

THESIS

TESTING THE EFFICACY OF THE “EA BRIEF”: AN INTERVENTION TO IMPROVE
EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT AND EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY (EA)

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

TESTING THE EFFICACY OF THE “EA BRIEF”: AN INTERVENTION TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT AND EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY (EA)

The goal of this study was to determine the extent to which a brief parenting intervention provided the context for helping families to support positive mother-child interactions as well as more optimal mother and child outcomes. Participants in this study were middle-income mothers and their children ages 0-3 years of age ($N = 25$ dyads). Participants were filmed via Skype during a 20-minute mother-child free play and completed questionnaires (Time 1) before attending the brief intervention (involving: 3 hours of a group workshop, brief reading materials, one hour of one-on-one coaching, and two weeks of tailored texts) followed by a repeat of the 20-minute Skype interaction and the completion of the same questionnaires (Time 2). Paired samples t-tests were performed, revealing that mothers reported improvements in their personal well-being (using the Flourishing Scale), reports about the mother-child relationship (using the Emotional Availability Self Report), and observed interactions, particularly the child’s side of the relationship (using the Emotional Availability Scales), from pretest to posttest. Results are discussed in terms of a brief intervention potentially having a role in “planting a seed” for parenting enhancement and child development.

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INTRODUCTION

Raising productive and contributing members of society is a key goal of parenting. The mother-child emotional relationship is critical for a child's early development (Biringen, Skillern, Mone, & Pianta, 2005; Saunders, Kraus, Barone, & Biringen, 2015). Previous studies have been successful in improving the emotional availability in the mother-child relationship, conducted over a 4- to 6-week interval (Baker, Biringen, Meyer-Parsons, & Schneider, 2015; Biringen et al., 2010). The goal of this study was to determine the extent to which a brief parenting intervention provided the context for helping families to support positive mother-child interactions as well as more optimal mother and child outcomes.

DEFINING EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY

Emotional availability (EA) is a framework that draws heavily from attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969) and describes the overall emotional connection between a parent and child. More specifically, emotional availability describes the capability of both individuals in the dyad to interpret the other's reactions and respond to those emotional cues in an appropriate manner. In this sense, emotional availability in a parent-child relationship is expected to contribute to the child's secure attachment to the parent as well as the positive emotional development of the child (Biringen, Derscheid, Vliegen, Closson, & Easterbrooks, 2014). Many studies use EA as a measure of the parent-child interaction qualities, given it describes four qualities on the parental side (Sensitivity, Structuring, Non-Intrusiveness, and Non-Hostility) and two qualities on the child side (Responsiveness and Involvement) (De Falco, Emer, Martini, Rigo, Pruner, & Venuti, 2014; Mingo & Easterbrooks, 2015), while others use it as a proxy for attachment between parent and child (Philbrook & Teti, 2016; Ziv, Kaplan, & Venza, 2016). Emotional availability is measured using the Emotional Availability (EA) Scales and a wide range of studies have documented its validity and usefulness in child development research (Biringen et al., 2014). "Emotional attachment" is measured by placing mother and child into one of four EA Zones (Emotionally Available, Complicated, Detached, and Problematic) using the EA Zones Evaluation which closely ties to Ainsworth's original three styles of attachment (Secure, Insecure-Anxious, Insecure-Avoidant; Ainsworth et al., 1978) and Main and Solomon's addition of a fourth (Disorganized; 1990). The term emotional attachment reflects the "emotional" emphasis on the attachment conceptualization.

EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY, ATTACHMENT, AND OUTCOMES

Attachment security is the social/emotional milestone of the first year of life (Bowlby, 1969; Ziv, Kaplan, & Venza, 2016), and secure attachment provides for healthy child development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Biringen, 2005; De Falco et al., 2014; Saunders et al., 2015). Attachment and emotional availability are critical for parenting because children are able to learn important skills in the context of healthy connections (Biringen, 2005). Having an emotionally available relationship facilitates the parent modeling, scaffolding, and co-regulation so the child can easily acquire cognitive and social/emotional abilities (Biringen et al., 2014). If the mother is lower in emotional availability, she may not be able to provide the context for emotional learning opportunities for her child, which may result in less optimal child relationship outcomes (Newland, Parade, Dickstein, & Seifer, 2016). It is important to note that mothers from all backgrounds and life experiences can have any style of attachment and EA with their child and being at a higher socioeconomic level is not necessarily indicative of higher EA (Biringen et al., 2014).

The mother-child relationship is an important avenue to support a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. However, due to varying circumstances, this relationship is not always conducive to the optimal growth of a child. The environment the parent grew up in and their ability to spend quality emotional time with the child may affect the parent-child relationship (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Mothers' perceptions and understandings around emotionally available relationships are affected by previous relationships and attachments. If the mother has experienced hardship in the past, regardless of her current station in life, she may be bringing that to the interaction with her child, leading to less-than-accurate reading of the parent-

child interaction (Mingo & Easterbrooks, 2015). Furthermore, she may not understand what an emotionally available relationship feels like, increasing the likelihood of a more complicated or detached style (Mingo & Easterbrooks, 2015). Without the ability to interpret and understand her child's cues, wants, and needs from the interaction, a secure attachment may not develop, leading to the child not having the most basic feelings of security and connection on which to learn about life. A mother's understanding and perception of an emotionally available relationship may allow her to engage with her child in a more emotionally available way, creating the foundation for their relationship moving forward in a healthy direction.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH USING THE EA INTERVENTION

