like higher school adjustment, self-esteem, motivation and pro-social behavior in children (Ryan et al. 1994, Stadelmann et al. 2007).

It can be concluded that the representation of children and parents towards each other is an important factor in developmental psychopathology. Therefore, each type of representation is considered worthy of careful investigation. While its importance is noted, Bretherton et al. (1989) points out that there is a general tendency to examine attachment representations from the child's perspective, and they also add that it is very important to consider the representations of parents towards their children in a detailed way. When those mentioned reasons and the effects of representations on parent-child relationship and psychological well-being are considered, it was thought that it would be consequential to review the literature about representations of parents, representations related parenting behaviors, and the outcomes for the children. For that reason, this review aims to summarize the literature on parental representations and their relationships between parenting and their consequences for children.

### **Various Factors Linked to Representations of Parents**

---

There are various factors which may be related to the representations of parents towards their children (Sokolowski et al. 2007). In particular, George and Solomon (1996) pointed out that mothers remember their attachment experiences with their own mothers during their pregnancy and they form a representation toward their expected motherhood. It is stated that those evaluations may influence their representations toward their maternal abilities, and it may be related with their representations toward their children (Huth-Bocks et al. 2004). In their study, George and Solomon (1996) present that mothers who have negative representations toward their own childhood have poor, inflexible, and confused narratives about their continuing relationship with their children. As a related finding, mothers' conflict with their own mothers was found related with narratives which involve anger, troubles, dissatisfaction, worries, and less engagement in the relationship with their children (Sokolowski et al. 2007).

It seems that parental representations begin to form in the prenatal period. While learning about pregnancy reconstructs the mother's self-perception of self and identity; the baby's movements in the womb, ultrasound pictures, and learning the gender of the baby affect the mother's representations towards the baby (Buldur 2009). In prenatal term, it was found that while speaking about the future relationship with the baby, being concentrated on the baby is associated with being accepting and warm. In addition, mothers who presented detailed and rich narratives about their babies defined their babies and their relationships with their babies in the future with more balanced and multidimensional representations (Hacıoğlu 2020). Moreover, in the prenatal term, some risk factors are related with disengaged representations toward the child. In the study by Vreeswijk et al. (2015), it was shown that unwanted pregnancy, mother's high and improper expectancies, mother's maltreatment history in her own childhood, not getting enough social support, not thinking that she is sufficient for motherhood, and having negative life experiences are related with distorted representations even before the child is born. As a remarkable finding, the parents' prenatal representations are tended to be consistent even after the birth. Especially, mothers and fathers who have aforementioned risk factors present more disengaged narratives about their infants after the baby is born (Vreeswijk et al. 2015). In addition to these findings, when the coherence in parents' narratives were examined, it was found that unsatisfactory feelings toward life and having a low interparental relationship quality was a risk factor for fathers' incoherent narratives

about their baby (Foley et al. 2019). As a recent and inclusive study which involved both fathers' and mothers' representations, Vismara et al. (2021) showed that there is a correlation between prenatal representations of both parents and their perception about their infants' temperament. According to the results of the study, both fathers and mothers whose representations are unbalanced they perceive their infants' temperament as less responsive and difficult; and they have a low relationship harmonization as partners.

