



УДК 159.9.072

EDN RMOTDB

<https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2686-9527-2024-6-1-18-32>

Research article

## The maternal position of women raising single or twin infants: A review of Russian and foreign studies

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**For citation:** Abdulaeva, A. M., Korgozha, M. A. (2024) The maternal position of women raising single or twin infants: A review of Russian and foreign studies. *Psychology in Education*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 18–32. <https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2686-9527-2024-6-1-18-32> EDN RMOTDB

**Received** 4 September 2023; reviewed 24 November 2023; accepted 24 November 2023.

**Funding:** The study did not receive any external funding.

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The article presents an overview of Russian and foreign studies devoted to a wide range of issues in the relationship between a mother and a single infant or twin infants.

**Materials and Methods.** We analyzed 124 articles which are available in the databases Scopus, Semantic Scholar, PubMed, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, RSCI and Crossref and contain keywords reflecting mother–child interaction in families with one infant or twin infants. Most of the articles were published from 2000 to 2023.

**Results.** The review focuses on the maternal sphere of a woman. The authors analyze the influence of the value-semantic aspects of motherhood, the mother's actual psycho-emotional state and her sensitivity and responsiveness on the mental health and development of a single infant and twin infants. The article describes the concept of the maternal position in women raising a single infant or twin infants. The maternal position is manifested in the specific behavior of a woman, which depends on her value attitude to the role of the mother, her sensitivity to the condition of the child, and her understanding of the child's individual characteristics. The maternal position also reflects the mother's evaluative attitude to the performance of her functions. The maternal position of women raising twin infants is undergoing changes due to the fact that the mother is simultaneously a part of two mother–child dyads. The review shows that mothers of twin infants tend to pay attention to the twins in general and build a unified interaction with the children, without paying sufficient attention to the characteristics and needs of each individual child.

**Conclusions.** The maternal position is a system of mother-to-child relationships which is manifested in a certain maternal behavior and the quality of performance of maternal functions. The maternal position is closely related to the sensitivity and responsiveness of the mother and can be compared with the parameters of adaptation to the maternal role. The review showed the need for empirical studies of the maternal position of women raising infants, including infants with various developmental disorders.

**Keywords:** psychology of motherhood, perinatal psychology, mental health, early intervention, maternal behavior, maternal position, twin infants

## Материнская позиция женщин, воспитывающих одного ребенка и двойню раннего возраста: обзор отечественных и зарубежных исследований

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**Для цитирования:** Абдулаева, А. М., Коргожа, М. А. (2024) Материнская позиция женщин, воспитывающих одного ребенка и двойню раннего возраста: обзор отечественных и зарубежных исследований. *Психология человека в образовании*, т. 6, № 1, с. 18–32. <https://www.doi.org/10.33910/2686-9527-2024-6-1-18-32> EDN RMOTDB

**Получена** 4 сентября 2023; прошла рецензирование 24 ноября 2023; принята 24 ноября 2023.

**Финансирование:** Исследование не имело финансовой поддержки.

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### Аннотация

**Введение.** В статье представлен обзор отечественных и зарубежных исследований, посвященных вопросу изучения широкого круга особенностей взаимоотношений матери и ребенка раннего возраста, а также матери и двойни раннего возраста. Материнская позиция является центральным феноменом, рассматриваемом в статье через призму факторов, влияющих на материнское поведение и исполнение материнских функций.

**Материалы и методы.** Осуществлен анализ 124 статей, опубликованных в базах данных *Scopus*, *Semantic Scholar*, *PubMed*, *Bielefeld Academic Search Engine*, РИНЦ и *Crossref* преимущественно с 2000 по 2023 год, в которых использованы ключевые слова, отражающие материнско-детское взаимодействие в семьях с одним ребенком или двойней раннего возраста.

**Результаты.** В обзоре внимание сфокусировано на материнской сфере женщины, осуществляется анализ влияния ценностно-смысловых аспектов материнства, актуального психоэмоционального состояния, а также параметров чувствительности и отзывчивости матери на психическое здоровье и развитие одного ребенка и двойни раннего возраста. Раскрывается понятие материнской позиции у женщин, воспитывающих одного ребенка и двойню раннего возраста. Данная позиция проявляется в конкретном поведении женщины, которое обусловлено ее ценностным отношением к роли матери, чувствительностью к состоянию ребенка, пониманием его индивидуальных особенностей, а также отражает ее оценочное отношение к выполнению своих функций. Материнская позиция женщины, воспитывающей двойню раннего возраста, претерпевает изменения ввиду того, что мать одновременно является частью двух диад «мать — дитя». Обзор показывает, что матери близнецов раннего возраста склонны обобщенно фокусировать свое внимание на двойню и выстраивать единое взаимодействие с детьми, не уделяя достаточного внимания характеристикам и потребностям каждого ребенка в отдельности. Исследования показывают снижение чувствительности и отзывчивости матерей близнецов, что влияет на качество взаимодействия с ними и удовлетворения потребностей детей.

