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Caring Emotions May Overcome Drug Addictions in New Parent Therapy Program

Mothers who focus on improving the emotional quality of their relationships with children may also be lessening their preoccupation with drugs.

An article published in the latest issue of *Family Relations* describes a new therapy program for women with young children and substance abuse problems. The Mothers' and Toddlers' Program (MTP) broadens the focus of substance abuse treatment to encompass parent-child relationships. The MTP aids mothers to recognize their own, and subsequently their child's, emotional cues aiming to improve the emotional quality of the mother-child relationship and decrease the mother's preoccupation with drugs.

Many abused substances, such as cocaine and heroin, have been shown to affect pathways in the brain associated with the initiation of behavior, hedonic reward, and motivation— pathways also thought to be critically involved in an adult's capacity to invest in the care of children. Continued drug abuse can "hijack" this value system and may create competition between caring for children and using drugs. The authors believe that as the caregiver's capacity to recognize and respond sensitively to children's emotional cues improves, the caregiver's emotional investment in the relationship will increase and the preoccupation with drug use may decrease. "We expect that, if this intervention helps mothers become more emotionally 'in sync' with their children, it will improve the emotional quality of their relationship and possibly 'reset' the focus of the reward system" they state.

The MTP has been in development for the last five years. The aforementioned pilot study consisted of twenty-five mothers caring for children from birth to 16 years of age in New Haven, Connecticut. In the pilot study, MTP demonstrated preliminary promise in helping substance abusing mothers recognize their own and their children's emotional states. The pilot project, part of a second four-year NIH-funded pilot study for mothers of children ages 12 to 72 months, is currently in its second year.

This study is published in the April issue of *Family Relations*. Media wishing to receive a PDF please contact JournalNews@bos.blackwellpublishing.net

Since 1951, *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies* has covered areas of critical importance to family professionals. The journal's content emphasizes family research with implications for intervention, education, and public policy. It is published by the National Council on Family Relations. Information about the National Council on Family Relations can be found at www.ncfr.org.

Nancy Suchman, Ph.D., is a Counseling Psychologist and an Assistant Professor at the Yale School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry. She has been developing relational parenting interventions for mothers in substance abuse treatment since 1995. Relational interventions aim to improve the emotional quality of the mother-child relationship as a means to promoting children's psychosocial development. Since 2002 Dr. Suchman has been collaborating with Linda Mayes, MD at Yale Child Study Center to develop individual parenting therapy for substance abusing mothers of young children that is based on attachment theory.

Dr. Suchman is available for media questions and interviews. Please call 1-203-937-3486 ext. 7430 or email Nancy.Suchman@yale.edu

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