General discussion
| From expecting to experiencing
The general aim of this thesis was to gain more insight into the causes of individual differences in parenting self-efficacy and the interplay between changes in parenting self-efficacy and adapting to the transition to parenthood. Furthermore, we were interested in the potential contribution of parenting self-efficacy to explain individual differences in infant-mother relationships. Although studies have frequently shown a positive association between high parenting self-efficacy and positive outcomes for both parents and children (for a review, see Jones & Prinz, 2005), some studies have suggested that high parenting self-efficacy has opposite effects for parenting when it reflects ‘naive confidence’ (Donovan & Leavitt, 1989; Donovan, Taylor, & Leavitt, 2007; Hess, Teti, & Hussey-Gardner, 2004). Confidence in own parenting skills can thus be disjoint from knowledge and experience. Another way of experience not being in concert with expectations is in situations when actual performance of parenting skills falls short of expectations, which may result in lowered efficacy beliefs. Therefore, not only level but also ‘strength’ (Bandura, 1977, 1997) of parenting self-efficacy was examined in the current studies. The potential contribution of success and failure experiences in caregiving, autonomic nervous system reactivity and perceptions to strength of parenting self-efficacy were examined using an experimental caregiving paradigm. Individual differences in the strength of parenting self-efficacy during the experimental paradigm were combined with individual differences in the association between parenting self-efficacy and temperamental characteristics of the infant over the transition to parenthood, in order to assess whether individual differences in the susceptibility to temperamental characteristics could be predicted already prior to birth. Further, the direction of effects between parenting self-efficacy and characteristics of the infant was investigated in a longitudinal design starting prior to birth of the infant. The period of adaptation to parenthood is also the period during which the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship takes place. Because both parenting self-efficacy and maternal state of mind regarding attachment may be under the influence of experiences with the parents during childhood, the interplay between parenting self-efficacy in the transition to parenthood and maternal attachment state of mind on the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship was assessed.

In this final chapter of the current thesis, findings of the four empirical studies are summarized and discussed. Next, strengths and limitations of the study are presented, followed by the implications of this thesis for theory, research and practice. In the final paragraphs, general conclusions to this thesis were formulated.

Parenting self-efficacy: individual differences in strength

Chapter 2 focused on the identification of factors associated with individual differences in the strength of parenting self-efficacy. By means of a challenging caregiving experiment, the effects of success and failure experiences, autonomic nervous system reactivity, and cry perception were examined as predictors of strength of parenting self-efficacy. First-time pregnant women in the second trimester of pregnancy completed the Cry Response Task, an experiment during
which they tried to soothe simulated crying infants. Soothability was manipulated in order to create an easy to soothe infant (80% soothing success) and a difficult to soothe infant (20% soothing success). Results indicated that parenting self-efficacy increased slightly after soothing the easy infant, whereas it decreased after the difficult infant. This suggests that women used their success and failure experiences during the task as a source of parenting self-efficacy, as was expected (Bandura, 1977). However, these changes in parenting self-efficacy were not significantly associated with changes in autonomic nervous system reactivity. Although all measures showed reactivity in autonomic nervous system functioning during the easy baby compared to baseline, it might be that this reactivity was dampened due to the pregnancy (De Weerth & Buitelaar, 2005), and therefore was imperceptible for the women and as a consequence unlikely to inform their parenting self-efficacy. Use of this experimental paradigm in a group of non-pregnant women may yield different effects. Another study outcome was that more negative perceptions of the cries were associated with a larger decrease in parenting self-efficacy after unsuccessful soothing, which suggests the existence of individual differences in how salient women experienced the cries to be. Moreover, women whose perceptions of the cries became more negative during the task showed larger decreases in parenting self-efficacy than women with less fluctuating perceptions of the cries. Findings of this study suggest that, apart from their objective success and failure experiences, women’s perceptions of the cries, which might be indicative of how salient they perceived the cries to be, were associated with individual differences in the strength of parenting self-efficacy. Strength of self-efficacy was associated with the intensity and persistence of effort a person puts into fulfillment of a certain task in earlier studies (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Reese, & Adams, 1982). If strength of parenting self-efficacy is associated with perseverance in parenting as well, the association with less negative cry perceptions may be the mechanism behind this association between strength of parenting self-efficacy and perseverance, because it is less difficult to persist in caregiving for people who are less disturbed by negative behaviors of the infant. Strength of parenting self-efficacy might thus provide information on individual differences in the perseverance people display in parenting, in addition to level of parenting self-efficacy.

