



EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PEACE: Connections and Interventions

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Preface

The central argument of this essay – that the environment experienced by infants and young children can have profound effects on their tendencies and abilities to find peaceful, nonviolent solutions to the problems of family and social life in later life – is only one strand in what is coming to be a vast fabric of ideas, scientific findings, social movements, and political policies created in the quest for peace in the human world. The weavers of this fabric are so various and so numerous that it is impossible even to begin to acknowledge them here; suffice it to say that they range from philosophers to neuroscientists, from nursery school teachers to diplomats, from therapists to philanthropists. Most of them would agree that it is important to develop the discourse of peace, to help create a culture of peace. The present essay is a small attempt to increase our readers' awareness of this discourse.

All of us have a stake in learning how to choose peace and to help others make the same choice. Part of that learning is to grasp the significance of child development: what comes early shapes what comes later. Another part is to grasp the significance of the environment, recognizing that individual behavior consists in large part of responses to the pressures, stresses and incentives of the person's situation. To the extent that we understand these influences in our own lives we may achieve some degree of inner peace and along with it empathy for others. We may also find the motivation to do what we can to make sure that as many young children as possible find the necessary security in their environment to support their development as peaceful individuals.

We thank Ayşen Özyeğin for her unwavering commitment to the right of all families to live in peace and for inspiring the idea for this essay. We hope that this essay will enhance discourse and understanding on the role of young children and families as a pathway to peace.

Diane Sunar - Yankı Yazgan *Istanbul, June 2015*

“Thank goodness, peace has come to our home”

The young woman had attended AÇEV’s Mother-Child Education Program and virtually pushed her husband out the door to attend the Father Support Program. Both had the same basic wishes: a better communication environment for their children, a family life free of strife, a way of disciplining their children that was sensitive to their needs, and for their children to grow up smart and knowledgeable and kind. By the end of the training programs, neither she nor her husband spanked the children anymore and both of them listened carefully to what the children said and tried to understand them. In making these changes, the couple put their heads together both as mother and father and as husband and wife to think what steps they could take to make their home life better. To those who asked, like their group leaders, “what happened to you?” they had a simple answer: “Thank goodness, peace has come to our home!”

AÇEV trainers and group leaders have heard these words, these experiences, not just once but over and over from hundreds of mothers and fathers. These experiences were shared in the group meetings and word began to spread. In one of the graduation ceremonies for parents completing the programs, a mother said to the founder and president of AÇEV, Ayşen Özyeğin and her husband Hüsnü, “Thank you, through this program we learned that we are people too.” Hearing this, Ayşen Özyeğin was not simply confirmed in her conviction of the importance of the connection between early childhood and peace in the home, but began to consider the idea that peace in the home might be a path to peace in the society.

From peace in the home to peace in the society: A search for evidence

There are many testimonials to suggest that peacefulness is not limited to a single context of mother, father, and child, but rather that avoiding violence as a “solution” to problems could also improve relations with “strangers” and “others” as well. We could say that the road to peace is through development of the peaceful tendencies implicit in our natural desire to be in relationships with our fellow man. Nevertheless, scientific evidence that the skills learned in programs designed to support family communication and child development can have an influence on world peace is not yet sufficient.

In the belief that the time had come to look closely at the connection between early childhood education and peace and build up the evidence base supporting it, in the spring of 2010 Ayşen Özyeğin contacted James Leckman and invited him to lead a group from Yale University in working with AÇEV to pursue this aim. Leckman and the Yale group began immediately to explore possible avenues of advancing knowledge on the relation of early childhood and peace. Beginning with a survey of experts in relevant fields, efforts continued with a meeting of the Ernst Strüngmann Forum, which produced the book *Pathways to Peace: The Transformative Power of Children and Families* which has served as a basic reference for us in preparing the present introductory article. Soon thereafter, the Early Childhood and Peace Consortium

(ECPC) was founded with efforts by AÇEV, UNICEF, and a broad group of individuals and institutions with interests in early childhood and in peace. New research partnerships will examine the mechanisms underlying the possibility of peace spreading from the home to the wider society, as has been observed informally so many times in AÇEV programs.