Previous work with EA interventions was tested with low- as well as high-risk mothers in a face-to-face 6-week group format (Biringen et al., 2010), with child-care professionals in a direct, one-on-one, face-to-face coaching format (Biringen et al., 2012); and with adoptive mothers in a group teleintervention format (Baker et al., 2015). Biringen et al (2010) found that observed emotional availability was significantly improved in both high-risk and low-risk settings, with the high-risk showing more substantial improvements. Biringen et al. (2012) found that one direct coaching of child care providers, combined with supports right at the child care sites, lead to significant improvement in caregiver structuring behaviors as well as the child's side of emotional availability. Baker et al (2015), conducting the intervention via Skype and in a group-setting with adoptive mothers, demonstrated improvements in observed emotional availability, reported emotional availability (using the measures in this project), as well as reported attachment of the adoptive children toward their mothers, using a separate, validated attachment measure. Saunders, Biringen, Benton, Closson, Herndon, and Prosser (2016) described the four concepts that support this particular intervention framework, as the 4Rs (Resources for psychoeducation, Role models videos, Reflection, and Relaxation/regulation). Resources for psychoeducation refers to the research and background specifically on mindfulness, attachment, and emotional availability, which are imparted to the parents during the group-format workshops and readings. Role model videos refer to sharing of actual videos of parents in interactions with their children, to help them understand the ingredients of emotional attachment and emotional availability. Reflection refers to the interventionist's encouragement and nourishment of reflective functioning in the parents as they discuss their attachment histories

and everyday life with their families. Finally, Relaxation/regulation refer to how daily mindful strategies (even when very brief) can help individuals to self-regulate and relax, thus making for more positive relationships in day-to-day life.

An entirely separate, attachment-based, yet very brief intervention, composed of two 30-60 minute sessions, was done with adolescent mothers before and after their infants were born (Nicolson, Judd, Thomson-Salo, & Mitchell, 2013). Nicolson et al (2013) performed their two-session intervention for adolescents focusing on the infant as an individual and the mother's response to their new infant. She demonstrated clear improvements in observed maternal non-intrusiveness and non-hostility (using the EA Scales) in comparison to a control group, providing impetus for testing a very brief intervention format.

THE EA BRIEF

Due to the importance of establishing an emotionally available relationship early in the mother-child dyad, intervention in the first few years of life can be critical. Interventions have been found to be most effective at changing developmental trajectories when children are zero to three years old (Guralnick, 2011). Intervening early allows mothers to develop a relationship with their child that facilitates emotional growth and healthy connections.

The EA Brief aims to improve the mother-child relationship in many ways by training mothers about brief mindfulness strategies to relax themselves, by understanding emotional availability and emotional attachment in relationships, and by practicing self-reflection about such relationships. Education about emotional availability and emotional attachment gives mothers a clear way to understand what an emotionally available relationship looks like with real examples to guide their understanding. Once knowledge is gained about how to identify and engage in an emotionally available and securely attached relationship, self-reflection gives mothers the opportunity to analyze their past experiences. Identifying how those experiences may have impacted their current parenting practices facilitates their understanding of how they may need to alter their interactions to give their child the environment they would have desired themselves as children.

The intervention also encouraged the positive interaction between mother and child through mindfulness practices (Saunders et al., 2016). Mindfulness is a practice that focuses on honing skills of attention and awareness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007) and has been shown to help alleviate symptoms of stress and depression (Dykens, Fisher, Lounds Taylor, Lambert, Miodrag, 2014; Greeson et al., 2015). While found to be important (Dumas, 2005), most

parents may not have the opportunity to engage in a full training about mindfulness. It was surmised that training them in these practices – even in a brief way – may allow mothers to be more present and more available to their children, as a relaxing and calming influence on the emotional climate in the home.

While not as long as some interventions, the original 4-to-6 week intervention model was not ideal for all populations, particularly for busy parents; it was believed a brief model would help to improve recruitment and to decrease drop out rates due to challenging schedules (Ammerman et al., 2006). This model requires only committing to one 3-hour workshop, reading of brief materials, a 1-hour of one-on-one coaching, and the receipt of supportive, brief but inspirational text messages (about mindfulness, emotional availability, and emotional attachment) tailored to their Time 1 EA Zones evaluations. Unfortunately, these previous studies did not include follow-ups with families to determine if the effects were maintained. The brief intervention was designed to provide “a seed of change” to these families. Because there was no prior experience with the implementation of the EA Brief, the main interest was in conducting a pilot feasibility study, to better understand ease of recruitment, adequacy and satisfaction of the brief delivery, as well as the acceptability of attrition. The goal was to evaluate this brief format first with normative, low-risk populations before trying this brief model with at-risk families.

HYPOTHESES

Because of previous success with the 4-to 6-week EA intervention (Baker et al., 2015; Biringen et al., 2010; Biringen et al., 2012) and brief intervention models from other areas of research (Nicolson et al., 2013), families who receive the intervention were hypothesized to show significant improvement in observed emotional availability, perceived quality of the mother-child relationship, and perceived mother well-being, from pretest to posttest.

METHODS

Participants

Twenty-five mothers participated in this study. The majority were Caucasian (92.6%) and all female. Mothers' ages ranged from 24 to 54 (50% 24-34, 42.9% 35-44, 7.1% 45-54) with children nearly equally distributed from 0 to 3 years (25% less than one year, 21.4% one year, 28.6% two years, and 25% three years old). Participants were highly educated (25% having completed college as their highest level of education, 7.1% with some post-graduate education, and 67.9% with a post-graduate degree) and most married (82.1% married, 7.1% Single, 3.6% in a committed relationship, 3.6% separated and 3.6% divorced).

Procedure

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Colorado State University, including all email recruitment avenues, recruitment statements, and consent forms. Participants were contacted through the university list serves, with a request to "spread the word" to others in the community. A brief email was sent to the list serves, with a request to contact the investigators in case of additional interest. Those interested families who responded to the investigators then received a more detailed email about the study, along with a consent form. The investigators also had the option of connecting with the families by telephone if the families had further questions or concerns. Participants signed the approved consent form that informed them of procedures, benefits, risks, confidentiality, as well as limits to confidentiality. Limits to confidentiality associated with risk to harm self or others was noted, as well as some of the risks that might be associated with self disclosure in a group setting.