**Заключение.** Материнская позиция как система отношений матери к ребенку, проявляющаяся в определенном материнском поведении и качестве выполнения материнских функций, является многокомпонентным конструктом и имеет свои специфические различия в ситуации воспитания одного ребенка или двойни раннего возраста. Она тесно связана с чувствительностью и отзывчивостью матери и может быть сопоставлена с параметрами адаптации к материнской роли. Обзор показал необходимость проведения эмпирических исследований материнской позиции женщин, воспитывающих детей раннего возраста, в том числе имеющих различные нарушения в развитии.

**Ключевые слова:** психология материнства, перинатальная психология, психическое здоровье, раннее вмешательство, материнское поведение, материнская позиция, двойня раннего возраста

## Introduction

Improvements in early assistance to infants and young children with various developmental disorders or exposed to the risks of such require an in-depth study of the factors affecting their mental health. Along with clinical health aspects, researchers give prominence to children's early interaction with their mother or another close adult acting as a caregiver, as well as to the attachment and functions inherent in the mother–child dyad (Anikina 2022; Clark et al. 2019; Shmatova, Razvarina 2022). Recent attachment studies in Russia and abroad attest to negative changes in the distribution of attachment patterns in children facing social risk and to the importance of a social and economic setting for the development of parenting models (Muhamedrahimov, Tumanian 2022).

Foreign research clearly tends towards a focus on the contribution of a whole range of maternal characteristics to the child's mental health and development. The maternal side, on the other hand, is not given much attention. Considering the practical need of assessing women's psychological readiness to motherhood and the quality of adaptation to it, and of identifying the factors degrading the quality of performance of maternal functions, Russian psychology is attaching more and more importance to the psychological phenomenon of motherhood as a research subject. G. G. Filippova, the pioneer of Russian psychology, generally analyzes the maternal sphere from two perspectives: 1) maternity as setting the stage for the child's development; 2) maternity as a part of the woman's personal sphere (Filippova 2018). We explain the distinction between these two positions by different degrees of understanding the factors influencing the way the mother–child dyad and each of its elements function. This review intends to examine the woman's maternal position as a system of the mother's attitudes to her child, which finds its way into a certain maternal behavior and the quality of performance of maternal functions. We therefore bring into focus various characteristics of a mother as a source of the child's mental health and development, recognizing the importance of exploring the woman's value-semantic sphere and its impact on the maternal role she is playing.

This study centres on the maternal position and its structure, making an attempt to compare it to other psychological characteristics of mo-

thers which come to the fore during their interactions with young children. It also looks at the findings concerning the maternal position of women with young twins.

It is worth mentioning that early development psychology applies the object relations psychoanalytic theory to interactions between children and close adults acting as permanent caregivers. We review the papers focusing on biological mothers as such close adults. The role of fathers and other close adults in interactions with infants and young children is not analyzed here although these essential factors need to be covered by research and psychological work with the family (Prino et al. 2016). We are omitting them from our review of latest research in order to outline the maternal position typical of women raising a single child or twins as the closest adult caregiver. It should be noted that according to studies, the quality of relations between children and their mothers has nothing to do with the quality of their relations with other close adults and deserves study in its own right (Anikina 2022).

Considering the findings of well-established studies into mental health among infants and young children published over many years, we start from the premise that personal relations stemming from the mother–child dyad are fundamental to the child's psychophysical and personal development. It is through this lens that one should scrutinize the relations in the mother–twin dyad, where the mother is not part of a single triad, but rather of two mother–child dyads at a time. We also find it more advisable to look into mother–twins interactions at a later stage, when the primary (perinatal) dyad has already broken up and separation from the mother is generally over. Such an approach is integral to the study of social and emotional as well as communicative spheres of preschoolers (Dobryakov 2009; Kurazhova, Lyakso 2020).

We analyzed foreign and Russian papers across the following databases: Scopus, Semantic Scholar, PubMed, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, RSCI and Crossref. The keywords used included 'maternal position', 'dyad mother–child', 'early mother–child interaction', 'infant twins', 'maternal functions' and 'maternal behavior'. Our study encompassed 124 papers (77 in foreign journals and 47 in Russian ones), most of which came out between 2000 and 2023. Articles with a high citation index and extensive empirical data were given more weight in this review.