The natural relation between early childhood and peace

In a world in which violence is present in our lives in both visible and invisible forms, peace has been both a cause that unites us and a quest. The need for peace is greatest for babies and young children. The place where children can find the peace they need, perhaps only for a moment, perhaps only within the walls of a single room, is their home. Even in environments of open conflict and war, children who have positive, meaningful relationships with their parents and siblings gain the strength they need for their development from the peace that nourishes the spirit and makes a person feel human.

Babies seem to come into the world with the mission of forming relationships and bonding with people. Their mental world, including their efforts to develop cognitive skills, revolves around relations with others. For the baby, almost every behavior is directed to being “close” to others, first and foremost of course to mother, father or other caretakers. The baby’s very survival depends on his or her facility in establishing and maintaining good relationships and getting along with others. Later relationships are directly affected by the quality of the first relationships.

The earliest years are a time of extraordinary opportunity for the child to develop well. In a stimulating environment brain cells not only grow in number, but the connections among the cells develop in a “use it or lose it” fashion. In this precious but short time, mothers and fathers have innumerable chances to support their child’s cognitive and social gains.

Beginning with the relationships and bonds we form with those closest to us in earliest infancy, is it possible to reach out to form peaceful, nonviolent relationships with all people? We can define as peaceful or non-violent those environments in which disagreements can be voiced openly, in which conflicts are accepted as a normal part of a relationship, in which disputes can be pursued while taking care not to harm the other person physically or spiritually. To be able to say that we are peaceful, is it enough to express our aggressive impulses or our indignation and rage in ways that do not harm others? Could the characteristics we acquire and develop in early childhood make it possible for us to grow up as peaceful individuals?

At this point we need to turn to a consideration of the concepts of peace and violence.

Is peace possible?

Or to ask the question another way, are humans naturally and inevitably violent?

The bloody history of the species seems to point to “yes” as the answer to the second question. From tribal headhunting to modern warfare, from drug cartels to urban gang wars, from football hooliganism to spouse-battering, individuals, groups and nations regularly resort to violence. Their aims may be as various as self-defense, punishment, self-aggrandizement or exploitation of others.

Yet the same individuals, groups, and nations often – in fact usually – live in relative peace, cooperating with their families, friends, and neighbors, helping one another and looking out for each other’s welfare. Even though violence is common, peaceful relations are even more common.

This observation suggests that perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Maybe instead of asking “are people naturally violent?” we should be asking “when and why are people violent?” Perhaps we should see violence as part of the human toolkit, as one option among others for dealing with stressful events and relationships. Just as a carpenter may shape a piece of wood using a saw, a plane, or a chisel, or other tools, so an individual may solve a social problem using negotiation, compromise, violence, or other tactics. In principle, then, although it often seems to be elusive in human life, peace does exist; through the expansion of nonviolent options its scope can be expanded, and the choice of violence as a means can be reduced.

Broadly speaking, whether or not violence will be used will depend on one or both of two factors:

- First, there may be differences among situations in terms of how likely they are to evoke violence or promote peace;
- Second, there may be differences among groups or individuals in terms of how likely they are to use violence in any given situation.

In other words, both the situation and the individual matter. But, as we shall see, these two sources of choice of violence may be very closely intertwined.

Experts agree that violence can take two major forms.

- The first, direct violence, is familiar to all of us as the use of physical force by individuals, groups or states to harm particular people – the disobedient child, the insulting rival, the criminal, the enemy.
- The second form, structural violence, is less often recognized, as it is insidious to the point of invisibility – unfair treatment of the poor or minority groups, unequal access to health services, education or protection of law, discrimination in employment, and the like. This form of violence tends to be taken for granted and may even be defended as justifiable, even though it demonstrably leads to shorter lives¹ and great suffering for its victims.

It is no accident that perpetrators of direct violence are frequently the victims of structural violence.

What are the connections with early childhood?

Psychologists, health professionals and educators tend to focus more on individual or group-level differences in violent behavior than on larger-scale situational pressures. This emphasis leads them to give great importance to the early years of life, which are in many ways formative of the individual's personality, character, and social behavior.

In the following pages, we will try to lay out the concrete connections that have been established by scientific research between different aspects of early experience and the tendency to respond aggressively or peaceably to the challenges of social life. Understanding these connections will also suggest to us possible interventions that might prevent or ameliorate negative aspects of early experience.