Furthermore, it has been shown that psychological problems are related with impaired narratives of mothers (Vreeswijk et al. 2015). The mothers' postpartum depression seems as a risk factor for negative representations towards children. As a related study, Wood et al. (2004) showed that in the postpartum period, mothers who have depression were twice as likely to have distorted narratives when compared to mothers without depression. Also, in Davis et al. (2020)'s study, depressed mothers were found to be more critical in the "Expressed Emotions Interview" which is an evaluation to assess maternal representations towards children. When mothers with depression, childhood abuse history, and post-traumatic stress disorder were evaluated in their play relationship with their infants, it was seen that those mothers were disengaged, less sensitive toward their baby's behavior and feelings, and do not have a warm approach toward their baby (Muzik et al. 2013). As a supporting finding, Pajulo et al. (2001) showed that mothers who have substance use, depression, social relation problems, and insufficient social support are more likely to have negative representations when they were compared with low-risk group mothers. In addition, it was observed that the high-risk group and the low-risk group were significantly differentiated in terms of relationship status, employment status, whether the pregnancy was planned or not, and miscarriage/abortion levels (Pajulo et al. 2001). Likewise, as a related experience with trauma, intimate partner violence was found as linked to negative and unsafe representations as including more rigidity, depressive and anxious mood, less sufficiency perception as motherhood, and less pleasure in the relationship with the infant (Huth-Bocks et al. 2004). As supporting these findings, Sokolowski et al. (2007) showed that violence including conflicts in parental relationship is related with enhanced distorted representations towards infants which are 17 to 20 months old. These findings can be interpreted that; violence and other traumas experienced by mothers in the past may activate unbalanced emotions and cause negative representations towards children (Schuengel et al. 1999). In addition to these factors, low socioeconomic status, low educational level, economic problems, high stress levels, and rearing the child alone were found as risk factors for negative representations towards children (Sokolowski et al. 2007, Vreeswijk et al. 2012, Muzik et al. 2013).

Vreeswijk et al. (2012) have concluded that some features of children are also related with representations of parents. For instance, it was shown that having a child with failure to thrive was found related to have more unbalanced narratives in the relationship with the child (Coolbear and Benoit 1999). As a similar finding Benoit, Zeanah et al. (1997) presented that mothers who have children with sleep, developmental, and eating problems have distorted and disengaged representations toward their children. In the study of Button et al. (2001), it has been determined that there is a relationship between the disability situation of the child and the representations of mothers. According to the study, mothers who have children with cerebral palsy described less conformity, higher levels of anxiety and sorrow in the relationship with their children. Additionally, it was shown that mothers' of children with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have insecure attachment representations toward their children (Darling Rasmussen et al. 2019). Relatedly, Kissgen et al. (2009) showed that increasing in the severity of ADHD symptoms cause to increased prevalence of insecure and unresolved attachment representations in mothers of children with ADHD.

In conclusion, the mothers' own attachment experiences with their mothers, negative memories about their childhood (George and Solomon 1996, Huth-Bocks et al. 2004, Sokolowski et al. 2007), parents' evaluations and expectations in prenatal period (Buldur 2009, Vreeswijk et al. 2015, Foley et al. 2019, Hacıoğlu 2020), psychological problems (Pajulo et al. 2001, Wood et al. 2004, Muzik et al. 2013), and various factors which are related with the child such as sleep and eating problems, learning disorders, disability, and ADHD (Benoit et al. 1997a, Coolbear and Benoit 1999, Button et al. 2001, Vreeswijk et al. 2012, Darling Rasmussen et al. 2019) are important risk factors for parents' negative representations toward their children. Besides, Rosenblum et al. (2002) pointed out that parenting behaviors have a mediator role on the relationship between representations of mothers and the actions of their children. Therefore, it seems important to understand the relations between parents' representations and parenting behaviors. With this concern, these relations will be presented in the next part of the review.

## **Parenting Behaviors Related with Representations Toward Children**

Representations of parents are considered in connection with parenting behaviors and it can be said that the

relationship with the baby starts to appear even before the child is born (Vreeswijk et al. 2015). It has been seen that even prenatal representations of mothers have effects on parenting behaviors (Terry et al. 2021). In their study Fuertes et al. (2020) showed that mothers with ambivalent representations in prenatal term are more disengaged in their play sessions with their baby. In contrast, mothers who had positive representations in the prenatal term were found to have more secure attachment relationships with their infants (Fuertes et al. 2020). In the literature regarding prenatal representations another finding indicated that mothers who were emotionally disengaged mothers in the prenatal term exhibited more dominating parenting behaviors later in the relationship with the infant; also, mothers with distorted narratives exhibited more hostile interactions with their children. On the contrary, mothers who have mentioned to have balanced narratives about their relationship with their children showed more encouraging and sensitive parenting behaviors (Dayton et al. 2010). In a related study, Tambelli et al. (2020) found that prenatal representations of parents were associated with their emotional availability; suggesting that parents with positive prenatal representations display greater sensitivity, flexibility, and appropriate boundaries in their relationships with their children. It is also stated that emotionally available parents are more concerned with the child's autonomy and have low hostility towards children (Tambelli et al. 2020). In another study, Terry et al. (2021) stated that representations before birth are related with custody removal in first two years of infant. According to that, mothers' hostile and helpless attitude towards their children in the prenatal period is associated with the seizure of their children's custody due to the child abuse and neglect.

