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## Family Matters: Supporting Adoptive Families with an Attachment-Based Intervention

Item Type	event;event
Authors	Juffer, Femmie
Download date	2025-04-19 22:01:30
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/42821">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/42821</a>

# FAMILY MATTERS

## Supporting Adoptive Families with an Attachment-Based Intervention

Femmie Juffer

2009, February 20

University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA

Plenary address at the conference

‘New worlds of adoption: Growing up in complex families’



Universiteit Leiden

The Netherlands

# Acknowledgements

Leiden University, Centre for Child & Family Studies:

- Marinus H. van IJzendoorn
- Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg
- Linda van den Dries
- Maartje Luijk
- Karin Dofferhoff

ADOC:

- [www.adoptionresearch.nl](http://www.adoptionresearch.nl)

Wereldkinderen

- [www.wereldkinderen.nl](http://www.wereldkinderen.nl)
- Chair Adoption Studies

# Overview Family Matters

- Adoptive parents:
  - A shocking case study
- Adopted children's background:
  - Effects of institutional care: new evidence
- Complex families:
  - The case of adoptive parents
- Attachment-based interventions:
  - What works?
- An intervention for adoptive parents
- Translating research findings into practice

# Adoptive parents: A shocking case study

## Newspapers

**Iowa man kills his  
4 Korean adopted  
children, then  
himself**

MOSCOW — The grim case of a Washington-area toddler who died of heatstroke after his adoptive father left him in a parked vehicle for nine hours is national news in Russia, fodder for angry political commentary and kitchen-table discussion.

# The Scientific Debate

## Child Abuse Fatalities Among Internationally Adopted Children

**Laurie C. Miller**

**Wilma Chan**

**Robert A. Reece**

**Linda Grey Tirella**

*International Adoption Clinic, New England Medical Center*

**Adam Pertman**

*Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute*

**Keywords:** *child abuse; fatalities; international adoption*

**M**ore than 250,000 boys and girls have been adopted from other countries by American parents since 1989 (*Immigrant Visas Issued*, 2006). Most of these children have experienced prenatal risk factors (low birth weight, prematurity, lack of medical care and/or exposure to drugs, alcohol, tobacco), as well as risk

even years to complete their international adoptions. Procedural delays and setbacks are common in international adoptions, due in part to the complex requirements of U.S. and foreign government bureaucracies.

Throughout the process, significantly, there are multiple opportunities for agencies to appraise and educate the prospective parents. Parents who adopt in

**Miller, L.C. et al. (2007) in *Child Maltreatment*, vol. 12, p. 378-379**

# Child Abuse Fatalities

- “Thus, it has been shocking and horrific to realize that, since 1996, there have been 18 fatalities (in 17 families) of internationally adopted children because of suspected or proven cases of abuse and/or neglect by their adoptive parents.”

(Miller et al., Child Maltreatment, 2007, vol. 12, p. 378)

# One of the Responses in the Debate

## Supporting Parents So That They Can Support Their Internationally Adopted Children: The Larger Challenge Lurking Behind the Fatality Statistics

**Megan Gunnar**

*Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota*

**Seth D. Pollak**

*Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Madison*

**W**e are pleased to be asked to comment on the letter by Miller and colleagues. Adoptive parents in the United States are embracing the option of international adoption on an unprecedented scale. Numbers have

of potential risks and the desire to obtain adoptive placements for needy children. Pediatricians are typically a source of sound, independent advice; however, relatively few in the United States are trained in international adoption concerns. And then we come to the

**Gunnar & Pollak (2007) in *Child Maltreatment*, vol. 12, p. 381-382**



# What Do We Really Know?

- But what do we really know about adoptive parents
  - Elevated risk of (fatal) abuse and neglect?
  - Or broader: what about their parenting abilities / coping with stress?
- Evidence from 2 sources:
  - A reply to the scientific debate in Child Maltreatment based on Dutch data
  - First results from a worldwide meta-analysis on adoptive parents

# A reply from the Netherlands

- Data collected through all 17 Dutch child protective agencies (CPS) on all cases of certified child maltreatment in 2005
- Family composition of the maltreated children was compared to a large national representative sample in the Netherlands
- No elevated risk of child maltreatment in adoptive families

**Van IJzendoorn et al., Leiden University, in prep.**

# Risk of Abuse and Neglect?

- (Fatal) abuse by adoptive parents is a tragedy for the family as a whole: child, parents and the broader adoptive family network
- However, we should not jump to conclusions based on shocking popular media reports
- Studies should examine the relative risks of adoptive versus nonadoptive parents
  - Netherlands: no evidence of elevated risk
- Also, which risk factors may be involved in / triggered by the child's background?

# Presentation

- Adoptive parents: A shocking case study
- **Adopted children's background**

# Adopted Children's Background

- Institutional care:
  - Neglect & abuse
  - Malnutrition
- Lack of nurturing care
- Lack of opportunities to develop secure attachments

# Adopted Children's Background

- Research studies point to 'structural neglect' resulting in:
- Developmental delays
- Insecure and disorganized attachment

# Effects of Pre-Adoption Adversity

- Pre-adoption adversity
  - Separation(s) and loss
  - Malnutrition
  - Neglect and Abuse
- Effects on children's
  - Cognition
  - Physical growth
  - Attachment

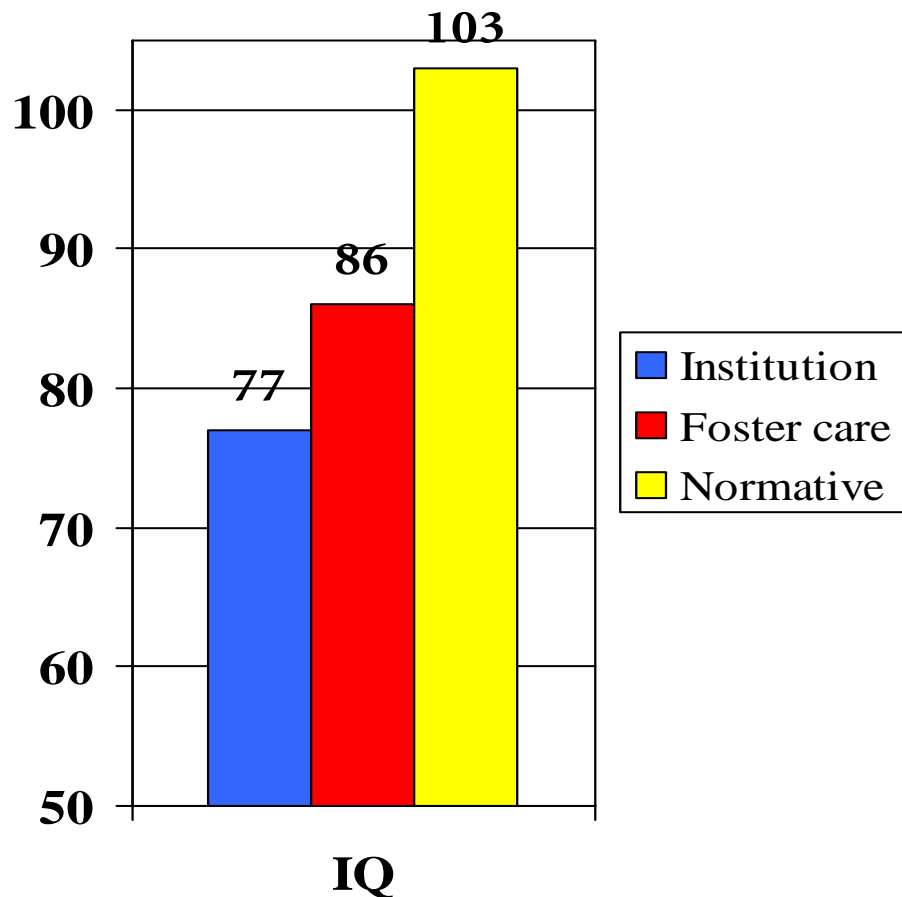
# Cognition: IQ of Children in Institutional Care