Briefly, the connections that we aim to show are these:

- Positive early interpersonal experience lays the groundwork for a more peaceful individual life, while negative early interpersonal experience may contribute to perceptions, relational styles and attitudes that predispose the person to aggressive or other negative responses.
- Growing up in a peaceful family environment contributes to positive early experience, while exposure to harsh punishment, neglect or domestic violence interferes with positive development.
- When the child grows up and becomes a parent, negative early experience may carry over into negative parenting practices.
- Effective interventions can support peace in the home.
- Appropriate intervention may help to break the negative cycle and support a positive cycle across generations.

What is needed for positive early experience?

Babies and small children have basic needs that go beyond the requirements of food and physical safety. They also need a sense of psychological safety and security – the feeling that someone cares about them, will protect them and comfort them. (It should be noted that a sense of safety and security is no small part of our adult definition of “peace”.) They need a bond of love with someone. Most frequently this “someone” is their mother, but it could also be any other person who regularly cares for the baby, and very often it is more than one person, including not just mother but also other family or household members such as father or grandmother or older sibling.

In other words, alongside their need for physical care, babies and young children need to be in one or more close relationships that they can depend on. The experience of basic security in the first years provides

children with a solid foundation from which they can venture out in later years to trust others, form friendships, and in general manage relationships in a positive way. Many studies show that children with this kind of early experience are more self confident, have better social skills, and have greater resilience, or ability to bounce back from setbacks, than others. When they grow up, other things being equal, they are more likely than others to provide their own children with positive early experience as well. The positive cycle emanating from early experience of love and security is illustrated in Figure 1.

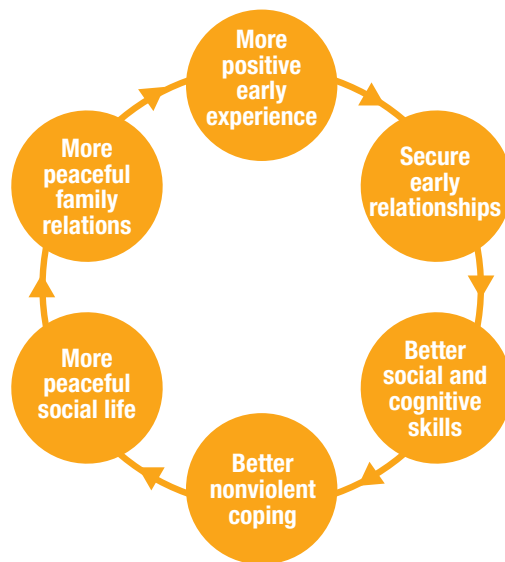


Figure 1
The cycle of positive early experience

What are the results of negative early experience?

Ordinarily the child's needs for close, dependable relations are met within the family. But what if family members do not have the physical, mental or emotional resources to meet these needs? For example, what if no one has time to focus on the child, as when demands of work, or the burdens of many children, make it impossible for anyone to pay much attention to the child? Or what if extreme poverty or other stresses distract the parents from their child's needs? Or what if the mother is unavailable because of physical illness, depression, or other mental illness? Even worse, what if the parents are harsh in their treatment of the child, or are caught up in a cycle of conflict and violence in their own relationship?

Children who are neglected or mistreated or exposed to domestic violence are unable to feel secure in their relationships and are likely to emerge into school years with poor social and cognitive skills; scientific studies demonstrate that they are apt to show physical brain changes that are associated with a variety of

physical and psychological problems. Some of them will veer towards aggressive behavior in trying to solve their social problems. Later in life, some will subject their own children to the same negative experiences that they endured in their early years. The negative cycle stemming from early experience of neglect, insecurity or maltreatment is illustrated in Figure 2.

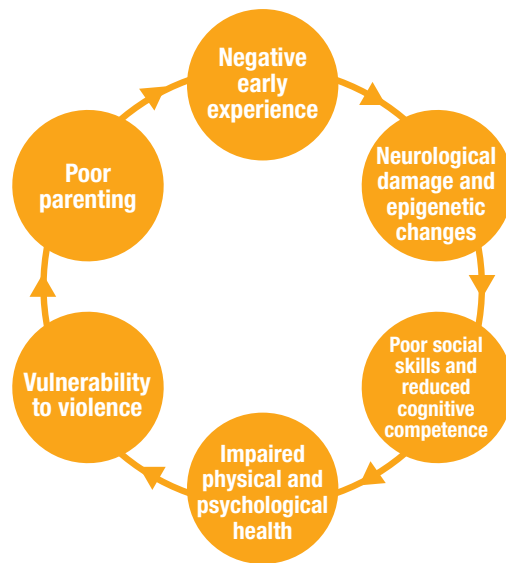


Figure 2
The cycle of negative early experience

What are the mechanisms at work in the negative cycle?