## The mother–child dyad

The basic theory describing interactions between the mother and the infant / young child is rooted in a dyadic approach, which views the mother–child pair as a specific primary dyad functioning as a single whole. It is premised on the psychoanalytical theory and experimental psychophysiological studies of mother–child interactions undertaken by such prominent scholars as J. Bowlby, M. Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al. 2015), R. Spitz, E. Erikson, D. Winnicott and many others. The mother engages in dyadic relations with her child as early as the prenatal stage, which can be explained by the dominant influence of gestation on one side and emerging prenatal attachment to the child on the other (Savenysheva et al. 2022). Dyadic mother–child relations unfold in large part throughout the mother’s postpartum period and the child’s postnatal phase, when the two dyad subjects are physically separate yet bound psychologically. The two form a ‘closed bipartite system,’ which undergoes dynamic processes and evolves in stages (Dobryakov 2009). When approaching the age of around three, the child comes to acquire self-awareness embodied by the ‘I concept,’ which brings psychological separation from the mother and the dyad to a logical end.

Vital to the child’s mental health is the fact that relations within the mother–child dyad are asymmetrical, meaning that the contribution of each side is unequal. In the case of infants and young children, the whole environment is confined to their mother. Children are fully engaged in the dyadic relationship, respond to the adult’s initiative according to their age and are able to actively initiate interaction themselves (Anikina 2022; Busuito et al. 2019). It was already V. N. Myasishchev (Myasishchev 2011) and G. Zimmel (Zimmel 1909) who stressed that early relations as part of the mother–child dyad are the primary source of all social relations that the child will engage in personally in the future — an assumption repeatedly confirmed by researchers later on (Emde 2012; Marquis-Brideau et al. 2023).

### The mother’s sensitivity and responsiveness as contributors to the child’s mental health

Numerous studies into the role of the mother’s behavior in facilitating the constructive functioning of the mother–child dyad boil down to qua-

litative assessment of two major characteristics of a close adult, namely sensitivity, or ability to perceive and identify the child’s cues, and responsiveness, or capacity to respond to them appropriately (Alvarenga et al. 2021; Anikina 2022; Egotubov et al. 2020; Galasyuk, Mitina 2020). Longitudinal studies of the interaction between mothers and young children show that the mother’s sensitivity tends to increase by the end of the child’s early age (Perea-Velasco et al. 2023). Sensitive mothers are more patient and responsive to the needs and requirements of their children as the latter progress towards the second year of life. At the same time, they are less prone to anticipate their children’s needs, providing them greater freedom to experiment, make mistakes and perceive the consequences of their own actions (Cerezo et al. 2021; Mahoney, Nam 2011; Olhaberry et al. 2022).

According to population studies, mothers are less inclined to show a defensive behavior as their child turns two. As the quality of communication in mother–child interaction improves, mothers become less obtrusive in games, giving their children greater freedom and encouraging their independence and initiative (Ainsworth et al. 2015; Letourneau et al. 2015; Rodrigues et al. 2021).

The attachment theory maintains that maternal sensitivity lies at the core of safe attachment evolving within the mother–child dyad during the child’s first years (Ainsworth et al. 2015; Deans 2020; Manning 2023; Opie et al. 2021). As studies over the past twenty years have shown, safe attachment is determined not so much by the mother’s sensitivity in the form of a specific capability to take attentive care of her children, as by her ability to recognize their own feelings and thoughts straight after their birth and behave accordingly (Brophy-Herb et al. 2023; Meins et al. 2018; Milligan et al. 2015; Verhage et al. 2016). To differentiate between the above maternal characteristics, the term ‘maternal mind-mindedness’ was introduced, which saw its spread in early intervention studies and practices abroad. It denotes a sensitive orientation of the mother towards her child’s inner state and ability to reflect upon his or her mental state and respond appropriately (Brophy-Herb et al. 2022; Meins et al. 2002; Valitova 2021). Unknown to Russian psychology before, this term is now instrumental in the study of specificities of the mother’s behavior within the mother–child dyad. Maternal mental-mind-

mindedness is a multifaceted construct distinct from sensitivity in that the mother is oriented towards the development of her child's mental world and is able and eager to understand how the newborn's mental state finds its way into his or her behavior (Bigelow et al. 2023). Supporters of the attachment theory have empirically proven that the quality of maternal mind-mindedness is decisive in how infants and young children develop safe attachment (Fonagy et al. 2002; Meins et al. 2018; Zeegers et al. 2017; 2019). Mothers' ability to accurately interpret their infants' mental state is enhanced as the dyadic relationship progresses during the child's first year and may lead to qualitative advances in his or her communicative competence (Bigelow et al. 2023; McMahon, Bernier 2017). Maternal mind-mindedness ensures a link between the mother's capacity to ponder over the child's mental state and maternal behavior, which naturally manifests itself during interaction with the child (Brown et al. 2023; Egmoose et al. 2023; Foley et al. 2023).