Parenting self-efficacy and the adaptation to parenthood

Findings in chapter 2 that individual differences in strength of parenting self-efficacy were associated with women’s perceptions of infant cries indicate that strength of parenting self-efficacy may be a relevant personal attribute to study in parents. Strength of parenting self-efficacy may, for example, affect the adaptation to parenthood. The study described in chapter 3 therefore examined whether women who were more susceptible to change in response to simulated temperamental differences between infants during the experiment also showed stronger linkages between infant negative reactivity and parenting self-efficacy after birth. Results from the cross-lagged panel analysis showed that women with larger decreases in
parenting self-efficacy after confrontation with the difficult to soothe infant also showed stronger linkages between perceived negative reactivity and parenting self-efficacy at 3 months after birth. The effect had vanished at 12 months after birth, which can be explained by parents being confronted with a variety of challenges in parenting over the first year after birth, besides temperamental characteristics of the infant. This finding indicates that strength of parenting self-efficacy, even when measured during pregnancy, can partly explain individual differences in the interplay between infant temperamental characteristics and parenting self-efficacy in the period of adaptation to parenthood and may thus be an important parental attribute to study, and eventually, to choose as a target for intervention.

Chapter 2 and 3 showed an association between parenting self-efficacy and infant temperamental characteristics, as did many previous studies (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Gross, Conrad, Fogg, & Wothke, 1994; Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2002; Lipscomb et al., 2011; Porter & Hsu, 2003; Teti & Gelfand, 1991). The direction of this association has not been subject to investigation, even though insights in this underlying mechanism of the adaptation to parenthood would be beneficial for providing information during pregnancy and for the development of intervention methods. Chapter 4 reported on a study that examined the directionality of the longitudinal association between infant negative temperamental characteristics and parenting self-efficacy in the transition to parenthood. Results of questionnaire data on parenting self-efficacy and infant temperamental characteristics filled out by first-time pregnant women revealed that women gained in confidence regarding their parenting abilities over the transition to parenthood, as was found in earlier studies (Hudson, Elek, & Fleck, 2001; Porter & Hsu, 2003). Cross-lagged panel analysis demonstrated that parenting self-efficacy predicted perceived infant negative reactivity and soothability, whereas no support was found for the pathways from infant temperamental characteristics to parenting self-efficacy. Because maternal mood was controlled for in the analyses, effects of parenting self-efficacy on perceived infant temperament were independent from possible mood effects. Findings of this study weaken the assumption in previous studies that infant temperamental characteristics influence parenting self-efficacy (e.g., Gross et al., 1994), but rather indicate that maternal perceptions of infant temperament are partly based on the extent to which parents believe in their ability to comfort and nurture their child.

**Parenting self-efficacy and the infant-mother relationship**

Another aim of the current dissertation was to investigate the role of parenting self-efficacy in individual differences in the development of infant-mother relationships. The first year after birth is the time period during which mothers adapt to parenthood, but it is also the period during which the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship takes place (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982). Studies have shown that the quality of the infant-mother attachment relationship can be predicted from maternal state of mind in a majority of the cases (for a meta-analysis, see Van IJzendoorn, 1995). However, maternal state of mind
with respect to own attachment experiences might also be a source of information on which mothers-to-be base their parenting self-efficacy, because these experiences make up a large part of the experiences they have with parenting. Parenting self-efficacy is constantly adjusted according to new parenting experiences after birth, verbal persuasion, other sources of modeling and emotional arousal; sources that are in itself possibly also under the influence of maternal state of mind. Studying the interplay between maternal state of mind and parenting self-efficacy in predicting the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship might thus yield new insights regarding the intergenerational transmission of attachment and the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship.

In chapter 5, the effects of psychosocial factors, including parenting self-efficacy, in the transition to parenthood on the quality of infant-mother attachment relationships in addition to maternal state of mind were examined. First, the role of maternal state of mind in the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship was assessed. The results showed that infant-mother attachment security was predicted by maternal autonomous state of mind. Disorganized infant-mother attachment occurred more often for mothers with a combination of an unresolved maternal state of mind and a non-autonomous secondary classification. Autonomous state of mind therefore functioned as a buffer against the intergenerational transmission of unresolved loss or trauma, as was first established by Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg and Van IJzendoorn (1999).