It can be seen that there are also studies which evaluate the effects of later representations on parenting behaviors. Relatedly, examining the relationships between maternal behavior and representations, Slade et al. (1999) stated that narrative contents of mothers can be distributed on three factors which are "Joy-Pleasure/Coherence", "Anger", and "Guilt/Separation Distress". When they investigated the correlations between those three representational factors and maternal behavior, it was seen that the "Joy-Pleasure/Coherence" dimension was positively correlated with positive maternal behavior; and was negatively correlated with negative maternal behavior. In addition, the researchers found that the higher the anger themes are seen in the narratives, the less positive mothering behaviors occurred (Slade et al. 1999). In another study, in which representations were measured with a special group and using the "Parent Development Interview (PDI)" the feeding approach of mothers were observed. In the study, it was questioned whether mothers who have children with cerebral palsy will be differentiated in terms of feeding approach according to their representations (Sayre et al. 2001). It was seen that there is a negative correlation between compliance related concerns and being sensitive, being accepting, and showing warmth while feeding the child. According to this finding, it can be said that having concerns about compliance is a risk factor for parenting behaviors. In addition, in the study of Sayre et al. (2001), it has been shown that if mothers have feelings of grief and complaints about the child, they display more hostile approach when feeding the child. In contrast, if their narratives were achievement related, they were more autonomy focused while feeding their child (Sayre et al. 2001). According to another study which investigated the relations between representations and parenting behavior, Sokolowski et al. (2007) showed that disengaged representations are correlated with being less responsive during the interaction with the baby. In contrast, in the same study it has been seen that mothers who are encouraging and guiding while communicating with their infants have more detailed narratives about their infants.

As a recent study, Edwards et al. (2021) investigated the relations between the representations and motherhood in a risky group which involves mothers at a young age and mothers who underwent an intervention because of substance use. As a result of the study, while young mothers mostly had balanced representations; mothers in the intervention group mostly had disengaged representations. Therefore, it can be said that substance abuse can be evaluated as a risk factor for impaired representations (Edwards et al. 2021). When the relations between representations and mothering behaviors were assessed, it was found that mothers' balanced representations were correlated with supporting motherhood. The term "supporting motherhood", states that mothers have a more respectful approach to their infants' individuality, and a supportive attitude toward the infants' cognitive and emotional abilities. In contrast, mothers with disengaged representations were observed as not creating space to allow the development of the child's cognitive abilities (Edwards et al. 2021). To conclude, parenting behaviors depending on representations can have important consequences on the developmental process of children (Dollberg et al. 2010). Therefore, in the next part of the review the outcomes of representations and parenting behaviors on children will be mentioned.

## **Representations of Parents and Some Outcomes for Children**

---

Vreeswijk et al. (2015) state that while evaluating and intervening childhood developmental problems, it is necessary to take into account the representations of parents. When the relational mechanisms between