Once informed consent was obtained, participants were asked to sign up for a 3-hour group workshop date with considerable availability of dates to accommodate busy schedules. A link to the approved study questionnaires (using Qualtrics) was sent to participant emails. As soon as surveys were completed, the researchers established a time for the pretest filming to take place remotely using webcams (which needed to be scheduled two weeks before their elected workshop). Prior to the group workshops, all participants were sent an email with filming guidelines so that the Skype filming (which is very convenient but not an ideal context for filming) could be optimized. Each participant was videotaped via Skype for 20 minutes. The researcher assigned to this family was always present on the Skype meeting to make sure that the filming session was conducted per guidelines, with occasional reminders about videotaping guidelines, if necessary. Guidelines included having four or five favorite toys available, not having a light source behind the dyad, trying to keep faces (rather than profiles) towards the camera, keeping a distance that allowed for seeing the dyad and the activity, and not having other individuals on screen during the filming. The premier instruction, however, was “be with your child as you normally would”. Words such as play were not used, since some participants perhaps do not play. After the 20 minutes of interaction was completed, videotapes were almost immediately uploaded to a secure online storage system by the researchers and checked to make sure that the filming was of adequate quality.

As the 3-hour, group-format workshop date neared, participants were sent guidelines for the workshops. Once the participant completed the workshop, they were sent brief reading material via email (Biringen, 2004, 2009). An informational brochure, guidelines on what to expect during the coaching session, and a parent worksheet were also included in the email (See Appendix A, C, and D respectively). Additionally, participants were asked to establish a time to

schedule the one-on-one coaching session, which ideally was set up one week after the workshop training.

Coaching sessions took place in the home of the parent or in the university office and lasted approximately 1-hour. Mothers were able to watch their first filming and receive feedback from their coach on specific areas of strength and growth. Mothers were also given the opportunity to reflect on their perceived areas of strength and growth, as well as, ask the coaches any questions regarding the workshop or materials read.

Within a week after the coaching session, participant phone numbers were entered into an automatic text servicing program, so that they could receive 14 days of daily texts about mindfulness and relationships. These texts were structured such that the mother received two days of texts (tailored to their EA-Z evaluation, to be described below) on each of the following areas: mindfulness strategies; strategies for being sensitive; structuring interactions with one's child; strategies for remaining non-intrusive even in challenging situations; strategies to remaining non-hostile during frustrating exchanges; ways to evoke emotional responsiveness in one's child; and strategies to engage in and involve one's child (See Appendix E for texts and schedule). After two weeks of receiving these texts, participants were then sent a link to complete the second round of surveys. The demographic survey was replaced with a feedback survey.

As the final phase in the data collection, the 20-minute post-test filming time was scheduled, with a reminder of the filming instructions. After filming, the videotapes were uploaded using the same procedure, as described earlier. At the end of the study, all families were provided resources for services in the community, such as counseling or parenting support.

The “EA Brief”

The EA Brief is a shortened version of the emotional availability intervention that was tested earlier (Baker et al., 2015; Biringen et al., 2010, 2012), with some modifications. As described earlier, the pretest assessments (questionnaires, filmings of mother-child interactions) were administered before the EA Brief (which was comprised of: 1) 3-hour group-format workshops, 2) brief reading material, 3) a single one-on-one, face-to-face coaching session, and 4) two weeks of tailored texts). The posttest assessments (again, the same questionnaires with a few additional questions about mother’s perceptions of the intervention, filmings of mother-child interactions) were administered after the EA Brief. Mothers selected one child to participate with between the ages of 0 and 3 years. On occasion, a mother did express concerns during the workshop or coaching about another child or the spouse/partner, and the coach was able to briefly address such issues, followed by the provision of community resources. In other words, the main focus was on the target child selected for this intervention.

3-Hour Group-Format Workshop

The workshop was conducted in groups of 2-15. Two facilitators conducted these workshops, with one being primarily responsible for the process and the other secondary. The workshop began with a brief mindfulness exercise (e.g., 3-minute breathing) and ended with a mindfulness exercise, to illustrate how beginning and ending one’s day in a calm and relaxed state can draw out inner emotional availability and the capacity to nurture security in one’s child. In between the mindfulness exercises, parents learned about attachment and emotional availability in parent-child interactions, as well as ways to reflect about their own history of parent-child relationships in the family of origin.

Brief Reading Material

All workshop participants were emailed two chapters on emotional availability and emotional attachment. They were also sent fliers surrounding Maternal Sensitivity, Child Involvement, Attachment, and Play to reinforce the elements discussed during the workshop.

A Single One-On-One, Face-To-Face Coaching Session

The focus of the coaching was on the observed interaction with the target child, rather than other aspects of the family's life, and this was stated up front with the mothers. Coaches prepared coaching materials (based on a pre-developed coaching protocol; see Appendix B) and had a session with at least one of the other investigators on the project to confirm coaching points. Coaches and participants then had a one-hour coaching session that was filmed and evaluated by another team member so that feedback could be given.

The coaching session began with both mother and the coach viewing the whole of the pre-test film. The coach then asked the mother for her own reactions and her impressions of what occurred in the film. Next the coach identified the area of growth thought to be the most influential during the interaction. The coach especially emphasized specific moments in which the child was emotionally responsive to the mother and wondering with the parent about how to embellish such positive interactions. The coaching session ended with a discussion around positive affect and reflecting upon how the child reacts differently depending on how the parent shows up in their interaction.