Neglectful or abusive parenting may be reflected not only in the child's poor social coping skills but may also result in neurological damage², particularly if the mistreatment or neglect occurs during the first year or so of life. Even more serious in the long run, the chemicals that govern how genes form brain tissues and neural connections may be altered (epigenetic changes), and these changes may be passed on to the next generation as well, resulting in harm to the second generation that cannot easily be reversed even in an improved environment.³ Prominent among these changes are increased sensitivity to others' behavior (for example, perceiving mild criticism as a threat), reduced ability to regain a state of calm after distress, and vulnerability to both communicable and noncommunicable diseases.

Who is at risk for negative early development?

In describing the negative cycle at the individual level, the source of negative early experience seems to lie in poor parenting. But why would a parent neglect or mistreat his or her child? Earlier it was noted

that lack of physical or psychological resources underlies poor parenting, and so it is necessary to inquire into the causes of inadequate resources. The most common problem is poverty. An abundance of studies shows that the more severe the poverty, the greater the likelihood of family disorganization, poor physical and mental health of both parents and children, and neglect or mistreatment of children. Poverty in turn may be a product of geographical or social displacement such as migration, refugee status, flight from war, and the like, or it may result from minority group membership or other factors such as economic shifts. Whatever its basis in the larger system, poverty is the main source of structural violence, and it is frequently exacerbated by discrimination, subordination, social conflict or war. It often affects parenting behavior negatively, which in turn may leave the child's basic need for a secure relationship unmet, with the result that the child is less able to cope with the demands of social life and may turn to aggression when frustrated in later social relationships.

Thus the negative developmental cycle of Figure 2 needs an additional step, as can be seen in Figure 3.

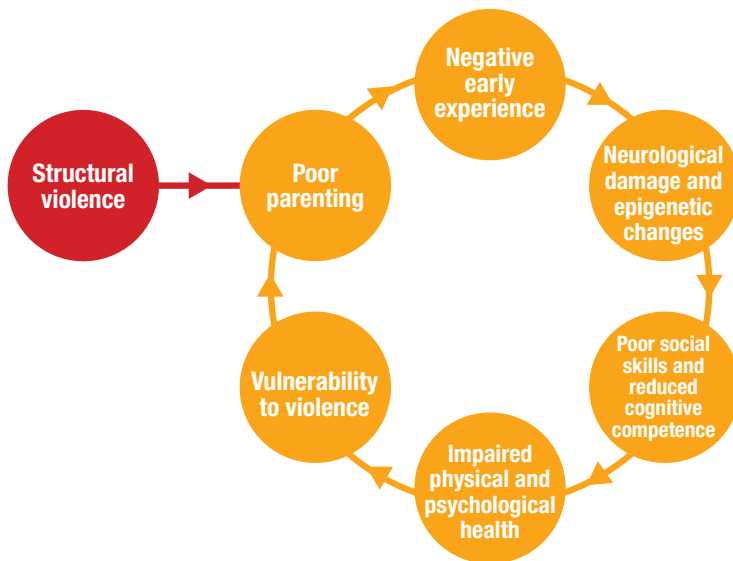


Figure 3
Structural violence and the negative developmental cycle

These risks and dangers to young children – neglect, insecurity, exposure to domestic discord and violence, or outright maltreatment – are widespread throughout the world. Even in nations with the highest levels of economic development, large numbers of people live in poverty, and both the breadth and the depth of poverty increase in less developed countries. Add to the problems of poverty those of malnutrition or epidemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS or Ebola that leave many young children orphaned, not to speak of families living in or trying to take refuge from wars or local conflicts. If even a fraction of children born into these risky environments grow up with an increased tendency to resort to violence, hopes for a peaceful life for them, for those around them, and ultimately for the whole of the human world, will be greatly reduced. The need for intervention to improve their situation is glaringly obvious.

