

## Research Briefing N° 53

# Callous-unemotional traits in children and reduced eye gaze during a parental expression of love

This work examined the eye gaze of young children during a parental display of love and affection.

**Key words:** love; eye gaze; callous-unemotional traits; parenting; attachment

### Key findings

- Children with behaviour problems and callous-unemotional (CU) traits show impairments in eye gaze towards mothers during affection.
- Mothers of children with high CU traits showed no problems expressing affection and eye gaze to their child.
- However, children with high CU traits were more likely to reject affection and eye gaze from their mothers.
- Impairments in eye gaze in children with high CU traits were associated with mother's self-reported negative feelings towards their child, but not with the quality of their attachment-related parenting behaviours, such as sensitive responding.
- Impairments in eye gaze in children with high CU traits were associated with psychopathic traits in fathers.



Our group is now examining whether impairments in child eye gaze can be changed with treatment, in a randomised controlled treatment trial funded by Guy's and St Thomas' Charity, and conducted at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London.

## What we did

In April 2011, Guy's and St Thomas' Charity funded this research examining emotional interactions between antisocial children (4-8 years) with CU traits and their parents.

Children with CU traits have difficulty recognising and responding to emotions expressed by others, which is related to a lack of attention to the eye region of other's faces. These emotion and eye gaze deficits are likely to be present early in life and may begin with a failure to attend to the eyes of caregivers when strong emotion is being expressed. Previous work on emotion deficits had largely used computer-based tasks, so we wanted to see whether eye gaze deficits were present during a real-life 'love' interaction with parents. The current study builds on our previous research (Dadds, Allen et al., 2012), however in this study we wanted to see if the eye gaze deficit was present in a larger sample of children and to check that the eye gaze impairments were not simply due to poor parenting (for example, the lack of eye contact due to insensitive parent responses to their child during the display of affection).

## How we did it

Families were recruited as part of a treatment trial conducted at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London. Three groups of children participated:

- children with behaviour problems and high levels of CU traits;
- children with behaviour problems and low CU traits; and
- healthy children.

Parents completed questionnaires assessing CU traits, their feelings toward their child and their own psychopathic traits. Parents and children spent some time playing together, and were then asked to 'look their child in the eyes, and show him/her, in the way that feels most natural for you, that you love him/her'. These instructions were given to parents over the phone so that the child was unaware of what the parent had been asked to do. The play and 'love' interactions were videotaped and independent raters (unaware of which group the family belonged to) provided ratings of the degree of eye gaze and physical affection during the 'love' interaction, and ratings of attachment-related parenting behaviours during parent-child play.

## Further information

For further information please see the following articles:

Dadds, M. R., Allen, J. L., McGregor, K., Woolgar, M., Viding, E. & Scott, S. (in press). Callous-unemotional traits in children and mechanisms of impaired eye contact during expressions of love: A treatment target? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.12155

Dadds, M. R., Allen, J. L., Oliver, B., Faulkner, N., Legge, K., Moul, C., Woolgar, M. & Scott, S. (2012). Love, eye contact, and the developmental origins of empathy versus psychopathy. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 200(3), 191-196.

## Contact

**Project lead:** Dr Jennifer Allen, Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University of London

**Email:** [j.allen@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:j.allen@ioe.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 (0)20 7612 6222

**Other team members:** Professor Mark Dadds (Principal Investigator, University of New South Wales), Professor Stephen Scott and Dr Matthew Woolgar (Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London); Professor Essi Viding, (University College London).