Two Weeks Of Tailored Texts

The one-on-one coaching was followed by two weeks of pre-written **texts** (sent through an automatic text-sending service, called EZ Texts) to the mothers that further reinforced the skills emphasized in the workshop and coaching session. To develop these texts, expertise was

obtained through collaboration with the Anschutz Medical Campus mHealth division. The texts included two days for mindfulness and two days for each of the six dimensions of emotional availability; note that the child qualities of emotional availability also address secure attachment of children and thus, all three large concepts (mindfulness, emotional availability, and emotional attachment) were covered in the texting component. The content began with a definition, followed by increasingly specific skills that a mother could actually use with her child. Most of the texts participants received were identical but texts related to the mother and child's EA Zones (established before the coaching session) were tailored to further support the specific needs of each mother-child pair. For example, mothers who were coded in the Complicated EA Zone, were sent messages to encourage them to allow their child to explore more independently while mothers who were coded in the Detached EA Zone, were sent messages prompting them to notice when their child was trying to engage them.

Texts were automatically sent in the morning, at mid-day, and at the end of the day, on each of these 14 days. Texting was included in this program to reinforce the relevant skills in a way that was time-efficient for the participants. Mothers were instructed that they had the option to briefly respond to the texts, and that every effort would be made to reply within 24 hours.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was given to all participants in order to gather information on age, gender, race, education level, relationship status, and parental status.

Emotional Availability-Self Report (EA-SR)

This questionnaire involved 36 questions assessing the parent's perception of the emotional availability between themselves and their child using a 5-point Likert scale with

options of (0) *not agree at all*, (1) *rather not agree*, (2) *neutral*, (3) *rather agree*, (4) *totally agree*. Ten questions are reverse coded. The 36-item self-report yields 5 factors (Vliegen, Luyten, & Biringen, 2009): Mutual Attunement (10 questions) and Affect Quality (5 questions) measure the interactions of the dyad; Intrusiveness (6 questions) and Hostility (6 questions) assess the parent's contribution; capacity to Involve the Parent measures the child's part of the interaction as perceived by the parent.

Observed emotional availability

Biringen and colleagues describe 6 dimensions of emotional availability including sensitivity, structuring, non-intrusiveness and non-hostility (mother measures) and responsiveness and involvement (child measures). The validity of this construct has been reported for all US subculture and numerous countries (Biringen et al., 2014; Moehler, Biringen, & Poustka, 2007; Trapolini, Ungerer, & McMahon, 2008); test-retest reliability has been reported in many studies (.76-.96 depending on study location and time between data collection (Biringen et al., 2014).

Parental sensitivity (7-point scale) reflects the environment the mother creates in terms of response to her child's cues, positivity, and affective authenticity. It encompasses the mother being able to accurately read their child's emotions and respond appropriately. Parental structuring (7 point scale) refers to the ability of the adult to support the child's learning such as allowing the child to dictate play but establishing limits. Parental non-intrusiveness (7 point scale, reverse scored) includes the mother allowing the child to develop their own individual activities and interests without being overbearing or guiding to an excessive extent. Parental non-hostility (7 point scale, reverse-scored) reflects a continuum of negativity, ranging from subtle/covert to overt hostility in the interaction or in the emotional climate of the home

(Biringen et al., 2014).

Child responsiveness (7 point scale) looks at how the child responds to their mother when invited to interact and enjoyment of the play. Child involvement (7 point scale) refers to the extent to which the child engages the mother in their play.

Emotional Availability Zones Evaluation (EA-Z) was also conducted. This is a 100-point scale that assesses the individual's emotional availability toward the interactive partner, where 81-100 indicates High Emotional Availability, 61-80 indicates a Complicated EA, 41-60 reflects a Detached EA, and anything below 40 indicates a Problematic EA. Mothers who demonstrated sensitivity to the child's cues and maintained positive affect with the child were placed in the Emotionally Available Zone. Mothers who exhibited warmth towards the child but may have missed some cues from the child or were inconsistent in their sensitivity were placed in the Complicated Zone. Mothers who were judged to be mechanical or distant in their interaction with the child and did not recognize the cues their child was exhibiting were placed in the Detached Zone. Those who were judged to be traumatizing or traumatized/frightened or frightening in their interaction patterns were placed in the Problematic Zone.

On the child side, children who were perceived as appropriately responsive to their mothers and maintained good affect were placed in the Emotionally Available Zone. Children who were judged to be warm towards mothers but often demonstrated distress and required their mothers for regulation were placed in the Complicated Zone. Where children rarely engaged with their mothers or frequently turned away from interacting with them and were generally avoidant were placed in the Detached Zone. Children who showed traumatized, frightened, or bizarre behaviors and were emotionally dysregulated for the majority of the time were placed in the Problematic Zone.

For this study, inter-rater reliability for each coder was first achieved on a prior sample, and all coders achieved at least 80% agreement across all cases and codes on 7 standard cases (Biringen, 2005). Thus, all coders moved through a standard training program and were certified to be reliable. An additional inter-rater reliability was achieved on the first 10 study cases, using intraclass correlations (ICCs). The ICCs were .71 for Sensitivity, .83 for Non-Intrusiveness, .78 for Non-Hostility, .81 for Child Responsiveness, and .69 for Child Involvement. In addition, it was .65 for the EA-Z for the parent and .74 for the EA-Z for the child. The ICC for structuring was low, potentially because of restricted range; a review of the scores indicated that in only one case did the coders differ by more than 1 point, and hence, percent agreement was used for this scale, at 90% agreement. In no case was the coach also the coder in this project.

Mother well-being

The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) is an 8-item questionnaire designed to measure social-psychological well-being. This includes reporting supportive and rewarding relationships, contributing to the happiness of others, perceiving self-competence, and reporting a purposeful and meaningful life. The items included tap into a person's self-respect and optimism. Well-being is assessed using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strong disagreement with all items) to 7 (Strong Agreement with all items). This scale does not provide separate measures of facets of well-being, but it does provide an overall score of positive functioning across various domains. The Flourishing Scale has been shown to be correlated with other validated measures of well-being. Research has shown a Cronbach's alpha of .87 and construct validity of .62 (Diener et al., 2010).