Unexpectedly, intergenerational patterns for insecure attachment were inverted, with avoidant attachment predicted by preoccupied maternal state of mind and resistant attachment predicted by dismissing state of mind. Only two other studies have found the same inverted pattern (Hautamaki, Hautamaki, Neuvonen, & Maliniemi-Piispanen, 2010; Shah, Fonagy, & Strathearn, 2010). The phenomenon might therefore be new or due to random fluctuation around a weakening intergenerational transmission effect. Van IJzendoorn (1995) already found in his meta-analysis that intergenerational transmission was weaker in studies from later publication years. Results from attachment research are currently widely available to parents, which might affect the way parents approach their children. This information could have differential effects on parents with different states of mind, because effects of intervention types have also been found to vary across groups (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Juffer, & Van IJzendoorn, 1998). These speculative explanations await further investigation.

With respect to the effects of psychosocial factors on the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship in addition to maternal state of mind, we found effects for parenting stress at 3 months after birth and the occurrence of serious life events in the year after birth. Depressive symptoms and parenting self-efficacy were not associated with the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship. The finding that lower parenting stress at 3 months after birth was associated with a higher occurrence of resistant infant-mother attachment was puzzling. An explanation for the finding that having experienced a serious life event during the year after birth was associated with a higher chance of developing an avoidant infant-mother
attachment relationship might be that the life event caused mothers to be emotionally distracted and therefore slower in responding to the infant, as was found earlier with other sources of distraction, such as daily hassles (Phelps, Belsky, & Crnic, 1998). Our finding that depressive symptoms were not predictive of the infant-mother attachment relationship was not entirely unexpected, because another recent study in a large normative sample did not find effects of depressive symptoms on infant-mother attachment either (Tharner et al., 2012). It was, however, surprising that parenting self-efficacy was not associated with infant-mother attachment either, at least in our low-risk sample. The essence of this result is that women who believed that they were highly capable of nurturing and soothing their children, did not elicit more secure attachment behavior from their infants in the Strange Situation than women without these beliefs. This finding casts doubts about the relevance of parenting self-efficacy for understanding the development of parent-child relationships. Possibly, parenting self-efficacy may have indirect relevance, or relevance over longer spans of time, for example when parents experience a cascade of diminishing parenting self-efficacy and increasing negative perceptions of their children's temperament and personality. Furthermore, earlier research showed that the associations between parenting self-efficacy and maternal behavioral competence were moderated by the knowledge of infant development: mothers with the highest level of parenting self-efficacy and the lowest level of knowledge of infant development (“naively confident mothers”) were least behaviorally competent, whereas more knowledge of infant development worked as a buffer for women with low parenting self-efficacy (Hess et al., 2004). High education levels have also been associated with high levels of knowledge of child development in previous research (Reich, 2005). If levels of knowledge of infant development were also high in our highly educated sample, most women with high efficacy expectations in the current study were not naively confident, but were confident with good reason. The high education level in this study sample might thus have obscured existing associations between parenting self-efficacy and infant-mother attachment.

**Strengths and limitations**

The current study made use of an experimental design to assess strength of parenting self-efficacy. Until now, most studies regarding parenting self-efficacy have focused on the level of parenting self-efficacy and have used self-report measures of general parenting self-efficacy, not relating it to challenges in parenthood. The use of an experimental task to measure strength of parenting self-efficacy has proven fruitful in the current study. Using an experimental paradigm, especially when conducted before birth of the first child, makes it possible to examine potential underlying mechanisms of parenting, which are too complex to study in the natural caregiving setting, because of possibly moderating family factors, such as variation between characteristics of children, partner support, and environmental demands. Furthermore, by manipulating demands placed on parents, individual differences between responses could be assessed, in ways that are impossible to realize in natural settings.
Another contribution of the current thesis is the further empirical exploration of the construct of parenting self-efficacy in an attachment theoretical framework. Even though the current study was not the first to use parenting self-efficacy as a predictor of the infant-mother attachment relationship (Donovan & Leavitt, 1989), the association between parenting self-efficacy and maternal attachment state of mind has not been studied before. Although we did not find a significant association between maternal state of mind and parenting self-efficacy in the transition to parenthood, results from the current study could serve as a starting point to further research on associations between maternal state of mind, infant mother attachment relationship, and psychosocial factors in the transition to parenthood, because associations with other psychosocial factors, such as parenting stress, did provide additional predictive information for the infant-mother attachment relationship.