mothers' representations and childhood developmental problems are examined, according to the regulational model it can be said that mothers' negative representations may contribute to childhood psychopathology by diminishing the co-regulation process (Dollberg et al. 2010, Lewis 2014). On the other hand, balanced representations may serve to read the signals which come from the child properly, and help the child develop emotional and behavioral regulation skills in turn (Dollberg et al. 2010, Perry et al. 2018). Related with those statements, in the study of Dollberg et al. (2010), a comparison was made between two groups of mothers and their infants who were referred from a clinical sample and not referred from the clinical sample. Two groups were compared according to the representations and behaviors during a free play activity and in a problem-solving situation. The findings of the study showed that there are group differences between the abovementioned mother-child groups. Accordingly, mothers with children who have sleeping, eating, emotional, and behavioral problems have narratives which include more anger and less pleasure regarding their relations between the child. Also, when they were observed during the interaction with their children, it was seen that they exhibit more negative affect. Moreover, as a remarkable finding, Dollberg et al. (2010) pointed out that mothers' sensitiveness to signals from the child during the free play session predicted the child's emotional and behavioral dispositions during the problem solving task. Regarding social emotional development, Seskin et al. (2010) showed that attachment representations of mothers who have children with autism are related to the child's functional-emotional development levels and the quality of communication and interaction of parents during the play with their children. According to this result, it has been shown that children whose parents exhibit secure attachment representations get higher scores from the "Functional Emotional Assessment Scale (FEAS)". In other words, children with parents who have secure attachment representations are better at regulation, shared attention, togetherness in social relationships, two-way communication, mutual problem solving, and symbolic thinking (Seskin et al. 2010). This finding is especially valuable in showing the importance of parental representations and participation for the success of the therapeutic interventions of autism. As another multi-method including study, Rosenblum et al. (2002) observed mothers and toddlers' reactions during the "Still Face Procedure", and evaluated those reactions according to the representational categories of mothers. As a result, toddlers whose mothers were in "balanced" category exhibited more positive and attention drawing reactions when they were compared with toddlers whose mothers in "disengaged" or "distorted" categories (Rosenblum et al. 2002). In addition, when Guyon-Harris et al. (2022) assessed mothers' representations during pregnancy, it was seen that mothers' distorted perceptions and thoughts about the baby had a predictor role for social-emotional difficulties on 24th months. Moreover, they found that negative maternal behavior is a mediator between them.

Furthermore, according to the findings it is possible to say there is a relation between mothers' representations and infants' attachment styles. As indicating attachment experiences of mothers are determinant on representations and infants' attachment patterns, Madigan et al. (2015) found that mothers' prenatal representations have a mediator role in the relation between mothers' own attachment styles and their infants' attachment styles. In a recent study which is related with prenatal representations and attachment style, Tambelli et al. (2020) found that mothers and fathers' positive prenatal representations are associated with the child's attachment style. According to the findings, mothers' balanced representations predicted secured attachment styles in children. In another study on maternal representations and infant attachment styles, Cox et al. (2000) showed that disengaged and distorted narratives of mothers predicted insecure attachment style in preterm infants. Related with behavioral difficulties, Sher-Censor et al. (2016) mentioned that poor self-regulation abilities and mothers' negative representations were risk factors for exhibiting externalization behaviors during the transition from preschool to first grade of elementary school. In other study of Sher-Censor et al. (2018), it was found that internalization and externalization problems are highly exhibited among children whose mothers are in high stress and who declare criticising narratives about the relationship between them and their children.

As differentiating from aforementioned studies, Dubois-Comtois et al. (2015) who investigated the relations between maternal representations and behaviors and childhood internalizing externalizing problems with foster mothers and foster children found that representations and behavioral problems show interrelations but do not show direct associations. However, in the same study the correlations between mothering behavior and behavior problems of children were found to be consistent with other studies. While examining the associations between representations and childhood developmental psychopathologies, it would be wise to keep in mind that there would be bidirectional relations between them (Dollberg et al. 2010). As Bowlby (1982) stated that internal working models of individuals have a dynamic nature, it is possible to declare both the representations of parents and the child's behavioral problems reciprocally affect each other all the time.

Lastly, it would be necessary to mention intervention programs for improving parental representations. One of the intervention programs “Mom Power (MP)” is developed and applied by K. Rosenblum et al. (2017) with the aim to improve maternal representations, mother-child interactions and the parents’ mental health. As a 13-week attachment-based intervention program, it aims to teach parents catching the signals from the child, to help the parent about psychological problems, and nurture balanced representations toward the child. In addition, the intervention program aims to help parents understand that as long as their children are provided with a safe and warm environment, they can use their capacity to explore and learn to their fullest. The program creates opportunities for social support by including participants in a group environment and also encouraging mothers to bring a partner with them like a spouse or a friend. Secondly, the program involves education sessions about child development, secure based attachment parenting skills like responsiveness and sensitivity. Third, the program offers caregivers the opportunity to realize emotional dysregulation and regulate their emotions and stress through stress management ways. The fourth component of the program is to support mother-child interaction by creating safe separations and reunions in a professionally guided group setting. It is stated that with this approach, children learn that it is not a problem to be left for a moment because they know that their mothers will come back. Lastly, the program involves individual sessions with professionals which include discussions about ongoing problem areas and some solution seeking attempts like communicating with social services. In the end of the interventions, K. Rosenblum et al. (2017) showed that mothers in intervention group developed more balanced representations toward their children and enhanced their parenting abilities to support the child’s attachment. According to these results, it was commented that “Mom Power Intervention Program” can be used in risky mother-child groups in order to improve maternal representations and related parenting behaviors.