Analytic Procedures

An a priori power analysis was conducted to determine sample size required to detect small, medium, and large effect sizes. In this study 199 participants are required to detect small effect sizes, 34 participants to detect medium effect sizes, and 15 participants to have adequate power to detect large effect sizes (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Using a previous intervention study as a guideline, a moderate to large effect size of .71 or larger could be expected (Baker et al., 2015). Given the 25 dyads, there would be adequate power to detect differences (Faul et al., 2007). That being said, this study was much more brief than the previous study and so smaller effect sizes were probable. Due to the novelty of this proposed intervention, data from outside of EA interventions was used to assess potential effect sizes. Another brief parenting intervention found moderate effect sizes for their 2-hour intervention and all analyses showed significant differences between the experimental and control groups (Dittman, Farruggia, Keown, & Sanders, 2016). It was likely that there would not be adequate power to detect small or moderate effect sizes (Faul et al., 2007).

RESULTS

Demographics

Zero order (Pearson) correlations were conducted to assess for the relations among the demographic variables (maternal age, education, relationship status, gender and age of child) and the Flourishing Scale, EA-SR, and EA Scales. Specifically, maternal education was correlated with EA-SR Child Involvement ($r = -.392, p = .043$), Maternal relationship status was correlated with EA-SR Intrusiveness ($r = -.411, p = .033$), and child age was correlated with EA-SR Child Involvement ($r = .536, p = .004$), Affect Quality ($r = -.453, p = .018$), Hostility ($r = .613, p = .001$). Additionally, child age was correlated with the observational EA Scales' Child Involvement ($r = .456, p = .025$). Only six out of 200 correlations were found to be significant, suggesting these could be chance findings.

Maternal Well-Being

To assess differences from pretest to posttest, two-tailed paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to assess changes in maternal well-being, as reported on the Flourishing Scale. There was a significant increase in scores, suggesting that the mother's perception of her own well-being may have improved from pre to post-intervention ($t(23) = -2.35, p = .028$).

Maternal Perceptions

Two-tailed paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare mother's perceptions of emotional availability in the relationship, using the Emotional Availability Self-Report. A significant improvement was reported in Mutual Attunement ($t(23) = -4.67, p = .000$), Child Involvement ($t(23) = -5.28, p = .000$), and Non-Hostility, ($t(23) = 2.55, p = .018$), indicating that mothers viewed their relationships with their children in a more positive light after the

intervention, as compared to the pre-intervention reports. However, no significant differences were found for Affect Quality or Intrusiveness.

Observed Mother-Child Relationship

Two-tailed paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the observed relationship quality in the mother-child dyad, using the Emotional Availability Scales. There was a significant increase in Child Involvement ($t(25) = -2.107, p = .045$) and Child Responsiveness ($t(25) = -2.033, p = .053$) from pre-intervention to post-intervention. No significance was found for the mother scales of Sensitivity, Structuring, Non-Intrusiveness, Non-Hostility, nor either clinical screener.

Qualitative Findings

Results from the feedback survey at the completion of the intervention revealed that overall mothers found the intervention to be helpful. More than half of participants reported high satisfaction with the intervention and high engagement with the coaching session. Nearly all participants reported gaining new information from the intervention that they would continue to use with their child further indicating potential change in the future.

Table 1: Summary of Differences Between Time 1 and Time 2

Type of Assessment	Mean (SD) at T1	Mean (SD) at T2	<i>p</i>
Flourishing Scale	48.38 (5.04)	50.21 (4.05)	.03*
EA-SR			
- Mutual Attunement	25.04 (4.46)	28.17(4.37)	.00**
- Child Involvement	29.96 (4.01)	33.00 (2.69)	.00**
- Hostility	7.71 (6.24)	6.00 (6.61)	.02*
- Intrusiveness	11.83 (3.25)	11.13 (3.04)	.26
- Affect Quality	18.00 (1.69)	18.25 (1.57)	.36
EA Scales			
- Sensitivity	5.23 (.62)	5.48 (.62)	.11
- Structuring	5.73 (4.65)	5.23 (.86)	.57
- Non-Intrusiveness	4.79 (1.20)	5.10 (.96)	.22
- Non-Hostility	5.89 (.68)	5.94 (.55)	.74
- Child	5.21 (.74)	5.50 (.53)	.05*
Responsiveness			
- Child Involvement	5.15 (.90)	5.54 (.73)	.05*
- Mother EA Zone	82.35 (6.35)	84.15 (6.10)	.25
- Child EA Zone	81.15 (9.09)	83.54 (6.56)	.17

* Indicates $p < .05$, ** Indicates $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to test the efficacy of the EA Brief, a brief intervention that involves training parents in emotional availability, emotional attachment, and mindfulness. Additionally, due to the lack of previous experience with the EA Brief, the goal was to conduct a pilot feasibility study, to better understand ease of recruitment, adequacy and satisfaction of the brief delivery, as well as the acceptability of attrition.

Participants in this study reported a significant increase in maternal perceived well-being as well as mutual attunement, child involvement, and non-hostility. A significant increase also was observed in the child's responsive and involving behaviors of the mothers from pre- to post-intervention, suggesting that it is the children who may have benefitted from this intervention.

The findings regarding an increase in mothers' perceived well-being relates to the previous mindfulness literature (Dykens et al., 2014; Greeson et al., 2015). By encouraging mothers to be more present with their children and more mindful in their daily lives, they may have perceived an increase in their overall well-being. Encouraging mothers to be more affectively expressive and present with their children (through workshop discussions and one-on-one coaching) and sending text reminders about ways they can improve their interactions may have contributed also to their perception of increased emotional availability in their relationship with their child. Giving mothers the opportunity to reflect on their own attachment histories (during the workshop) also may have impacted their perceptions and understandings of emotionally available relationships, potentially influencing their perception of the relationship between themselves and their child.