In addition to the strengths of the current set of studies, several limitations should also be noted. First, the study sample was very homogeneous in education level, age and immigrant status. The sample had a high socio-economic status, which is associated with few external stressors, such as financial and housing problems. This might have made the adaptation to parenthood easier in this group than it is in more high-risk samples. Despite this homogeneity in background variables, there was considerable heterogeneity in attachment state of mind and mother-infant attachment quality. Also, all participants in the current study were first-time mothers, meaning that results cannot be generalized to mothers of multiple children and fathers.

Another limitation can be found in the set-up of the challenging caregiving experiment. The order in which the easy and difficult infant were presented was the same for all participants, which posed a limitation on the interpretation of our results, because it did not provide us with information on whether decreases in parenting self-efficacy following the unsuccessful soothing of the difficult infant were due to the infant’s temperamental characteristics or to fatigue. Effects of fatigue were unlikely, because parenting self-efficacy increased following the easy to soothe infant. Furthermore, participants were asked to rate perceptions of the cries during the experimental task, but this construct is not the same as perceived infant temperament, which would have made these ratings more similar to what was examined after birth. If ratings of perceived infant temperament during the task would have been collected, we could have examined the directionality of the association between infant temperament and parenting self-efficacy during the task as well, which would have provided information on short term effects.

In addition, inclusion of an instrument to measure knowledge of infant development would have been useful, especially in this highly educated sample. Having information on participants’ knowledge of infant development would have provided us with the opportunity to investigate whether high knowledge buffered against the effects of lower parenting self-efficacy or whether this knowledge played a role in the inverted pattern of intergenerational transmission of insecure attachment.
Implications for theory, research and practice

Theoretical implications

The current thesis has yielded new findings that contribute to the theoretical framework regarding parenting self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) already stated that self-efficacy is a multidimensional construct, with self-efficacy not only differing in level, but also in generality and strength. Previous studies have focused research on the level of self-efficacy; the current study also investigated strength of self-efficacy. Our findings suggest that individual differences in the strength of parenting self-efficacy have psychological meaning distinct from mere level of parenting self-efficacy. The current study thus adds further support for the theoretical assumption of the multidimensionality of the self-efficacy construct, and should provide an impetus for further work using a more dynamic model of self-concepts like self-efficacy.

Furthermore, the results described in chapter 4 on the direction of the association between parenting self-efficacy and perceived infant temperament showed that parenting self-efficacy drove the changes in perceived infant temperament, which is contrary to the current theoretical assumption that infant temperament is used as a source of parenting self-efficacy. However, the interplay between parenting self-efficacy and negative temperamental characteristics is quite complicated, as is suggested by the result from the experimental data described in chapter 2 and 3 that temperamental differences preceded changes in parenting self-efficacy. It might still be that infant temperamental characteristics are used as a source of parenting self-efficacy, but that these effects are only visible on the short term. In the longitudinal study, there is a nine-month time lag between measurement points, which is a significant amount of time to predict parenting self-efficacy from infant temperamental characteristics, especially because infant negative reactivity at 3 months after birth was not associated with infant temperament at the end of the first year (Rothbart, 1981, 1986), while infant temperament characteristics at both time points were concurrently associated with parenting self-efficacy. Effects of infant temperamental characteristics as a source of parenting self-efficacy might have been apparent if we had measured both constructs at 6 and 9 months after birth as well. To obtain more clarity on this issue and to be able to draw more theoretical conclusions, additional research is needed.

This thesis also yielded new findings regarding the theoretical framework of attachment theory. Ever since the finding by Main and colleagues (1985) that maternal attachment state of mind was predictive of infant-mother attachment, studies have replicated this result with the same patterns of intergenerational transmission (Van IJzendoorn, 1995). Results from the current study provide further confirmation of the association between maternal autonomous state of mind and secure infant-mother attachment, as well as the buffering role of an autonomous state of mind in the intergenerational transmission of unresolved loss or trauma (Schuengel et al., 1999). The current study findings, however, suggest alternative patterns of inverted intergenerational transmission of insecure attachment. The current study thus fails to support the theoretical assumption that there is only one pattern of intergenerational transmission of attachment. Given the large
sample size of the current study and the fact that this result was found in two other studies as well (Hautamaki et al., 2010; Shah et al., 2010), this result should not be discarded because it is deviant from most other studies, but it should motivate further study into the emergence of this alternative pattern of intergenerational transmission of attachment.