- Meta-analysis
- 75 studies on IQ of children in institutions
- combined effect:  
 $d = 1.10$
- mean IQ child in institution is 84  
(normative IQ: 100)

**Van IJzendoorn, Luijk, & Juffer, 2008 in Merrill Palmer Quarterly, vol. 54, p. 341-366**



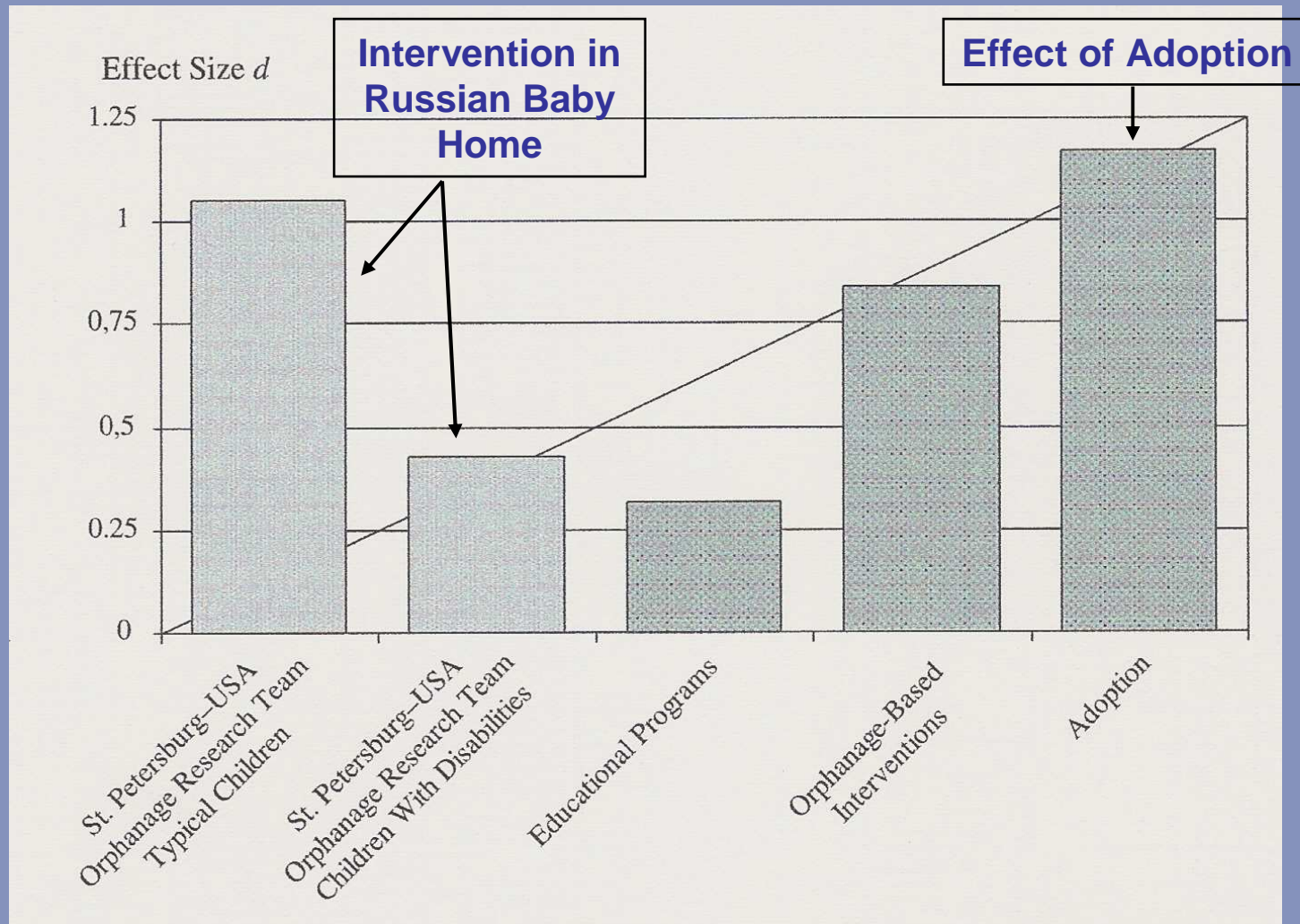
# Institutional Care and Subsequent Foster Care: Recent Study



- 136 children in Romanian institutions
- randomly assigned to remain in institutional care ( $n = 68$ ) or placed in foster family ( $n = 68$ )
- control group: 72 normative children
- significant benefit of placement in family

Nelson et al., 2007 in *Science*

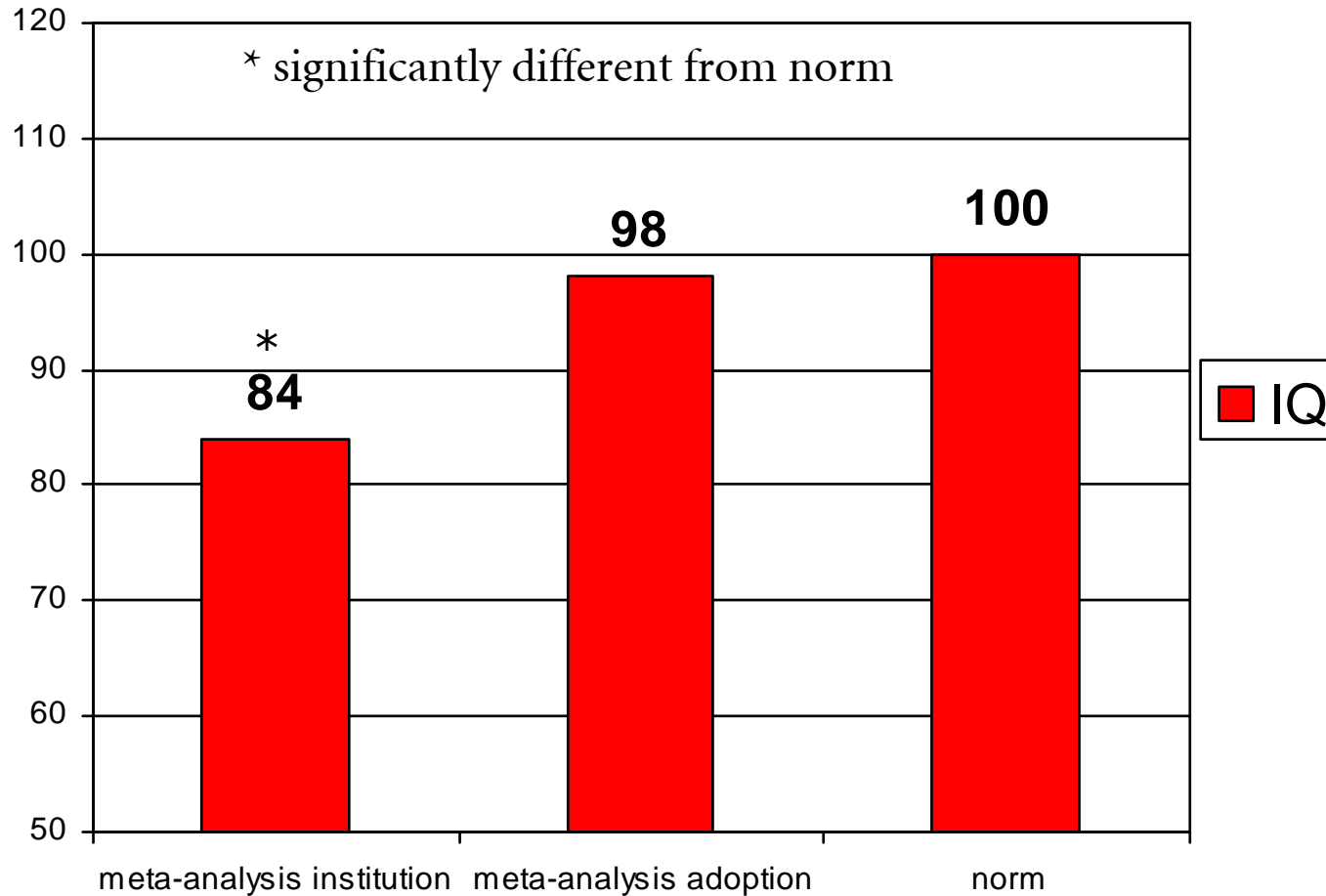
# Effects on Cognition: Adoption as Intervention