Additionally to individualistic intervention approaches, Julian et al. (2018) emphasize the value of group based intervention programs. In the “Strong Military Families (SMF) Intervention Program” -which is derived from MOM Power- multifamily group approach is applied with the aim of advancing parental representations, reflective capacity, and positive parenting. The group approach includes parent education that takes into account the challenging processes of military families with young children. Additionally, the intervention involves parent-child interaction sessions which are supported by researchers, educations about stress management and protecting well-being, group studies to ensure social support, and personalized directions to access the necessary resources for each family. As a result of the study, Julian et al. (2018) showed that being in the multifamily group is associated with advancements in parenting reflectivity and parental representations. They especially emphasize the value of social support in the group dynamic and personalized suggestions instead of written psychoeducational materials.

## Conclusion

---

This review aimed to summarize the relations between representations, parenting behavior and its consequences for children. As abovementioned, mothers’ own perception about their maternal abilities, attachment styles with their parents, maternal psychopathologies such as depression, or post- traumatic stress disorder, distorted marital relations, and some developmental difficulties that the child may have such as ADHD, or disabilities are found associated with unbalanced representations (George and Solomon 1996, Wood et al. 2004, Huth-Bocks et al. 2004, Sokolowski et al. 2007, Seskin et al. 2010, Muzik et al. 2013, Darling Rasmussen et al. 2019). These unbalanced representations can also be reflected in parenting behaviors and cause certain developmental problems in children (Slade et al. 1999, Sayre et al. 2001, Rosenblum et al. 2002, Dollberg et al. 2010, Dayton et al. 2010, Dubois-Comtois et al. 2015, Fuertes et al. 2020, Terry et al. 2021).

It has been seen that parental representations tend to be formed before the baby is born and they are relatively permanent in the relationship between children and their parents unless intervened with an intervention program (Vreeswijk et al. 2015). When the representations’ consequences on parenting and the development of the child are considered, it can be said that parents’ representations can be an important subject to handle in therapeutic interventions (Edwards et al. 2021). Therefore, in clinical environment, monitoring parental representations during pregnancy and after the baby is born may give opportunity to work on interventions and may prevent the possible developmental psychopathologies (Guyon-Harris et al. 2022). Also, early initiation of therapeutic interventions, especially in risky groups such children with special needs or preterm birth, may facilitate a secure attachment relationship between parents and infants (Meijssen et al. 2011).

For the growth and development of the baby, both of the parents differ in terms of contributing to the socialization, and these contributions have a special value for the child (Lamb 1975, Williams and Kelly 2005). Kazura (2000) states that even though the role of fathers recently attracts the attention of researchers and

clinicians; when the reviewed studies were considered, it can be easily seen that generally mothers were evaluated in terms of representations. Considering that fathers are also in interaction with babies and mothers, it is also necessary to conduct more studies with fathers in order to explore the representations of fathers and their results for the children and for the family system.

Finally, also more studies should be conducted on parent and child representations in our country and in the world. For the dissemination of representational studies, the development of quantitative evaluation methods may be beneficial to increase the number of studies on this subject. In addition, findings in qualitative interviews aiming to evaluate representations can be supported by quantitative measurements.