### **Maternal behavior and adaptation to the role of a mother**

The Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health concept (IECMH) assesses the quality of parental care based on the following three fundamental characteristics of the mother as a close adult caregiver: 1) she is always emotionally available to her child; 2) she can perceive and appreciate the child's unique personality; 3) she feels comfortable and competent as a parent (Anikina 2022; Skoblo, Trushkina 2021). These characteristics bear on the woman's maternal behavior and the quality of her maternal functions. Healthier relations within the mother-child dyad imply that mothers adapt to the needs of their infants without expecting any adaptation from them in return (Anikina 2022).

Foreign research papers tend to associate maternal behavior with parental resilience, which refers to parents' capacity to ensure competent and high-quality parenting for their children despite adversities and everyday stressors (Çakmak Tolun, Bolluk Uğur 2023; Gavidia-payne et al. 2015; Masten, Barnes 2018). The key determinants of parental resilience include parents' psychological wellbeing and self-efficiency, family functioning and social connections of the family. Researchers also highlight that the value

and meaning that parents find in their daily family life are essential for their adaptation and adaptability to life adversities (Mann et al. 2023; Masten 2001).

Adaptation to a maternal role is a complex step-by-step process embracing the mother's psychological readiness for motherhood, parental competence and satisfaction with the way she deals with her maternal functions (Shrestha et al. 2019; Trushkina 2021). By no means unimportant is the mother's own early childhood experience. The psychologist F. Leite Ongilio and her colleagues produced a comprehensive review of empirical research data and established that the mother's own adverse childhood experience impinges on her future interaction with the young child. Such mothers are less emotionally available and sensitive to their child's needs — the fact that most often triggers attachment disorders in the latter (Leite Ongilio et al. 2022).

Some foreign researchers find maternal identity to be a major criterion of the mother's adaptation to her maternal role. Maternal identity refers to the woman's inner feeling of maternal competence in the role of a mother and in the knowledge about her child (Shrestha et al. 2019; Walker, Montgomery 1994; Warsiti 2020). However, this evaluative category is subjective and may be out of keeping with the constructiveness of maternal behavior.

### **Maternal position and its structure**

Over the past fifteen years, maternal position has drawn interest among such Russian psychologists as T. V. Barmina, A. P. Knyazeva, V. A. Yakupova, E. I. Zakharova and others (Barmina 2006; Knyazeva 2012; Yakupova 2017; Zakharova 2015). Overall, maternal position is construed as a system of the mother's attitudes to a specific child, which finds its way into the quality of maternal functions and reflects the woman's inner subjective feelings about their fulfilment (Knyazeva 2012). Russian researchers also use the term 'internal maternal position,' emphasizing that it is a personal formation embodied by the woman's readiness to accept herself as a mother (Chistyakova 2021). These terms are imbued with the same meaning by different authors, which leads us to think that 'maternal position' and 'internal maternal position' are synonyms. They are not common among foreign researchers, though, who

give preference to the concepts of a maternal role ('adaptation to a maternal role') and maternal identity instead.

Maternal position should be explored as part of a system of the woman's personal relations and as manifestation of the mother's parental position. When the child is born, the woman's self-awareness transforms as her parental position takes shape. As a result, she is able to form a conscious and accepting attitude to parental functions (Zakharova 2015). Researchers who studied families with children with developmental disorders single out cognitive, emotional and behavioral components in the maternal position, in common with the parental position (Knyazeva 2012; Morozova, Aleksandrova 2023; Posysoev 2017; Spivakovskaya 1986; Tkachenko 2021). In the case of physical conditions, the maternal position is also reflective of the mother's subjective attitude to the child's disorder (defect).

The maternal position is dynamic and in line with specific mother-child interactions in different age periods of both. Infancy and early childhood are predominantly critical to the development of the maternal position as they are fully representative of what the mother experiences in the mother-child dyad (Barmina 2006; Kiseleva 2016; Posysoev 2017; Zakharova 2015).

This position materializes as specific maternal behavior and is characterized by a certain degree of resilience. The maternal position of women with more than one child may differ between the children on some aspects. The reason is that it reflects the set of relations with each child in particular, considering his or her individual characteristics and the motherhood experience of the woman herself.