Interventions, peacemaking and peacebuilding

Just as violence can be seen as taking two different forms, direct and structural, so actions to reduce or prevent violence can be seen as taking two different forms.

- The first, which aims to stop or reduce direct violence, is known as *peacemaking*. Some authors also use the term peacemaking to refer to interventions at the local or individual level.
- The second form, *peacebuilding*, aims to reduce or eliminate structural violence and is usually applied at a wider scale.

Interventions to improve the lives of young children, both as peacemaking and peacebuilding, can take a wide variety of forms and operate at a wide variety of levels, from the international to the local or even the individual. *Policies* implemented at international, national and regional levels can contribute directly to peacebuilding, or the reduction of structural violence. Some *programs* can also operate at very broad scales, generally with peacebuilding goals such as improvements in child nutrition, health care or educational access. More frequently, programs operate at relatively local scales, with elements tailored to the needs of the local population; in this case they are regarded as efforts at peacemaking.

In Turkey, AÇEV (the Mother-Child Education Foundation) has pioneered several programs designed to improve young children's cognitive and emotional development by means of family support. Let us take a look at two of these programs as examples of how intervention can encourage the positive cycle of development, even within a context of economic deprivation.

The largest AÇEV program (Mother-Child Education Program) targets mothers of young children who have not attended any sort of preschool but will be entering the public school system in the next year. The program combines guided group discussions on family relations, communication, discipline and child development with training in activities designed to facilitate children's cognitive development and school readiness, which the mother applies during the days between meetings. Results of this program in terms of children's cognitive performance have been so impressive that the national Ministry of Education has supported its implementation all across the country; more than three-quarters of a million people have been reached through this program. In this example we see a combination of national *policy* – to invest in a peacebuilding effort of development of human capital by increasing school readiness and boosting cognitive performance of young children – and a *peacemaking* program designed to produce this result by training the children's mothers.

The Mother-Child Education Program, however, goes beyond the function of improving children's cognitive performance. Participating mothers generally report that communication with their children, and even with their husbands, improves as a result of their learning in the guided discussions. Likewise, they report using more constructive discipline methods and consequent reduction in conflict with their children. In other words, support for mothers of preschool children can contribute to a more peaceful family environment,

which can be predicted to nudge the child's development in a more positive direction. While this program does not directly address poverty or other risks to the child, it does help to compensate for both cognitive and emotional deprivation, with beneficial results.

A second AÇEV program, the Father Support Program, targets fathers of children in the early school years. Participation in guided group discussion is the main method used in this program. Fathers share memories of their childhood relationships with their own fathers and try to articulate their own aims and ideals as fathers; discuss child development, discipline and gender roles; and apply their new insights at home during the days between meetings. As seen in the program for mothers, participating fathers frequently report not only more constructive discipline and improved communication with their children, but also with their wives. Once again, we see that a more peaceful family environment can contribute to a more positive developmental cycle for the children.

A further benefit of these father groups is that the fathers may be drawn from different neighborhoods, different ethnic or religious groups, and differing political orientations. Despite these differences, through sharing the group experience, many of the men develop a sense of group solidarity as well as establishing new friendships with others in the group. The potential of such groups for reducing tensions in the community needs to be explored further: the common concern for improving children's lives may provide a cooperative focus that allows people from many backgrounds to work together and to develop liking and respect for one another.

These two examples do not begin to show the richness and variety of interventions being carried out in communities and nations around the world. They do, however, illustrate the validity of the final two connections suggested at the beginning of this essay.

We suggested that "Effective interventions can support peace in the home," and in the case of both programs we have seen that this is indeed the case.

We suggested further that "Appropriate intervention may help to break the negative cycle and support a positive cycle across generations." Truth to tell, few interventions of this nature have a long enough history for us to judge whether the effects can or will last across generations. Nevertheless there are some indications that this may be the case. Not only AÇEV programs but a number of other programs around the world have shown more positive development into adolescence and early adulthood for participating children compared to their nonparticipating peers⁴. As these children move into parenthood, it will be very important to observe their children to see whether benefits do in fact persist into the next generation.

In any case, it seems clear that the connection between early childhood and peace – both peace in the home, and possibly peace in the community – can be strengthened by peacemaking interventions such as family support programs.