## References

- Ammaniti M (1991) Maternal representations during pregnancy and early infant-mother interactions. *Infant Ment Health J*, 12:246–255.
- Bat Or M (2012) Non-verbal representations of maternal holding of preschoolers. *Arts Psychother*, 39:117–125.
- Benoit D, Parker KCH, Zeanah CH (1997a) Mothers' representations of their infants assessed prenatally: stability and association with infants' attachment classifications. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 38:307–313.
- Benoit D, Zeanah CH, Parker KCH, Nicholson E, Coolbear J (1997b) "Working model of the child interview": infant clinical status related to maternal perceptions. *Infant Ment Health J*, 18:107–121.
- Bowlby J (1982) Attachment and loss: retrospect and prospect. *Am J Orthopsychiatry*, 52:664–678.
- Bretherton I, Biringen Z, Ridgeway D, Maslin C, Sherman M (1989) Attachment: The parental perspective. *Infant Ment Health J*, 10:203–221.
- Buldur, AN (2009) A qualitative investigation of maternal representations in pregnancy and early motherhood (Masters thesis), İstanbul, Boğaziçi University.
- Button S, Pianta RC, Marvin RS (2001) Mothers' representations of relationships with their Children: relations with parenting behavior, mother characteristics, and child disability status. *Soc Dev*, 10:455–472.
- Coolbear J, Benoit D (1999) Failure to thrive: risk for clinical disturbance of attachment. *Infant Ment Health J*, 20:87–104.
- Cox SM, Hopkins J, Hans SL (2000) Attachment in preterm infants and their mothers: neonatal risk status and maternal representations. *Infant Ment Health J*, 21:464–480.
- Crittenden PM (1990) Internal representational models of attachment relationships. *Infant Ment Health J*, 11:259–277.
- Darling Rasmussen P, Bilenberg N, Shmueli-Goetz Y, Simonsen E, Bojesen AB, Storebo OJ (2019) Attachment representations in mothers and their children diagnosed with ADHD: distribution, transmission and impact on treatment outcome. *J Child Fam Stud*, 28:1018–1028.
- Davis JAG, Alto ME, Oshri A, Rogosch F, Cicchetti D, Toth SL (2020) The effect of maternal depression on mental representations and child negative affect. *J Affect Disord*, 261:9–20.
- Dayton CJ, Levendosky AA, Davidson WS, Bogat GA (2010) The child as held in the mind of the mother: the influence of prenatal maternal representations on parenting behaviors. *Infant Ment Health J*, 31:220–241.
- Dollberg D, Feldman R, Keren M (2010) Maternal representations, infant psychiatric status, and mother-child relationship in clinic-referred and non-referred infants. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry*, 19:25–36.
- Dubois-Comtois K, Bernier A, Tarabulsy GM, Cyr C, St-Laurent D, Lanctot AS et al (2015) Behavior problems of children in foster care: Associations with foster mothers' representations, commitment, and the quality of mother-child interaction. *Child Abuse Negl*, 48:119–130.
- Edwards RC, Herriott AL, Finger B, Hans SL (2021) Associations between parenting representations and behavior among young mothers and mothers with opioid use disorder. *Infant Ment Health J*, 42:796–811.
- Foley S, Branger MCE, Alink LRA, Hughes C (2019) Thinking about you baby: expectant parents' narratives suggest prenatal spillover for fathers. *J Fam Psychol*, 33:905–915.
- Fuertes M, Ribeiro C, Gonçalves JL, Rodrigues C, Beeghly M, Lopes dos Santos P et al (2020) Maternal perinatal representations and their associations with mother-infant interaction and attachment: a longitudinal comparison of portuguese and brazilian dyads. *Int J Psychol*, 55:224–233.
- George C, Solomon J (1996) Representational models of relationships: links between caregiving and attachment. *Infant Ment Health J*, 17:198–216.
- Guyon-Harris KL, Ahlfs-Dunn SM, Madigan S, Bronfman E, Benoit D, Huth-Bocks AC (2022) Disrupted caregiving behavior as a mediator of the relation between disrupted prenatal maternal representations and toddler social-emotional functioning. *Dev Psychopathol*, 34:755–763.
- Hacıoğlu M (2020) Maternal representations during pregnancy: a study of the five minute speech sample among primiparous women (Master thesis). İstanbul, Boğaziçi University.
- Huth-Bocks AC, Levendosky AA, Theran SA, Bogat GA (2004) The impact of domestic violence on mothers' prenatal representations of their infants. *Infant Ment Health J*, 25:79–98.
- Ilicali ET, Fisek GO (2004) Maternal representations during pregnancy and early motherhood. *Infant Ment Health J*, 25:16–27.