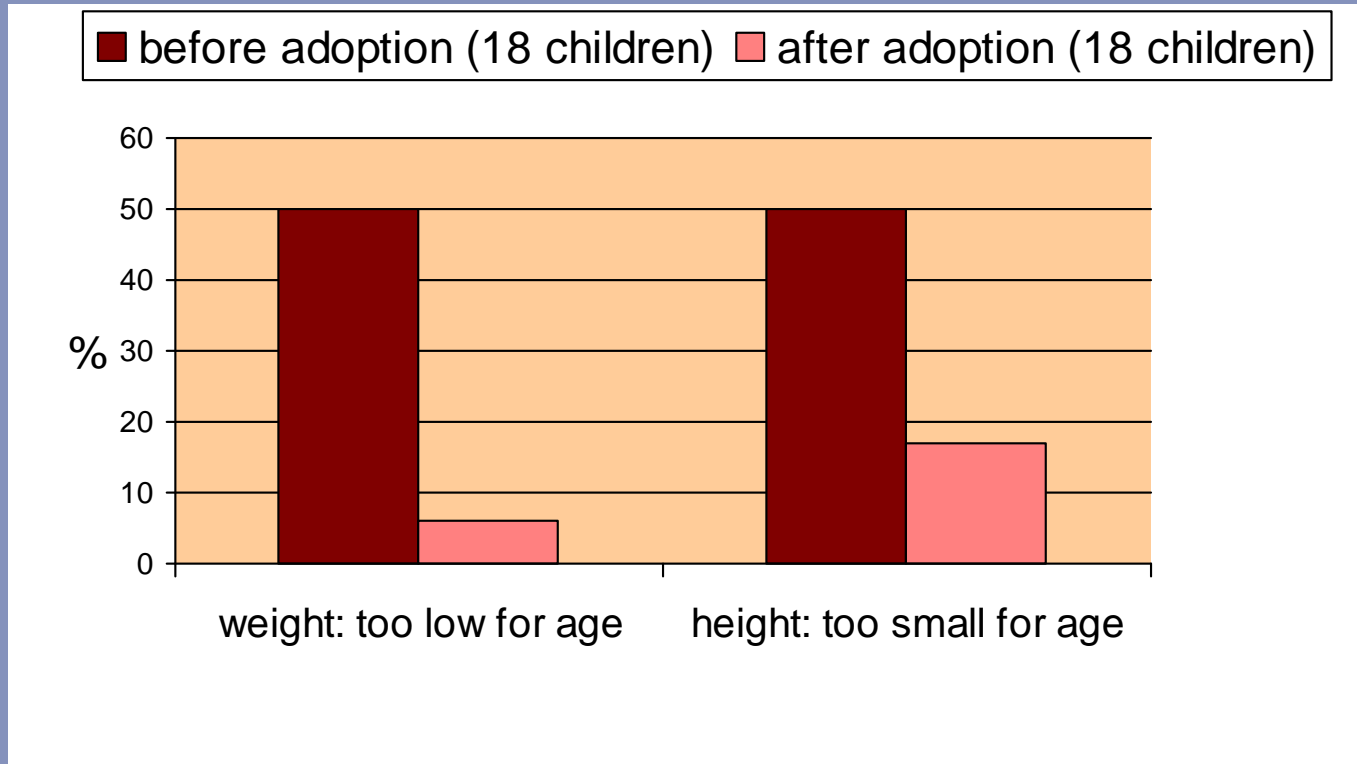
**Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2008, Monographs of the Society for Research of Child Development, vol. 73, p. 279-293**

# IQ

Juffer & Van IJzendoorn (2009) in Wrobel & Neil,  
*International Advances in Adoption Research for Practice*  
(p. 169-192). London: John Wiley & Sons



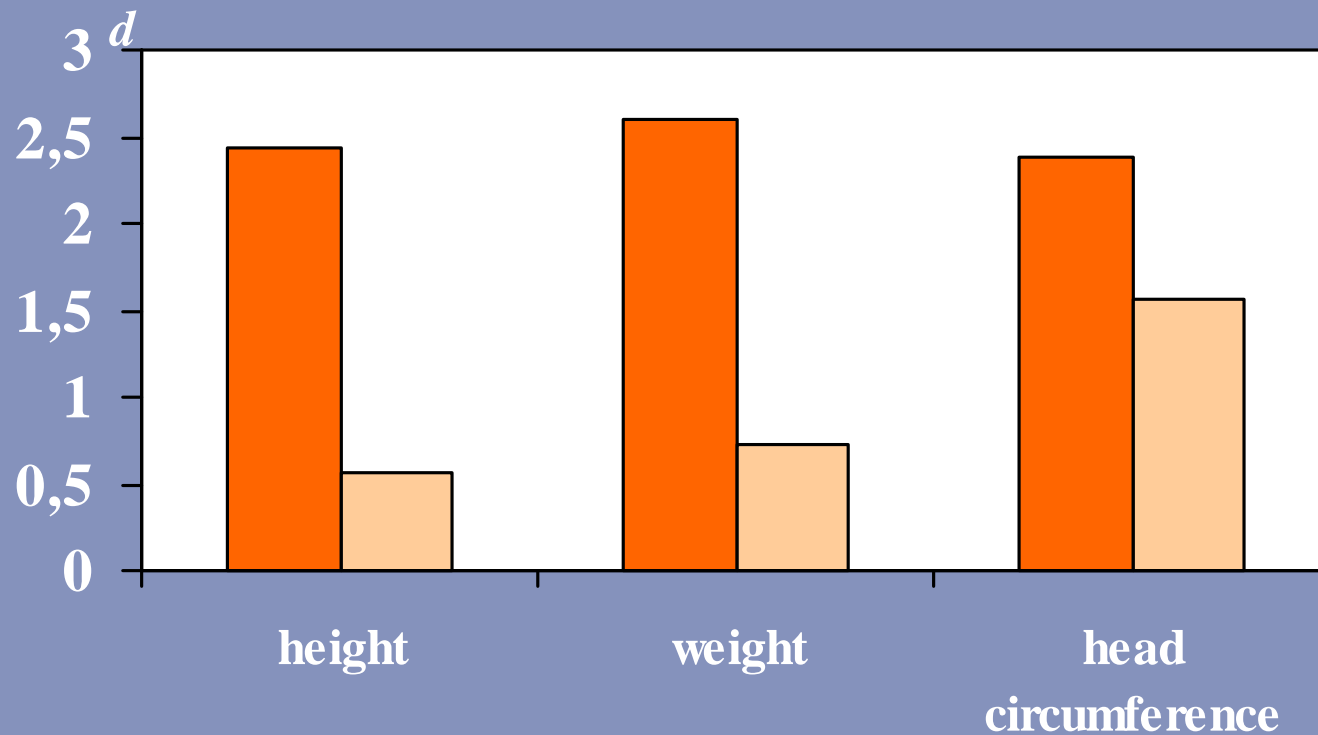
# Physical Growth: Case Study



Van Geest & Juffer, 2007, Adoptietijdschrift (Dutch)

# Meta-Analysis: Reduction of Growth Delay After International Adoption

■ delay at arrival ■ delay after 8 years



Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Juffer, 2007 in Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, vol. 28, p. 334-343