The finding that children significantly increased in their observed emotional responsiveness and involvement of their mothers may have been affected by many aspects of the intervention. As mentioned above, if mothers were more mentally present during their daily interactions with their children, the children may have come to be more interested in being affectively present with the mothers and in engaging with them. Previous interventions found significance on the maternal side of the observational EA Scales (Biringen et al., 2014; Nicolson et al., 2013). One of these interventions was also a brief model but had the ability to compare to a control group (Nicolson et al., 2013) and showed improvement on the observed mother EA in Non-Intrusiveness and Non-Hostility. Perhaps future studies that are able to employ a control group will detect a difference on the mother's behavior as well. The fact that the mother's perceptions clearly showed improvements may indicate that perception is more possible to change in short-term intervention — a suggestion of change in maternal behavior may come later, or with continued exposure to this content. Future studies should conduct follow ups to evaluate for sustained effects of the intervention.

Limitations

The main limitations of this study were the sample and the use of a single group pre/post test design without a control group. The group of participants in this study was both few in numbers and a homogenous convenience sample. Due to the small number of participants, it possible that Type II errors occurred and significant results may have been missed. The demographics of participants were not representative of the general population, making generalization of findings limited. Despite this homogeneous population of mothers, there was a range in EA scores, which highlights the importance of remembering that higher and lower EA are not necessarily indicative of any particular socioeconomic group. In addition, with a single

group pre/post design involving only an intervention group, it is challenging to definitively indicate cause and effect.

Factors such as the change in seasons or maturation of the children could have played a role in the improvements over time. For example, previous studies have found that as children age they have the potential to become more emotionally available (Biringen et al., 2014). However, the limited timeframe of the study did not allow for much change in age as there was never more than 10 weeks between pretest and posttest. In addition to maturation, the change in seasons can often have a role in how individuals feel (Winthorst et al., 2014). However, in this case, the change in seasons was from fall to winter, which often is associated with many individuals feeling more moody, rather than more optimistic (Winthorst et al., 20014). A comparison/control group over the same time period would have been useful.

Another limitation of the study was that families were only filmed one time before and after the intervention. Having multiple filmings to get a more in depth understanding of the interaction of the dyad that is less dependent on the random day or time filmed could potentially be helpful and eliminate chance findings.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study was the first to test a brief EA Intervention. It builds upon previous EA intervention studies successfully increasing the EA between parent and child (Baker et al., 2015; Biringen et al., 2010; Biringen et al., 2012; Nicolson et al., 2013) and offers new insight into how a brief model may influence maternal perception and child involvement. The implication for mother-child intervention is that a brief model could be used alone or as augmentation of another parent-child intervention to increase the emotional availability in the dyad potentially influencing the child's developmental trajectory.

Future work on this topic should address the individual characteristics of the EA coaches and how such characteristics influence intervention outcomes, including how the participants report about their experiences with a particular coach. Such information could help with training of future EA coaches. While this study did not take the mother's partner or spouse into consideration, it could be interesting to evaluate how partner support and partner characteristics influence the changes made by the mother and/or the child. Future work, with larger sample sizes, could also evaluate how workshop size might affect the experience of the participants and intervention outcomes. Future work could investigate this EA Brief in comparison with the full EA interventions (which have a 4-6 week length), described earlier (e.g., Biringen et al., 2010). These will all be avenues to further understand how the EA approach can help families to interact in positive and emotionally healthy ways.

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APPENDIX A

Healthy Connections Brochure

Things to know about filmings, group workshop, and videoplayback coaching



At First, Where, What, and With Whom:

Right at the beginning, you will interact with your child in your home and we will film that interaction. The filmings of you will take place with only your target child you choose, rather than the whole family. We ask this due to scheduling and so that we can really focus on one relationship, knowing that there is “spillover” from one relationship to another. A video of you and your child interacting can provide some distance from day-to-day life and allow reflection about what is important to you and how to continue to improve your relationships, all the while knowing that perfection is not the end goal. The child development specialist will observe the videotaped interaction and will then share some feedback regarding both strengths and areas of growth with you.

Then What?

You are invited to a 2-3 hour group workshop with other parents. It is important that you and your family see this as “your time” to learn about mindfulness, about secure attachment in parent-child bonds, and about emotional availability in relationships. You may benefit from others’ comments and input, as well as the community of learning. We will start and end

promptly, provide a great deal of educational material, and encourage interactions within the group. We prefer to postpone one-on-one interactions between parents and the child development specialist until the videoplayback coaching session.

And then?

One-on-one, face-to-face, video playback coachings will be at home or CSU. These sessions will also be filmed for training purposes. During this meeting, there will be some time to watch scenes of the film together and to discuss together. During this time, your coach will give special focus to the relationship between you and your target child. In order to facilitate this conversation, we ask that your child is cared for by another adult during the coaching. They can be close-by if you like, but we prefer that this be “your time” without interruptions. The coaching will take one hour. During this time, your coach will focus on the video and on actual interactions between you and your child. She will facilitate a discussion about what is going well in the relationship, situations that may be challenging, reasons why you or your child interact in a certain way, and what you or your child may be thinking. Although we realize that related topics, such as your other child(ren), spouse, work, or other, are relevant and important, your coach will attempt to focus the discussion on the video and your parent-child interaction. If you feel that you need to talk about other challenges further, we are happy to offer referrals to other services.

A little bit more?

After the coaching, we will send you text messages that emphasize the qualities we have talked about in workshop and coaching, in bite-sized ways. You can respond to these texts if you like, and we will try to respond back within 24 hours.

And then:

You are the one who will decide what is going to be the best for you and your child.

The observation of the videos will be done using the EAS (Emotional Availability Scales). This is a scientific, evidence based instrument that is used to observe interactions between caregivers and their child. The instrument is developed by Biringen and based on the observation of thousands of parent-child interactions in many different cultures. To use the instrument, you have to be trained and become certified by Dr. Biringen. For more research on this topic, please read the two chapters we provided for you. It is important to distinguish a secure attachment as we describe it in these works from concepts like attachment parenting which is completely different and less scientific than concepts such as secure attachment and emotional availability, which come from decades of rigorous research. The topic of mindfulness is brought in to help parents be less stressed as they interact with their children and also go about their daily lives. At the end of the study, we are happy to provide a reference list for future readings.

