Biological and Social Determinants of Responsiveness to Infants in 10-to-15-Year-Old Girls

Ann M. Frodi
University of Rochester

Ann D. Murray
Boys Town, Omaha

Michael E. Lamb
University of Utah

Jamie Steinberg
University of Michigan

Subjects filled out questionnaires and were individually observed interacting with an 8-to-12-month-old infant in a waiting room. Hidden observers recorded the frequency of ignoring, responsiveness to infant bids, and of social bids to the infant. Analyses revealed that older girls ignored more, made fewer bids, and responded less than younger girls did. However, chronological age was highly correlated with measures of biological and social maturity. Multiple regression analyses were used to determine which of these factors best predicted the developmental decline in baby responsiveness. Multiple regressions showed that social maturity was the best predictor of the number of bids to the infant, followed by the development of secondary sex characteristics and menarcheal status ($R = .44$). Social maturity, babysitting experience, and menarcheal status were the significant predictors of ignoring ($R = .48$), while menarcheal status,

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1 This research was supported by grants from the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Humanistisk-Samhällsvetenskapliga Forskningsradet of Sweden to Ann M. Frodi. The authors are grateful to Sharon Bienstock for her assistance.

2 Correspondence should be sent to Ann Frodi, Department of Psychology, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York 14627.
development of secondary sex characteristics, and babysitting experience predicted responsiveness \( (R = .49) \). Possible reasons for the decreased interest in infants are discussed, as are the implications for research using baby responsiveness as a measure of sex-role-related changes in adolescence.

In the last few years, several researchers have investigated the emergence or strengthening of sex differences in early adolescence. Many of these investigators have used indices of interest in or responsiveness to infants as dependent measures, reasoning that it is sex appropriate for girls and sex inappropriate for boys to be interested in babies (see Berman, 1980, for a review). The present study was concerned with developmental changes in “baby responsiveness” among girls. Previously reported findings have been remarkably consistent. Fullard and Reiling (1976) reported a substantial increase between ages 12 and 14 years in girls' preferences for looking at pictures of babies, while the increases among boys were much smaller. Feldman, Nash, and Cutrona (1977) reported no sex differences in 8-to-9-year-olds, while 14-to-15-year-old girls preferred pictures of babies more than boys did. Focusing only on girls, Goldberg and Kriger (Note 1) confirmed an increase in girls' preferences for pictures of infants between 12 and 14 years. They also found that postmenarcheal girls preferred looking at pictures of infants more than premenarcheal girls of the same age did. Two studies of behavioral responsiveness to unfamiliar infants showed sex differences among 14-year-olds that did not exist in younger children (Feldman et al., 1977, Frodi & Lamb, 1978). Both of these investigations employed a “waiting room” procedure in which the subjects were observed individually in the presence of a young infant and its mother. The authors of these studies likewise intimated that during early adolescence, girls become more interested in infants than they had been previously. The consistency of these conclusions despite differences in methodology is quite impressive: In her review, Berman (1980) reported poor intercorrelations among behavioral, picture preference, psychophysiological, and self-report measures of interest in infants.

Two explanations of the emergent sex differences, and especially of the increased interest in babies among girls, have been offered. Fullard and Reiling (1976) proposed that the hormonal changes of puberty feminize girls, strengthening an adaptive behavior for females of reproductive age. Although they set out to discount this hypothesis, Goldberg and Kriger (Note 1) concluded that their data also implicated biological determinants. By contrast, Feldman et al. (1977) and Frodi and Lamb (1978) have argued that the sex differences intensify because of increasing social pressures on adolescents to conform to cultural sex stereotypes. This argument is consistent with Nash and Feldman's (1982) evidence that sex differences wax and wane throughout the life span depending on changing role expectations and demands. However, no one has attempted to assess social and biological influences in the same study in order to compare their relative contribution to females' responsiveness to infants. The present study was designed to do this. We correlated behavioral measures of interest in