# The Case Against Institutional Care

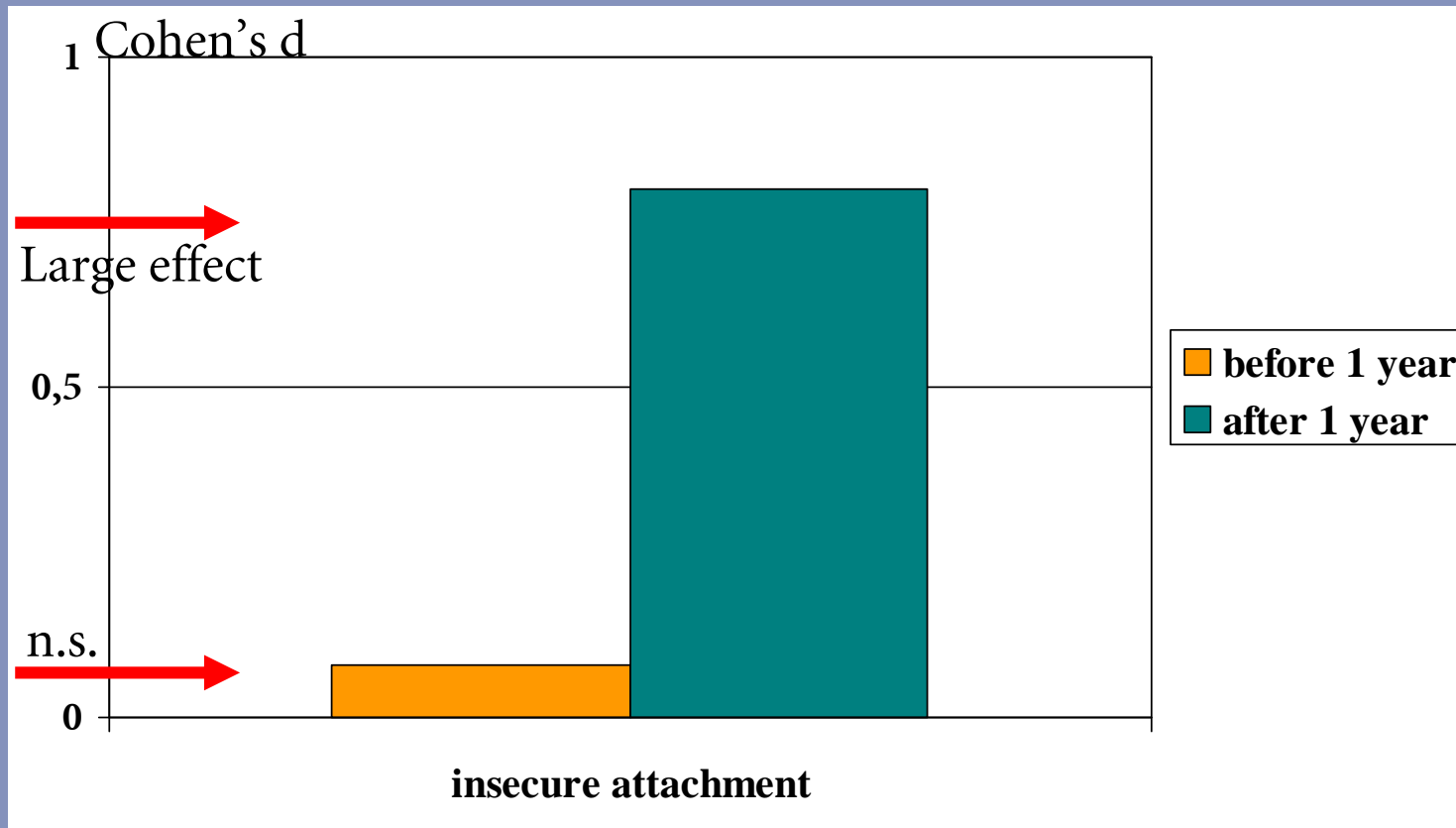
- It means loss!
  - **Loss of centimeters and grams**
    - 3 to 4 months stay in institution is 1 month growth delay
  - **Loss of IQ points**
    - Mean IQ child in institutional care is 84 (normative: 100)
  - **Loss of emotional security**
    - 3 out of 4 children in institutional care are insecurely attached

# Meta-analysis of Attachment

- Adoptees more often insecurely attached?
  - Adopted before / after first birthday
  - 17 studies
  - $N = 772$  adoptees
- Adoptees more often insecure disorganized?
  - 11 studies
  - $N = 468$  adoptees

**Van den Dries, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009 in Children & Youth Services Review, vol. 31, p. 410-421**

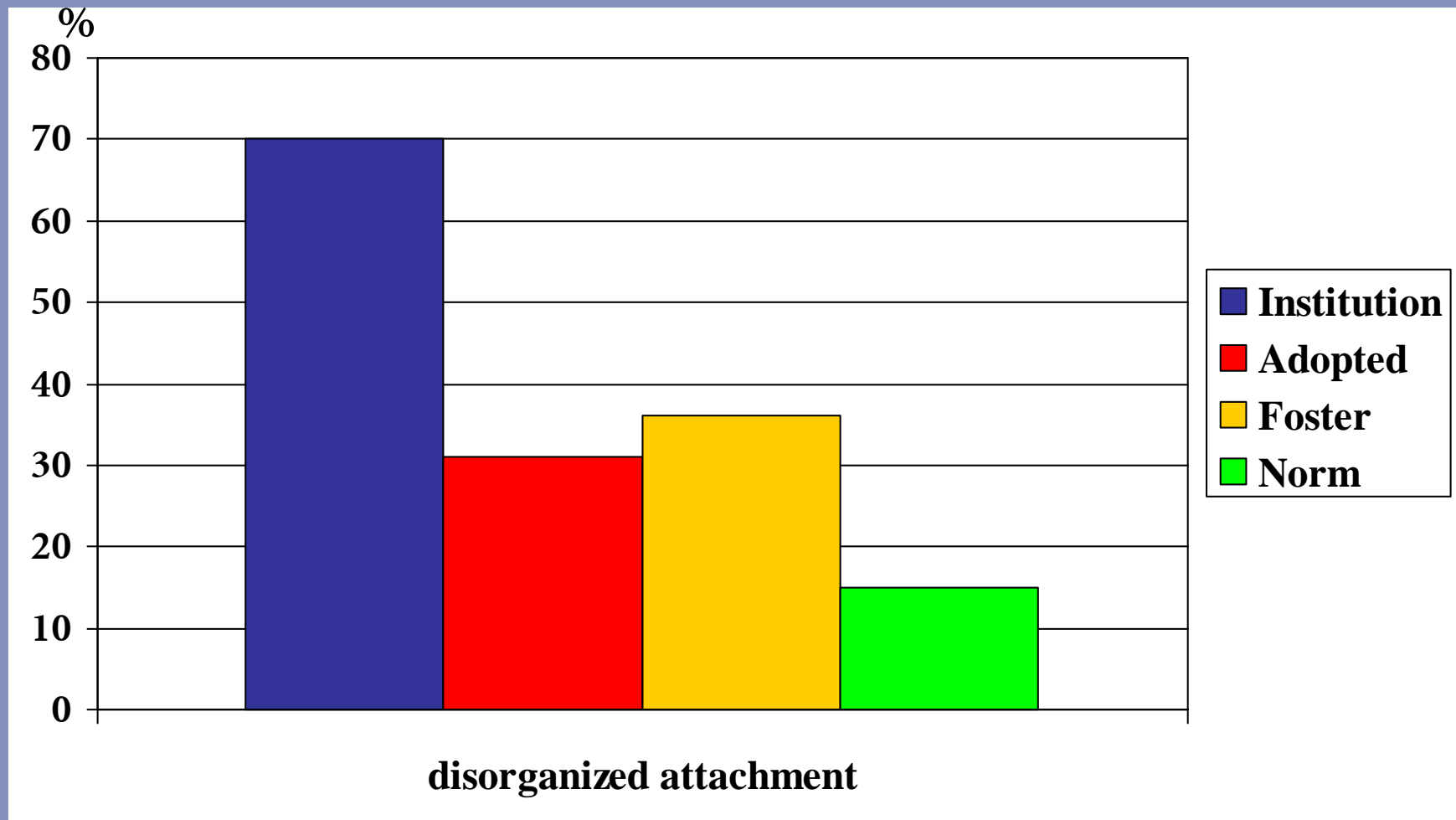
# Risk of Insecure Attachment



Van den Dries, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009 in  
Children & Youth Services Review, vol. 31, p. 410-421



# Risk of Disorganized Attachment



Van den Dries, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009 in  
Children & Youth Services Review, vol. 31, p. 410-421

# Presentation

- Adoptive parents: A shocking case study
- Adopted children's background
- **Complex families:**
  - **The case of adoptive parents**

# The Case of Adoptive Parents

- Complex family
  - Somewhat older, higher SES
  - Background: often infertility
  - No genetic bond with child and permanent (invisible) connection with birth parents
  - Role model handicap (Kirk, Brodzinsky)
  - Plus: confronted with delays and difficulties of post-institutionalized children

# Adoptive Parents

- Hypothesis: (somewhat) more difficulties in parenting an adopted child
- Meta-analysis of studies on adoptive parents' parenting behavior and adjustment
- Preliminary outcomes: no differences

Juffer et al., Leiden University, in prep.