Testimonials

The following are some statements from parents who have been exposed to this procedure:

- “Now I understand better why interactions between the two of us can be so complicated”
- “I didn’t like the use of the video camera, but afterwards the video was very enlightening (or clarifying)”
- “I never thought they would really understand how difficult family life can be, but they really did”
- “I never thought that such an observation would reveal such a realistic picture of the interaction of me and my child as we are at home”
- “The picture the observation revealed was very recognizable for us”

- “Thanks to the observation we can work out our problems”
- “The observation helped me to understand my child better”
- “It was nice to hear about the good things of the interaction between me and my child”

APPENDIX B

Coaching Checklist

Reminders before coaching session:

- Mother EAZ Zone: _____
- Child EAZ Zone: _____
- Mother and child scores: _____
- **Watch video** with parent. “Quiet watching” of much of the 20-min video at one sitting
Area of strength & moments on video to highlight: _____
- “Take home” statement based on one aspect of EA that is an area of growth for parent:

Checklist:

____ Ask mom what were your initial thoughts? What are you seeing? After watching the video

____ Invite parent to recognize an **area of strength** in video, from EA perspective

- **Pause video** at moment of strength and discuss with parent, tuning into both parent and child’s inner experiences
 - *“How did you feel/what were you thinking...”*
 - *“What do you think s/he may have been thinking/feeling...”*

____ **Integrate “take home” statement**, “wonder if” and “wonder with” parent – this should be related to their “area of growth” within EA.

- *“I wonder what would happen if...”*
- *How do you think practicing mindful moments might help with this?*

____ Invite parent to watch **child behaviors and what they might mean**, using EA language

- Point out moment when child **seeks out parent**, “look how he/she is seeking you out”
- Point out child’s **positive cues** and what **parent does in response**
- Point out child’s **negative cues** and what **parent does in response**

_____ Discuss **expression of positive affect**, either a moment within the video OR ask parent to think of a time in the past week when s/he expressed positivity toward child.

- *“How did you feel inside?” “What was your face/voice/body language saying?”*
- *“How do you think your child experienced this?” “How did it affect your child?”*
- Invite parent to consider ways to **weave positive expressions** into interactions with child.
- **Mindfulness** may help parent stay in the moment and find gratitude/joy.
- Discuss idea of **“embodiment”** (but use terms like body language, tone of voice, etc) or “fake it till you make it,” the idea of simply being “there,” positive more often than not
- Emphasize that **perfection is not the goal**, the goal is pleasurable times together with child, more often than not. Acknowledge that, even if there are challenges with EA, we can see the parent’s love for child and we recognize their effort in coming to EA program

_____ Briefly touch on **each of the dimensions** in a positive way (dimensions that are not the focus)

Coding Narrative

Maternal sensitivity:

Maternal structuring:

Maternal non-intrusiveness:

Maternal non-hostility:

Child responsiveness:

Child involvement:

APPENDIX C

What to Expect during Our Coaching Session

I recognize that you might be a bit nervous about our upcoming coaching session and I want to put your mind at ease. My intention for our time together is to be a relaxed conversation between you and I where we will watch your video and discuss your areas where you may see strength as well as areas of growth. To help ease your concerns here is what we will be covering during our session:

- We will watch the video together and I'll encourage you to look at your child's behaviors and what they might mean in the language of emotional attachment and emotional availability.
- We will observe your child's **positive** signals and discuss how you respond to them (e.g., do you feel you are sensitive).
- We will also observe your child's negative signals, and discuss how you respond.
- We will “wonder if” and “wondering with” about other things you can do to connect emotionally in this situation (as if afterthoughts). This is not about you making every interaction into a perfect parenting situation, but more about understanding your child and his/her perspective. This will be a lot about putting yourself in your child's shoes, so to speak.
- I will pause your video at a moment of strength and a moment where growth may be needed. I will try to point out one or two areas for you to embellish, based on the video.
 - How did you feel/what were you thinking when s/he seeks you out?
 - What do you think s/he may have been feeling/thinking?

- I will also ask you to think of time when you show positive affect either on the video (or another moment in the last week, if need be) and help you to identify what this felt like for you. We will discuss how positive emotional expressions affect your child's responses toward you and toward life in general. We will consider how mindfulness can help facilitate more positive connections during daily activities.

Remember, even if you see that your relationship with your child involves less emotional availability than you desire right now, that is ok because parent-child relationships are not perfect and none of us should be striving for perfection. The goal of this program is about understanding and wanting to better understand your child and his/her relationship needs at a particular point in life. Coming to this program shows that you have an open mind and heart.

APPENDIX D

Language of Emotional Availability Parent Worksheet

Each child needs caring and emotionally available parents in his or her life. You want to see your child(ren) generally happy and comfortable in your presence. Every child longs for a warm and secure connection with his/her parents. A secure relationship between parent and child develops, but often with ups and downs.

Sometimes a child doesn't act or develop as expected. Sometimes a parent is stressed and doesn't always act his or her best. Sometimes a parent and child don't find the emotional connection with each other at the beginning or they lose it at some point in development. It can be helpful to share your positive thoughts and also worries with a child development specialist. He/she will welcome you with questions like: "What does my child need of me? How can I reach my child in a better way?"