- Julian MM, Muzik M, Kees M, Valenstein M, Rosenblum KL (2018) Strong military families intervention enhances parenting reflectivity and representations in families with young children: strong military families intervention. *Infant Ment Health J*, 39:106–118.
- Kazura K (2000) Fathers' qualitative and quantitative involvement: an investigation of attachment, play, and social interactions. *J Mens Stud*, 9:41–57.
- Kissgen R, Krischer M, Kummert V, Spiess R, Schleiffer R, Sevecke K (2009) Attachment representation in mothers of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Psychopathology*, 42:201–208.
- Lamb ME (1975) Fathers: forgotten contributors to child development. *Hum Dev*, 18:245–266.
- Lewis M (2014) Toward the development of the science of developmental psychopathology. In *Handbook of Developmental Psychopathology*. (Eds M Lewis, KD Rudolph):3-20. New York, Springer US.
- Madigan S, Hawkins E, Plamondon A, Moran G, Benoit D (2015) Maternal representations and infant attachment: an examination of the prototype hypothesis: maternal representations of attachment. *Infant Ment Health J*, 36:459–468.
- Maysless O (2006) Studying parenting representations as a window to parents' internal working model of caregiving. In *Parenting Representations: Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications*. (Ed. O Maysless):3-40. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Meijssen D, Wolf M-J, van Bakel H, Koldewijn K, Kok J, van Baar A (2011) Maternal attachment representations after very preterm birth and the effect of early intervention. *Infant Behav Dev*, 34:72–80.
- Miljkovitch R, Pierrehumbert B, Bretherton I, Halfon O (2004) Associations between parental and child attachment representations. *Attach Hum Dev*, 6:305–325.
- Muzik M, Bocknek EL, Broderick A, Richardson P, Rosenblum KL, Thelen K et al (2013) Mother–infant bonding impairment across the first 6 months postpartum: the primacy of psychopathology in women with childhood abuse and neglect histories. *Arch Womens Ment Health*, 16:29–38.
- Pajulo M, Savonlahti E, Sourander A, Piha J, Helenius H (2001) Prenatal maternal representations: mothers at psychosocial risk. *Infant Ment Health J*, 22:529–544.
- Perry NB, Dollar JM, Calkins SD, Keane SP, Shanahan L (2018) Childhood self-regulation as a mechanism through which early overcontrolling parenting is associated with adjustment in preadolescence. *Dev Psychol*, 54:1542–1554.
- Pincus AL, Ruiz MA (1997) Parental representations and dimensions of personality: empirical relations and assessment implications. *J Pers Assess*, 68:436–454.
- Rosenblum K, Lawler J, Alfafara E, Miller N, Schuster M, Muzik M (2017) Improving maternal representations in high-risk mothers: a randomized, controlled trial of the mom power parenting intervention. *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev*, 49:372–384.
- Rosenblum KL, McDonough S, Muzik M, Miller A, Sameroff, A (2002) Maternal representations of the infant: associations with infant response to the still face. *Child Dev*, 73:999–1015.
- Ryan RM, Stiller JD, Lynch JH (1994) Representations of relationships to teachers, parents, and friends as predictors of academic motivation and self-esteem. *J Early Adolesc*, 14:226–249.
- Sandnes K, Lydersen S, Berg Karstad S, Berg-Nielsen TS (2021) Measuring mothers' representations of their infants: psychometric properties of the clinical scales of the working model of the child interview in a low- to moderate-risk sample. *Infant Ment Health J*, 42:690–704.
- Sayre JM, Pianta RC, Marvin RS, Saft EW (2001) Mothers' representations of relationships with their children: Relations with mother characteristics and feeding sensitivity. *J Pediatr Psychol*, 26:375–384.
- Schuengel C, Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, Van IJzendoorn MH (1999) Frightening maternal behavior linking unresolved loss and disorganized infant attachment. *J Consult Clin Psychol*, 67:54–63.
- Seskin L, Feliciano E, Tippy G, Yedloutschnig R, Sossin KM, Yasik A (2010) Attachment and autism: parental attachment representations and relational behaviors in the parent-child dyad. *J Abnorm Child Psychol*, 38:949–960.
- Shamir H, Schudlich TDR, Cummings EM (2001) Marital conflict, parenting styles, and children's representations of family relationships. *Parenting*, 1:123–151.
- Sher-Censor E, Khafi TY, Yates TM (2016) Preschoolers' self-regulation moderates relations between mothers' representations and children's adjustment to school. *Dev Psychol*, 52:1793–1804.
- Sher-Censor E, Shulman C, Cohen E (2018) Associations among mothers' representations of their relationship with their toddlers, maternal parenting stress, and toddlers' internalizing and externalizing behaviors. *Infant Behav Dev*, 50:132–139.
- Slade A, Belsky J, Aber JL, Phelps JL (1999) Mothers' representations of their relationships with their toddlers: links to adult attachment and observed mothering. *Dev Psychol*, 35:611–619.
- Sokolowski MS, Hans SL, Bernstein VJ, Cox SM (2007) Mothers' representations of their infants and parenting behavior: associations with personal and social-contextual variables in a high-risk sample. *Infant Ment Health J*, 28:344–365.
- Stadelmann S, Perren S, Groeben M, Klitzing KV (2010) Parental separation and children's behavioral/emotional problems: the impact of parental representations and family conflict. *Fam Proc*, 49:92–108.
- Stadelmann S, Perren S, von Wyl A, von Klitzing K (2007) Associations between family relationships and symptoms/strengths at kindergarten age: what is the role of children's parental representations. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 48:996–1004.