# Implications

- Adoptive parents do not seem to be at risk for less optimal personal and parental adaptation
- However, even ‘normative’ parents can be challenged by the delays and difficulties presented by post-institutionalized children
- Therefore, supporting adoptive families is a promising avenue
- And a fruitful focus is: attachment and sensitive discipline

# Presentation

- Adoptive parents: A shocking case study
- Adopted children's background
- Complex families: The case of adoptive parents
- **Attachment-based interventions:**
  - **What works?**

# Attachment

- Attachment in infancy predicts later adjustment in adopted children, particularly their social development in middle childhood and adolescence

**Stams, Juffer, & Van IJzendoorn, 2002** in *Developmental Psychology, vol. 38, p. 806-821*

**Jaffari-Bimmel, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg & Mooijaart, 2006** in *Developmental Psychology, vol. 42, p. 1143-1153*

# Attachment and Sensitivity

- Children feel (in)secure depending on how their parents comfort/support them
  - How do parents react when children are frightened, tired, ill, etc.?  
Supportive? Comforting?
- Crucial role for parental sensitivity\*
- Resulting in different patterns of (in)secure child-parent attachment relationships

**\*Confirmed in meta-analysis by De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, Child Development, 1997**



# Parental Sensitivity

- Parental sensitivity (Ainsworth):
  - Perceiving child signals accurately
  - Responding in adequate / prompt way
- These two elements are important for intervention!
  1. Awareness, perceiving, observing
  2. Reacting

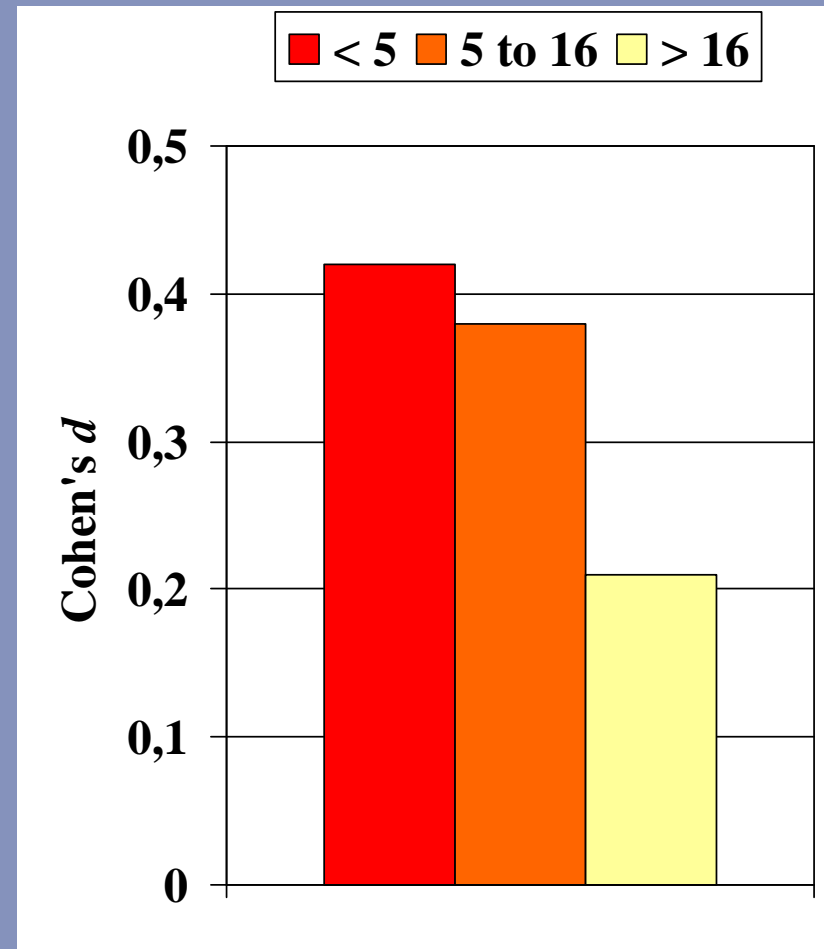
# How to Promote Secure Attachment?

Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003, in *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 129, p. 195-215

- Meta-analysis of intervention studies aimed at promoting secure attachment in children
- 88 interventions
- > 7,500 families

# Less is More

- Short-term interventions (up to 16 sessions) significantly more effective than longer interventions to promote parental sensitivity

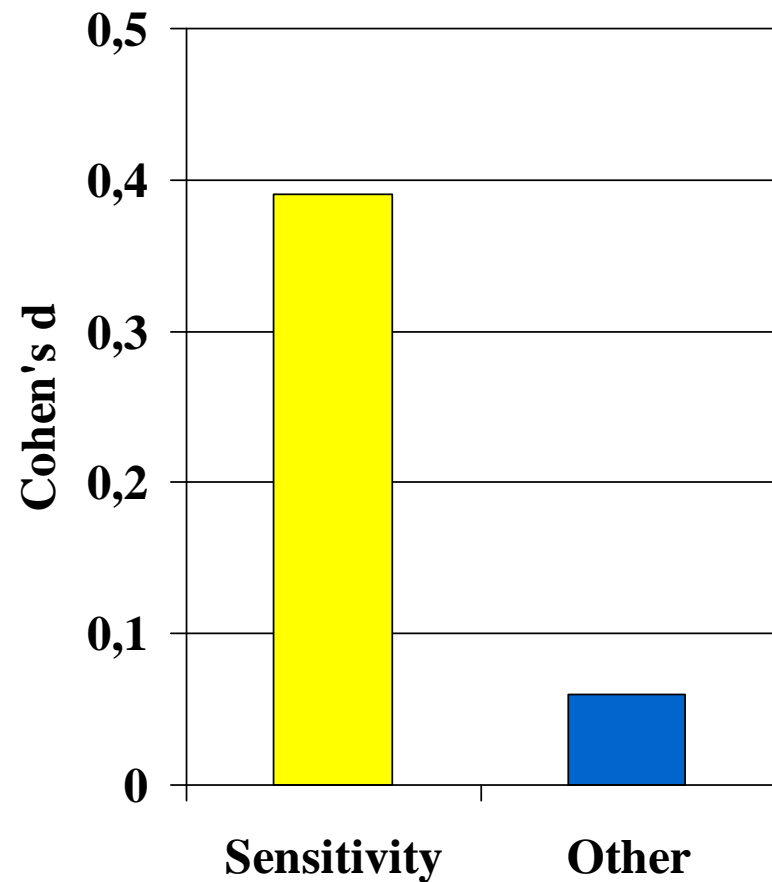


Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003, in *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 129, p. 195-215