<p>Parent Sensitivity: refers mainly to your warmth and positive affect during interactions with your child, your reading/understanding of your child's cues appropriately and reacting appropriately.</p>	
<p>Structuring: your setting of age-appropriate limits, guiding, suggesting, and breaking down activities into small, achievable parts for your child.</p>	

<p>Non-Intrusiveness: your being available to your child, but in a non-overbearing way; being available to your child, but without being overinvolved.</p>	
<p>Non-Hostility: your appropriate emotion regulation, particularly during difficult or frustration times.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covert signs we might look at together: boredom, general discontent, mannerisms, such as rolling the eyes, some without possibly realizing it. • Overt signs: most parents realize that yelling or hitting are not good things, but more subtle overt signs include teasing, making jokes that put down the child. 	
<p>Child Responsiveness: your child's positive affect and mood as well as age-appropriate balance between autonomy/independence and responsiveness to you.</p>	
<p>Child Involvement: your child's initiative and interest in inviting you into play or interaction.</p>	

APPENDIX E

Text Schedule

Mindfulness

Morning: Mindfulness is paying attention on purpose, non-judgmentally, to what is occurring in the present moment. (John Kabat-Zinn)

Mid-day: More often than not, do just one thing. When one task is completed or a thought is over, then focus on the next moment. Be fully in the moment for each.

End of day: As you go through your day, pause and bring your attention back to your breath.

Practice the 3-minute breathing or walking meditation.

Next morning: Notice your body sensations through the day (sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste).

If something is distracting or uncomfortable, notice that too, and move on.

Sensitivity

EVERYONE, morning: Sensitivity refers to your habit to show positive emotions more often than not, read your child's nonverbal or verbal cues, and respond in a good way.

EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE, mid-day: 30-minutes of play each day helps focus your attention on your time together, enjoy each other's company, and respond appropriately in more difficult times.

EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE, end of day: Plan 30 minutes of daily play giving your full attention to your child. Practice following their lead and reading their nonverbal and verbal cues.

EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE, next morning: Being sensitive isn't about being perfect! After a conflict, gently approach your child for a do-over, which teaches that mistakes do happen.

COMPLICATED, mid-day: 30-minutes of play each day helps focus your attention on your time together, enjoy each other's company and encourage your child to discover on their own.

COMPLICATED, end of day: Plan 30 minutes a day of play giving full attention to your child. Practice following your child's lead, reading nonverbal/verbal cues and encouraging discovery.

COMPLICATED, next morning: It's healthy for your child to explore and discover on their own. Quietly sit back, be attentive, and available, wait for your child to invite you into play.

DETACHED, mid-day: 30-minutes of play each day helps focus your full and positive attention, helping you and your child engage and respond well to one another in difficult times.

DETACHED, end of day: Plan 30 minutes/day of play giving your child your full attention and engagement. Practice following their lead, reading their cues and enjoying their company.

DETACHED, next morning: When your child seeks attention, enthusiastically comment: "How fun, you're playing dolls!" Shine a light on your child an extra moment to show them that they are at the center of your world.

Structuring

Morning: Structuring is your habit of gently guiding your child. Set limits for behavior while supporting their focus of interest. Stay with and embellish their play.

Mid-day: Join in your child's play. This is a great way to learn where their interests lie.

Then you can guide, describe, or embellish based on their interests.

End of day: Describe what your child is doing. Instead of, "what are you doing?" try "oh, look, Batman is chasing the bad guy!"

Next morning: Make guiding comments about what your child is doing. Instead of "the puzzle piece belongs over there" try "This puzzle piece has red on it. Where can it go?"

Non-Intrusiveness

Morning: Non-intrusiveness refers to the extent to which you provide age-appropriate autonomy and independence and avoids interference, unless there is an emergency.

Mid-day: During your 30 minutes of play, resist just joining your child's play, observe for a bit & wait for your child to invite you—by a look, by words, or gestures.

End of day: Instead of, We are in a hurry, let me do it for you, allow a few extra minutes to get ready so that they can do it on their own.

Next morning: Instead of “Do not climb up on the playset so high! ” step back and say, Wow, you sure are up high! How do you think you will get down from there?

Non-Hostility

Morning: Non-hostility refers to your successful management of negativity, including your facial expressions, words, or other actions in the presence of your child.

Mid-day: Outside of your time with your child, try using mindfulness techniques to manage your stress and any negative feelings about life.

End of day: Notice your child's emotions and behaviors, and take a mindful moment to consider where they are coming from; this may help you respond empathetically.

Next morning: Instead of becoming frustrated because your child is pushing your buttons, step back & consider if there is misbehavior due to age, hunger level, or exhaustion.

Responsiveness

EVERYONE: Your child's emotional responsiveness refers to their habit of reacting positively to you WITH age-appropriate signs of independence.

EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE, mid-day: During 30 minutes of play, your child's sense of positivity and connection with you are important.

COMPLICATED, mid-day: If your child wants your attention a lot of the time, give more space by supporting their interactions with others or problem solve on their own.

DETACHED, mid-day: If your child seems a bit withdrawn from you or others, see if you can show positive interest and undivided attention when you are with them.

EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE, end of day: When your child is excited to be with you (smiling or touching), take the opportunity to respond to their affection; if they are more quiet, ok to be low key.

COMPLICATED, end of day: Encourage your child's fun times with others. For example encourage one-on-one time with other parent.

DETACHED, end of day: Wait for your child to come to you, and then show interest in what they have to say. Smile & show how much you enjoy talking to and playing with them.

EMOTIONALLY AVAILABLE, next morning: When your child reaches out to play or talk to you, they will love your excitement or gentle/calm positivity, based on your style.

COMPLICATED, next morning: Empathize with your child's emotions-e.g., sweetie, that must have hurt -yet give them the space to work it out on their own rather than swoop in and rescue.

DETACHED, next morning:

Involvement

Morning: Your child's involvement is about them taking the initiative in seeking out a connection with you.

Mid-day: During your 30 minutes of play, let your child set the pace. If your child is on their own and does not include you, gently try to connect without pushing it.

End of day: Sometimes children involve through whining, fussing, or acting out. Try to understand why your child is behaving this way.

Next morning: When playing, follow your child's lead. If they begin to turn the head away or look at a different toy, follow the lead again, but always be gentle and engaged.