Having generalized the research data, we assume that the maternal position should consist of four elements: 1) value-semantic and motivational; 2) cognitive; 3) emotional; 4) behavioral. The first and foremost element refers to the woman's value attitude to the role of a mother in relation to the child who is subject to her maternal position. It is also meaningfully indicative of her parental motivation, preparedness for motherhood and maturity of the maternal sphere in general. The cognitive element covers the whole body of her conscious knowledge about the child, his or her mental and physical health, developmental and other individual characteristics. It also comprises the set of ideas and attitudes associated

with the personalized care and parenting given to her child. The emotional element is illustrative of the woman's evaluative attitude towards the performance of maternal functions and takes the form of various emotional reactions and states. The behavioral element completes the maternal position and builds on the other three components. It applies to the mother's behavior expressed in interactions with her child.

### The maternal position of women with young twins

The maternal position is reflective of what the mother experiences as part of dyadic relations with her child and has to be assessed by a comprehensive analysis of the mother-child dyad. Therefore, studies of the maternal position of women with twins under three seem particularly complicated. As the quality of care in gynaecology makes headway and auxiliary reproductive technologies gain spread, modern obstetrics sees more and more multiple gestations end in a childbirth. Over the past twenty years, the frequency of twin births rose 2.2 times, totalling 1.2 % of all live births in 2020 (Kuznetsov et al. 2022; The Demographic yearbook of Russia 2021). In various foreign countries twin births account for 1 to 3 % deliveries (Osterman et al. 2023). There is an obvious paucity of studies into mother-twin dyadic relations in Russian and foreign psychology. Meanwhile, researchers stress the urgent need to examine interactions between mothers and young twins as well as mothers and each twin separately.

Twin births may be accompanied by a number of pregnancy complications and high risk of premature birth (Gladkova et al. 2021; Kosyakova, Bepalova 2018; Pauphilet et al. 2023). All of this puts immense stress on the mother, making postpartum depression more likely (Benute et al. 2013; De Roose et al. 2018). It has been generally established that twin mothers are more anxious and less sensitive to their children's cues than mothers of a single child during the first year of the child's life. Research by C. Riva Crugnola and her colleagues revealed that low sensitivity only has to do with the fact of parenting young twins and not personal characteristics of women themselves (Riva Crugnola et al. 2020). Mothers tend to interact differently with each twin. Besides, they are more distanced and detached compared to mothers

of single infants (Ionio et al. 2022; Prino et al. 2016).

Mothers are more inclined to focus generalized attention on the twins, initiating common interaction with both without paying the required or adequate attention to the nature and needs of each child in particular (Beer et al. 2013). Given the high significance of mothers' sensitivity and responsiveness for the mental health of young children, we find it extremely important to carry out empirical studies into the maternal position of women towards each individual twin.

## Conclusions

The overview of Russian and foreign research has provided us with two perspectives on the maternal position of women with young children, with the mother as a source of the child's mental health and development on the one hand, and the sphere of maternal needs and motivations on the other. The maternal position is intimately linked to sensitivity and responsiveness and can be compared with the parameters of adaptation to the maternal role.

It has been shown that the maternal position as a system of the mother's attitudes towards her child is a complex construct which finds its way into a specific maternal behavior and the quality of maternal functions. It incorporates four components: value-semantic and motivational, cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

The maternal position of women with young twins is shaped by the mother's involvement in two mother-child dyads at a time. To ensure better mental and physical development of her children, the mother's behavior towards each twin should be tailored to his or her nature and needs.

There is thus an unquestionable need for new empirical studies into the maternal position of women with single or twin infants. This new knowledge will contribute to constructive mother-child relations. Potential improvements in the early assistance system require data on the maternal position of women bringing up young

children with various developmental disorders. Such studies can broaden the horizons of psychological assistance provided to families with such children.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential.

## Конфликт интересов

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии потенциального или явного конфликта интересов.

## Ethics Approval

The study was approved by the Local Ethics Committee of St. Petersburg State Medical University of the Ministry of Health of Russia (minutes no. 18/02 of 27 October 2022).

## Соответствие принципам этики

Исследование одобрено Локальным этическим комитетом ФГБОУ ВО СПбГПМУ Минздрава России (протокол № 18/02 от 27 октября 2022 г.).

## Author Contributions

A. M. Abdulaeva — search for publications, initial analysis of the data contained in the publications; preparation of the article manuscript in Russian and English.

M. A. Korgozha — systematization and generalization of the results of analysis, formulation of the research problem.

## Вклад авторов

А. М. Абдулаева — поиск и первичный анализ данных исследований, подготовка рукописи статьи на русском и английском языках.

М. А. Коргожа — систематизация и обобщение результатов анализа исследований, формулировка исследовательской проблемы.

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