# Focus of Intervention Studies Promoting Secure Attachment

- Sensitivity-focused interventions promote secure attachment in children

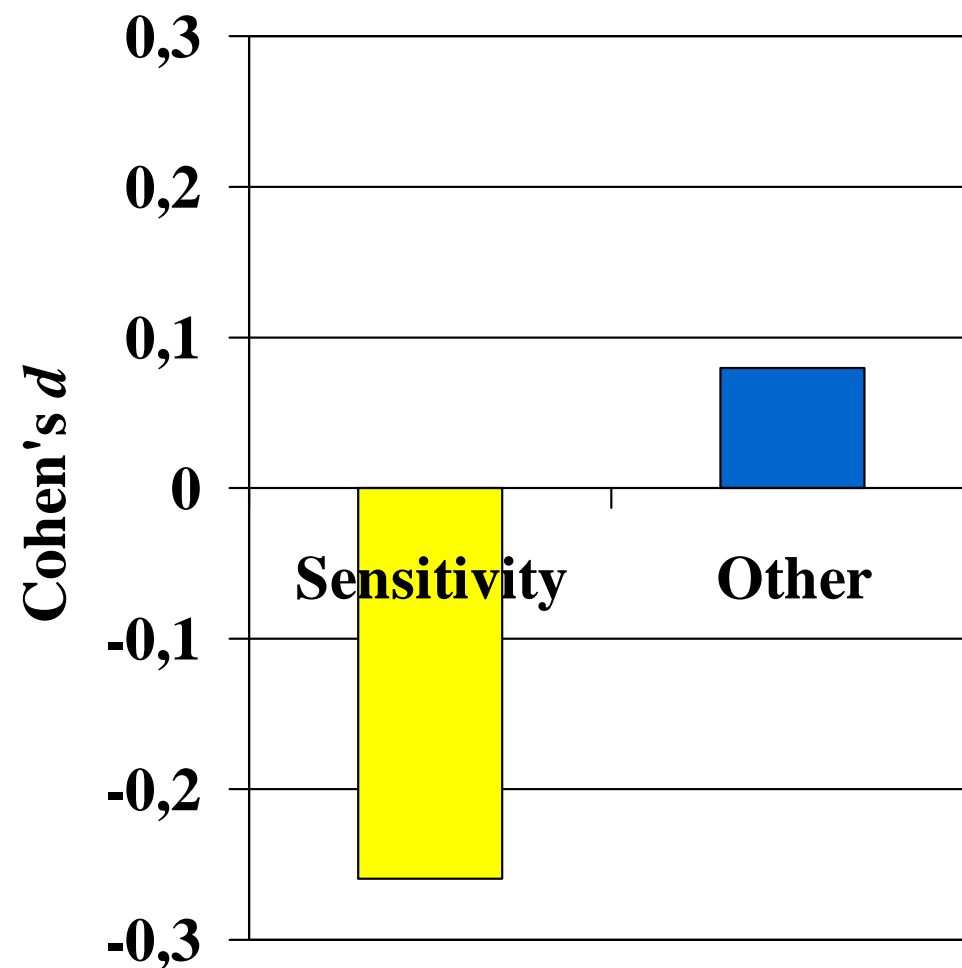
Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003, in *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 129, p. 195-215



# Meta-Analysis Disorganized Attachment

- Only sensitivity-focused interventions succeed in reducing disorganized attachment

Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2005, in *Infant Mental Health Journal*, vol. 26, p. 191-216



# Conclusions Meta-Analyses

- Less is more
- Sensitivity-focused interventions most effective in:
  - promoting attachment security in children
  - reducing attachment disorganization in children

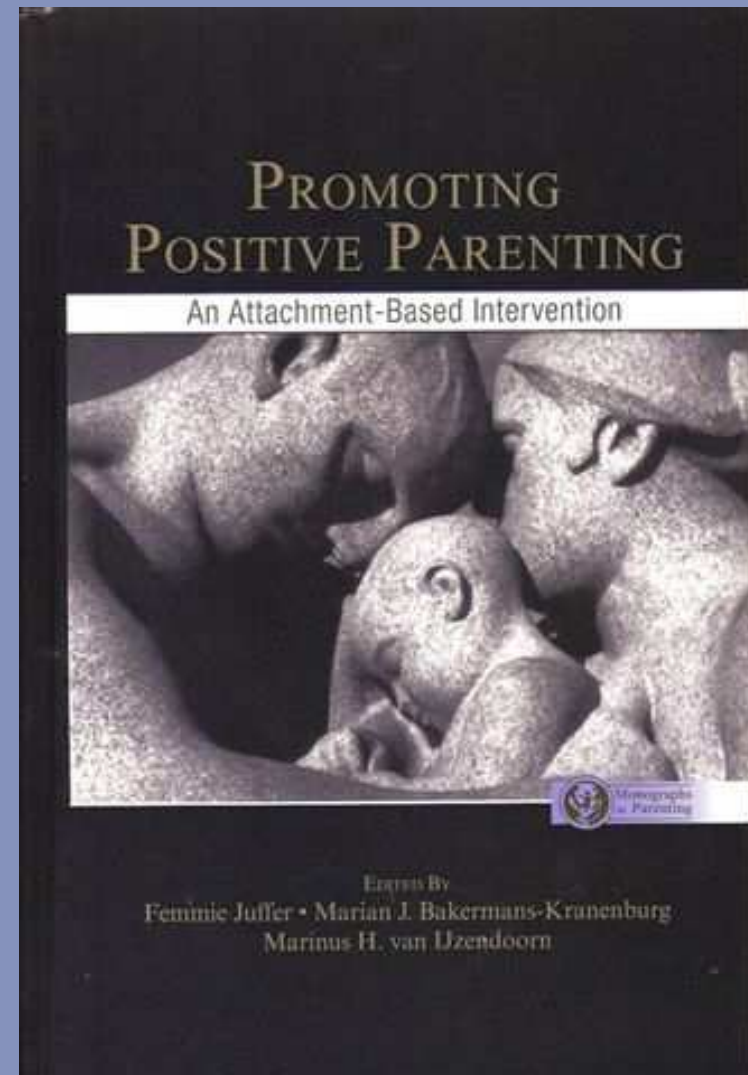
# Presentation

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- **An intervention for adoptive parents**

# Development of VIPP

- Development of VIPP: Video-feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting

**Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2008, Promoting Positive Parenting, New York: Taylor & Francis**





# VIPP

- More than 20 years work in the field of early childhood intervention
- Video with videotaped MODEL not successful\*
- Intervention with video-feedback in adoptive families (started in 1985)

\* Lambermon & Van IJzendoorn, 1989 in Early Childhood Research Quarterly

# Adoptive families

**Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2005, in Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, vol. 46, p. 263-274**