Peace is possible

At the outset we argued that violence is an option, an option that is made more attractive and more likely when individuals lack security in their lives – particularly in their early years. In other words young children who are victims of and witnesses to direct violence are more likely than others to use violent means of dealing with conflicts and frustrations as they grow into adolescence and adulthood. Likewise we argued that individuals and groups suffering from poverty, injustice, or discrimination – those suffering from structural violence – are not only more likely to resort to direct violence themselves, but are also more likely to lack the physical, emotional and social resources to provide their children the security they require.

However, as we have seen, it is possible to at least partially diminish some of the negative effects of poverty or other forms of structural violence on parenting through effective interventions, thereby allowing a greater degree of security in the young child's experience. This in turn will help to avert some of the characteristic neurological and epigenetic changes found in children of the poor, potentially blocking or modifying the cascade of negative effects on cognition, social relations, and physical health. In other words, by supporting parents it is possible to change some aspects of parenting practices, which may lead to a better developmental trajectory for the child, with the potential for more constructive coping in adolescence and adulthood.

This “bottom-up” path to peace⁵ is a difficult one; to the extent that interventions are local, oriented to peacemaking rather than peacebuilding, change comes one family, one child at a time. But it leads to peace in the place that is most important to most people – their homes. And difficult though it may be, for many of those who wish to impact both young children's lives and the chances for peaceful homes and communities, it is a path that is more accessible than the “top-down” path that requires political will in the form of decisions, laws and policies to support peacebuilding.

Let us close with a quotation that sums up our hopes and aspirations for interventions to promote better home environments for children:

Healthy children form secure attachments, have well-developed social skills, and exercise the capacity to reason and communicate. Peaceful children, however, have additional capabilities: the capacity for empathy, respect for others, commitment to fairness, and trust in relationships with other people. . . . Having these peacebuilding capabilities goes beyond the creation and maintenance of harmonious relationships: they lead to the expression of a peaceful disposition, which enables individuals to think and act in ways that will promote equity, safety, and well-being for all people.⁶

Leckman, Panter-Brick & Salah (2014)

Endnotes

1. Considerable evidence has accumulated showing that lower social status is associated with shorter life expectancy (see Underwood, 2014). Possible biological mechanisms have been suggested by a study (Mitchell, et al. 2014) which found that children growing up in poverty had shorter telomeres than those growing up in more favorable circumstances, particularly for children with a genetic susceptibility to stress. Interestingly, children with the same genetic susceptibility who lived in more nurturing environments actually had *longer* telomeres than their peers, indicating that the effect of the genetic makeup depends on the child's environment and experience. (The length of telomeres is often considered to be related to life expectancy; shorter telomeres may also indicate greater experience of stress.)

2. In a brain-imaging study of children from families with incomes ranging from the lowest 10% to the highest 10% in major U.S. cities (Noble, Sowell, et al. 2015), it was found that brains of children from the lowest income levels had up to 6% less surface area than children from the highest income levels. This study illuminates part of the biological basis for the well-documented tendency of children from poor families to show lower cognitive test scores as well as lower educational achievement and attainment.

3. Meaney and his colleagues (Weaver et al., 2004) report that for rats, the mother's nurturing behaviors in the first days of life regulate the expression of genes in the brain that govern how many receptors for the rat version of cortisol will be made. More licking and grooming by the mother is associated with less epigenetic marking (methylation) and more receptors. More receptors are associated with better ability to recover from stress. Less licking and grooming is associated with more epigenetic marking, less receptors, and poor ability to recover from stress. When the baby female rat grows up and becomes a mother, she shows the same type of nurturing that was shown to her, regardless of whether she was raised by her own mother or a "foster" mother, and her own pups will show the same epigenetic marks that she has. In other words, the epigenetic marks are passed on to the next generation. There is evidence in humans that similar processes are at work. For example, McGowan et al. (2009) found significantly less glucocorticoid receptors in brains of subjects who had been abused as children, and McGinness et al. (2012) found many differences in epigenetic marks between individuals who grew up in poverty versus middle class backgrounds, regardless of their adult incomes. See also Roth & Sweatt (2011). See also Morgan, et al. (2014) for an overall discussion of biological consequences of early deprivation.

4. For example, see Kağıtçıbaşı et al. (2009).

5. See Hinde (2011).

6. From Leckman, Panter-Brick & Salah (2014). For a more detailed discussion, see also Christie, et al. (2014), p. 7.

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