- Stover CS, Horn PV, Lieberman AF (2006) Parental representations in the play of preschool aged witnesses of marital violence. *J Fam Viol*, 21:417-424.
- Tambelli R, Trentini C, Dentale F (2020) Predictive and incremental validity of parental representations during pregnancy on child attachment. *Front Public Health*, 8:439.
- Terry M, Finger B, Lyons-Ruth K, Sadler LS, Slade A (2021) Hostile/helpless maternal representations in pregnancy and later child removal: a pilot study. *Infant Ment Health J*, 42:60–73.
- Vismara L, Lucarelli L, Sechi C (2021) Prenatal parental representations: Influences on perceived romantic couple adjustment and infant's temperament during pregnancy and after the infant's birth. *Family Relations*, 71:750-765.
- Vreeswijk CMJM, Maas AJBM, van Bakel HJA (2012) Parental representations: a systematic review of the working model of the child interview. *Infant Ment Health J*, 33:314–328.
- Vreeswijk CMJM, Rijk CHAM, Maas AJBM, van Bakel HJA (2015) Fathers' and mothers' representations of the infant: associations with prenatal risk factors: fathers' and mothers' representations of their infants. *Infant Ment Health J*, 36:599–612.
- Waters TE, Bosmans G, Vandevivere E, Dujardin A, Waters HS (2015) Secure base representations in middle childhood across two Western cultures: associations with parental attachment representations and maternal reports of behavior problems. *Dev Psychol*, 51:1013-1025.
- Williams SK, Kelly FD (2005) Relationships among involvement, attachment, and behavioral problems in adolescence: examining father's influence. *J Early Adolesc*, 25:168–196.
- Wood BL, Hargreaves E, Marks MN (2004) Using the working model of the child interview to assess postnatally depressed mothers' internal representations of their infants: a brief report. *J Reprod Infant Psychol*, 22:41–44.
- Zeanah CH, Anders TF (1987) Subjectivity in parent-infant relationships: a discussion of internal working models. *Infant Ment Health J*, 8:237–250.
- Zeanah CH, Benoit D, Hirshberg L, Barton ML, Regan C (1994) Mothers' representations of their infants are concordant with infant attachment classifications. *Developmental Issues in Psychiatry and Psychology*, 1:9-18.

**Authors Contributions:** The author(s) have declared that they have made a significant scientific contribution to the study and have assisted in the preparation or revision of the manuscript

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** No conflict of interest was declared.

**Financial Disclosure:** No financial support was declared for this study.

**Acknowledgement:** We would like to thank Dr. Melek Volkan Yazıcı for her efforts and valuable contributions in checking the English version of the article.