Another contribution to the framework of attachment theory stems from the finding that psychosocial factors in the adaptation to parenthood play a role in the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship in addition to maternal state of mind. This study extends the existing literature on factors that influence the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship by showing that factors in the process of adaptation to parenthood might be worth looking into as well.

**Directions for future research**

From the studies in this thesis, we can conclude that strength of parenting self-efficacy is a factor to take into account in the adaptation to parenthood. However, further research needs to be carried out on the effects of strength of parenting self-efficacy on the development of mothers and children. Earlier studies have already shown that naively confident mothers displayed the least competent behaviors with their infants (Hess et al., 2004) and were also most prone to depressive mood and depressive attribution styles (Donovan & Leavitt, 1989). Similar patterns might apply to mothers with weak efficacy expectations, because they are easily discouraged about their own parenting abilities. Studying the effects of strength of parenting self-efficacy in relation to parenting behaviors would be interesting in comparing the effects of strength of parenting self-efficacy with the effects that were found previously for naive confidence. Directly studying whether parents with naive confidence are the same individuals as the parents who display less strong efficacy expectations would be interesting as well, because knowledge on characteristics of vulnerable parents would be useful for intervention. Examining the sources for strength of parenting self-efficacy studied in chapter 2 again after birth might also lead to additional information, because the impact of the different sources may have changed after birth. For example, personal mastery experiences are more extensive after birth and physiological arousal is not dampened anymore due to pregnancy, making it more likely that it is used as a source of self-efficacy at this point in time. If further study after pregnancy provides no support for the use of physiological arousal as a source of parenting self-efficacy, this result, combined with the null finding on physiological arousal in the current study, would weaken the idea that emotional arousal is used as a source of parenting self-efficacy. Follow-up studies should also focus on more long-term effects of strength of parenting self-efficacy for maternal well-being and child development, because all studies to this point have focused on short term effects on mothers and infants. These effects might extend to or even increase during later stages of parenthood, because each stage in child development poses new challenges for parents.

From the study in chapter 5 on the predictive value of psychosocial factors in the transition to parenthood on the development of the infant-mother attachment relationship, it can be concluded
that psychosocial factors in addition to maternal attachment representations do play a part in
the emergence of infant-mother attachment. However, more research is needed to establish
what patterns of psychosocial factors, such as parenting self-efficacy and parenting stress, are
typical and atypical in the adaptation to parenthood. Furthermore, the effects of deviations from
the typical adaptation patterns on maternal and child development need to be assessed more
thoroughly. Also, future studies should aim at examining psychosocial factors in the adaptation
to parenthood in more diverse samples in terms of education level and socio-economic status,
because these demographic characteristics might have functioned as a protective factor for the
negative consequences of low or unjustified high parenting self-efficacy.

Unexpectedly, the study described in chapter 5 also revealed a different pattern of intergenerational
transmission of attachment, with an inversion of the insecure patterns between mother and
infant. Research on the role of maternal sensitive behaviors in this pattern of intergenerational
transmission could provide us with information of the mechanisms behind this inversion. Specific
patterns of maternal insensitive behaviors have been associated with both non-autonomous
maternal states of mind and insecure infant-mother attachment classifications (De Wolff & Van
IJzendoorn, 1997; Pederson, Gleason, Moran, & Bento, 1998). The question is whether behaviors
displayed by mothers in dyads with an inverted pattern of intergenerational transmission are
like the behaviors that would be expected based on their state of mind or like the behaviors that
would lead to their infants’ attachment classification. If maternal sensitive behaviors are like
the behaviors associated with infant attachment classification, but not the behaviors associated
with their own state of mind, measuring maternal state of mind again after birth would clarify
whether maternal state of mind has undergone a change in the transition to parenthood or
whether these mothers display behaviors that are unexpected based on their state of mind.

