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**Paternal infant directed speech to 3 months old premature infant: an exploratory study on the influence of severe prematurity and parental symptomatology**

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**Abstract**

*Introduction:* Literature on perinatal period showed a recent increased interest on paternal figure, exploring the characteristics of early father-infant interactions. However, little is known on paternal Infant-Directed Speech (IDS), especially in contexts of high vulnerability as preterm birth or perinatal symptomatology. This study is aimed to describe functional and morpho-syntactic features of paternal IDS at 3 months, in comparison to maternal one. We also considered the influence of birth status [premature infants-PT: Extremely Low Birth Weight-ELBW (<1000 gr), Very Low Birth Weight-VLBW (1000-1500 gr); full-term infants-FT] and post-partum symptomatology (depression; parenting distress).

*Methods:* Seventy-one fathers, mothers, and their 3 months infants (24 FT, 22 ELBW, 25 VLBW) were recruited for the study. 3 minutes of parent-infant free play were video recorded: lexical, syntactic, and functional features of interaction were analyzed by CHILDES software. Depressive symptoms and parenting stress were assessed using the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) and the Parenting Stress Index Short Form (PSI-SF).

*Results:* Paternal speech was characterized by minor verbosity ( $F(3,129)=7.50$ ;  $p=.006$ ) and lexical variability ( $F(3,129)=7.10$ ;  $p=.009$ ) compared to maternal IDS, while no differences emerged among birth status groups ( $p>.05$ ). When we considered the interaction between parental role and birth status, differences were found on descriptions and questions ( $F(6,260)=14$ ,  $p=.001$ ;  $F(6,260)=7.50$ ,  $p=.007$ , respectively): only in FT dyads, fathers had significant lower scores than mothers.

Analyses on perinatal symptomatology showed that higher paternal PSI scores was associated with more complex morpho-syntactic features (Types:  $r=0.25$ ;  $p=.03$ ; Tokens:  $r=0.26$ ;  $p=.02$ ; Mean Length of Utterance:  $r=0.24$ ;  $p=.04$ ), while higher maternal EPDS scores correlated with less affect-salient speech ( $r=-0.42$ ,  $p<.001$ ), more descriptions ( $r=0.25$ ,  $p=.03$ ) and questions ( $r=0.30$ ,  $p=.01$ ),

*Discussion:* The present study suggests that paternal IDS could differ from to maternal one and be sensitive to level of parenting distress. Despite preliminary, these results could contribute to better understand



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strengths and vulnerability of paternal communications, confirming the need of involving both parents in infant care from the early stages of development, especially in vulnerable conditions