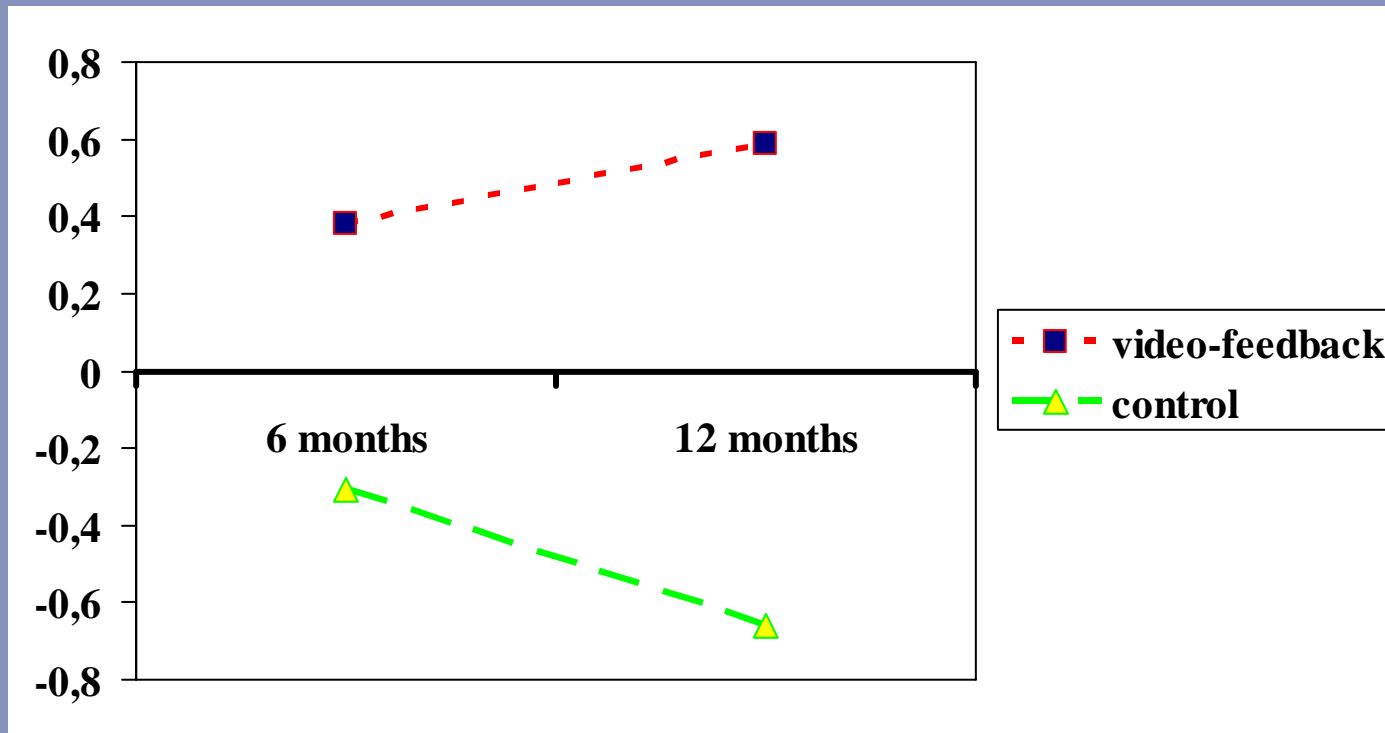
- Randomized control trial
- Adoptive families without (90) and with (40) birth children
- Children from Sri Lanka, South Korea and Colombia
- Adopted at very young age (< 6 months)

# Intervention

- Focus on parental sensitivity and adopted child's attachment security
- Intervention:  
3 sessions of video feedback and a personal book with parenting tips

Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2005, in *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, vol. 46, p. 263-274

# Parental Sensitivity

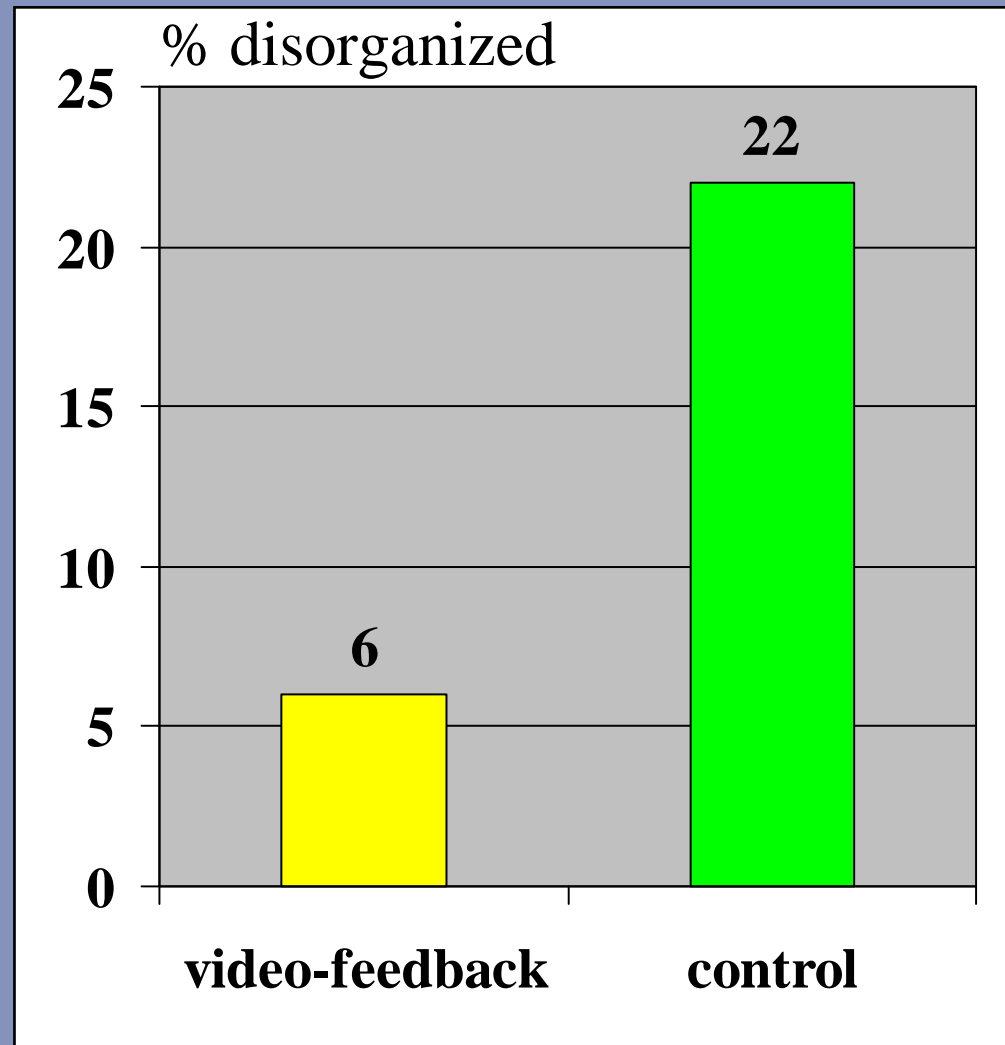


Significant effect in both sub-samples: adoptive families with(out) birth children

Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2005, in Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, vol. 46, p. 263-274

# Disorganized Attachment

- Both types of adoptive families:
- Video-feedback group:
- Significant lower number of insecure disorganized attached children



Juffer et al. (JCPP, 2005 and chapter 9 book Promoting Positive Parenting)

# Presentation

- Adoptive parents: A shocking case study
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- Complex families: The case of adoptive parents
- Attachment-based interventions: What works?
- An intervention for adoptive parents
- **Translating research findings into practice**

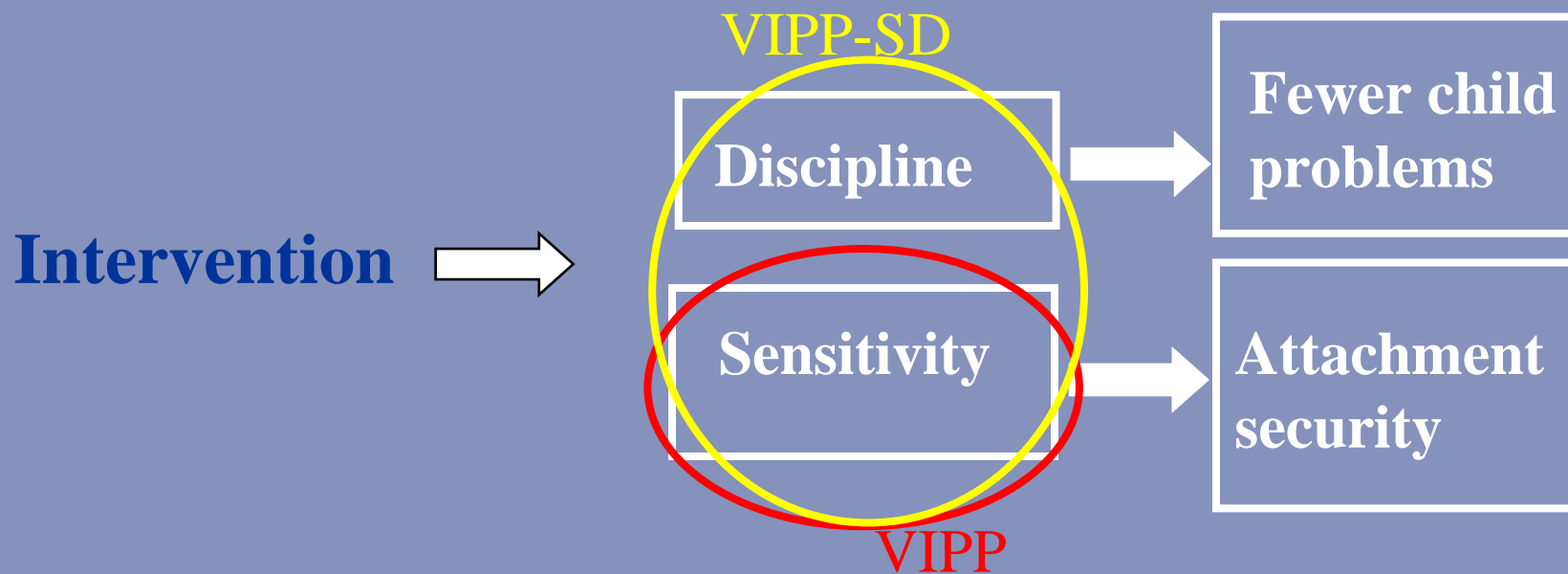
## Adoption aftercare service in the Netherlands

