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Is Responsive Early Childcare (REC) the Best Method?

What is this research about?

Responsive Early Childcare (REC) describes prompt, consistent, and sensitive reactions to an infant's distress for caregivers. It includes practices like: nursing on demand, late weaning, co-sleeping, and frequent child and caregiver physical contact. Some literature advocates for this type of childcare on the grounds that it has a positive impact on the development of a child's brain. It also cites REC as a protective factor against developmental problems such as autism and anxiety disorders. REC is believed to help develop "normal" or "healthy" stress by keeping low levels of stress hormones in an infant's brain. However, this belief is mainly developed and promoted by non-neuroscientists.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers looked at the ethical issues surrounding REC. They assessed the quality of evidence that supports this method of parenting. They also examined some specific claims and several relevant articles.

What did the researchers find?

Much of the neuroscience studies cited in

What you need to know:

REC is highly debated and its full effects are unknown. Doctors maintain that REC is not an indicator of the onset of autism or anxiety disorders. However, REC may impose high stress situations on parents who might feel anxious about their child's care. There is no conclusive medical evidence to support the theory that a lack of REC will cause autism or anxiety in children.

support of REC is animal-based research. It also focuses more on the negative effects of abuse and neglect, rather than the benefits of REC. The evidence was inconclusive and did not necessarily apply to the context of most families.

The idea that "unresponsive" practices are a relevant factor in the emergence of common psychological disorders is a reasonable hypothesis. Further research on the topic is needed, and it is unclear if the effects of these practices extend through adult life.

The researchers also observed 2 ethical issues with the neuroscience argument for REC:

- It unduly raises the stakes of care choices, thus creating unneeded anxiety in parents.

- The hasty use of neuroscience evidence can damage efforts to build public trust in developmental neuroscience and its efforts to improve child health and well-being.

How can you use this research?

Parents may use this research to learn more about the limits of REC. It may also help inform future assessments that might affect their beliefs and goals about care options for their children.

Doctors may use this research as a guide to explain the issues associated with REC to families.

About the Researchers

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