- first years after arrival
- offer for every new adopted child (including special-needs and older-placed children, sibling placements)
- up to four visits of video feedback
- parents pay about 100 Euro for this service

# Video-Feedback Intervention

- At Leiden University extended to other types of families
- Extended from infants to toddlers and preschoolers
- Elaborated to standardized protocol: VIPP
- Extended with extra module:
  - VIPP-SD focus on Sensitive Discipline





## Model for intervention

# Evidence Base of the VIPP Intervention

VIPP effective in samples of:

- Adopted children
- Insecure mothers
- Children with externalizing problems
- Eating disordered mothers
- Insensitive mothers

Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, Leiden  
University, in prep.

# Presentation

- Children's attachment security
- Adopted children's background
- What works?
- An attachment-based intervention for adoptive parents
- Translating research findings into practice
- **How does it work?**

# Features of VIPP

- Home-based
- Short-term (4-6)
- Children 0-5 years
- Use video fragments
- Parents are their own model
- 'Here and now' approach
- Focus on strenghts, positive moments
- Active involvement of the parent ('expert')
- Supporting relationship between home visitor and parent

# Video feedback: filming

- Parent and child are videotaped
  - During daily situations at home
  - Short episodes: 10-30 min.
  - For example during play, meals, etc.

# Video feedback

- Watching the videotape together
  - Selected fragments + comments
- Focus on positive interaction

# Training VIPP-SD

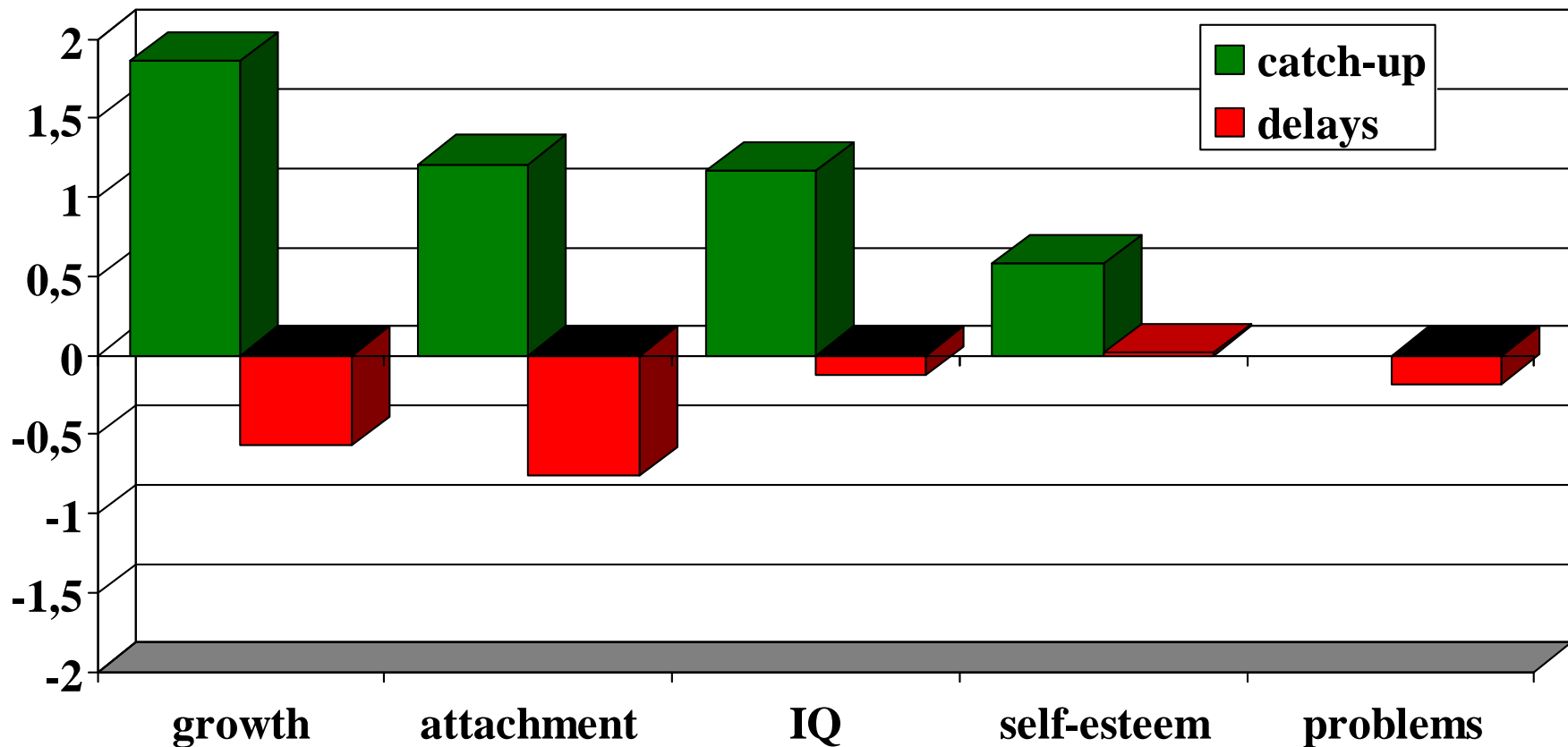
- Training institutes for international audience
- Manual
- Training DVD
- Feedback

# Encouraging Security

- Adopted children are at risk of insecure and disorganized attachment
- Short-term interventions like VIPP and VIPP-SD can support adoptive parents
- Video feedback helps parents to react sensitively to a child with subtle signals or ‘mis-cues’



# More catch-up than delays in adoptees



Adapted from Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006 in *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, vol. 47, p. 1228-1245

- Although they show resilience and catch up, adopted children's delays and attachment needs require extra, specific attention
- Adoptive parents seem to show normative parental capacities but they may need extra support to help their children

## Conclusion

# From Holland With Love

- A Dutch present
  - Not a Tulip
  - Not a Mill
  
- But Music by a Dutch Artist

# Lavinia Meijer

## Website (Dutch and English):

<http://www.laviniamejer.com/>

## Video clip:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2jQWGGky2y4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2jQWGGky2y4)

Harp Solo

A Dutch artist

Adopted as a child from Korea

Played in the 2009 New Year's concert in Korea  
where she met her birth father for the first time

## Further reading

- Juffer, F., & Van IJzendoorn, M.H. (2009). International adoption comes of age: Development of international adoptees from a longitudinal and meta-analytical perspective. In G.M. Wrobel & E. Neil (Eds.), *International Advances in Adoption Research for Practice* (pp. 169-192). London: John Wiley and Sons.
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# Websites:

[www.socialsciences.leidenuniv.nl/educationandchildstudies/childandfamilystudies/](http://www.socialsciences.leidenuniv.nl/educationandchildstudies/childandfamilystudies/)

[www.adoptionresearch.nl](http://www.adoptionresearch.nl)



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