**Implications for practice**

The findings of the current thesis have implications for practice as well. Findings described in
chapter 2 indicated that more negative perceptions of the simulated infant were associated with
decreases in parenting self-efficacy, and that this effect was even stronger for women whose
perceptions became more negative during the task. It might be that the longitudinal effects
found in chapter 3 work through the same mechanism, where women’s perceptions of their own
infants become more negative over time. This may be the beginning of a negative cascade in the
infant-mother relationship, possibly leading to overreactive parenting, which has been associated
with decreases in parenting self-efficacy (Lipscomb et al., 2011), or parents giving up on trying
to be the best parent possible. Findings of the study in chapter 3 suggest that susceptibility
to changing self-perceptions as a parent due to negative experiences can be identified already
during pregnancy. Being able to identify more susceptible parents at an early stage would be
beneficial for specifically targeted intervention and prevention programs in the adaptation to
parenthood.
The results found in chapter 4 showed that parenting self-efficacy drives the changes in parenting self-efficacy, and not vice versa. This has important implications for practice, because intervention programs should thus be aimed at changing the expectations mothers have about their parenting self-efficacy and not necessarily at methods for coping with infants with a difficult temperament. Increasing mothers’ parenting self-efficacy might affect their perceptions of infant temperament in a positive way and prevent cascades of negative perceptions of self and child.

Furthermore, in chapter 5 we found an inverted pattern of intergenerational transmission of attachment, with preoccupied maternal state of mind predicting avoidant infant-mother attachment and dismissing state of mind predicting resistant infant-mother attachment. The practical implications of this finding, if confirmed in other studies, could be that the repertoire of caregiving behavior among parents with non-autonomous attachment representations may be broader than has previously been assumed. However, before interventions can be developed based on this idea, more information on the mechanism behind the inverted pattern of transmission is needed.

Finally, the findings of the current study have implications for normally developing first-time pregnant women and mothers as well. As stated in the introduction of this thesis, parents differ in the confidence they have regarding their parenting capabilities upon entering parenthood. Results of the current study indicate that parenting self-efficacy on average increases over the course of the transition to parenthood. Initial doubts among new parents are therefore not anomalous nor foreboding a difficult experience as a parent. Findings of the current study also show that not only the level of this confidence is of importance, but also the strength of this confidence. For new parents, it might be important to know that it is normal to feel challenged by behaviors of their infants sometimes. These challenges may lead them to doubting their efficacy as a parent. An advice to parents would be to try to persevere to overcome challenging situations, because this ultimately leads to a boost in parenting self-efficacy. However, failure experiences in parenting cannot be avoided. Based on our findings that decreases in parenting self-efficacy lead to more negative perceptions of the infants, parents have two options when they are confronted with failure. The first option is to attribute their feelings of failure to characteristics of the infant. The second, and perhaps best, option is to try to identify which parenting skill was lacking and try to develop this skill to avoid future failure. Also, by developing this skill, people gain knowledge on parenting and infant development, which has been shown to buffer low self-efficacy (Hess et al., 2004). Finally, when a mother often experiences doubt regarding her parenting self-efficacy and feels less efficacious after each challenging caregiving situation and begins to develop more negative perceptions of her child, it might be advisable for her to seek help in developing her parenting skills and experience successes in parenting, which will lead to increases in parenting self-efficacy. This may prevent a negative cascade in the infant-mother relationship.
General conclusion

The general aim of the current thesis was to gain more insight into the causes of individual differences in parenting self-efficacy and the interplay between changes in parenting self-efficacy and the transition to parenthood. Until now, most studies regarding parenting self-efficacy have focused on the level of parenting self-efficacy, whereas results from the experimental studies presented in chapter 2 and chapter 3 showed that strength of parenting self-efficacy as a concept can aid us in further understanding of the mechanisms behind the process of the adaptation to parenthood and the potential cascade of negative consequences of perceptions of the self or the infant. Furthermore, the study described in chapter 3 suggests that it is even possible to identify mothers who are more susceptible for caregiving difficulties during pregnancy. In addition, the study presented in chapter 4 indicated that parenting self-efficacy drives the changes in perceived infant negative reactivity and soothability, which is contrary to assumptions made in earlier studies. This knowledge gave us more insight in the underlying processes of the adaptation to parenthood, because it showed that perceptions of infant characteristics are partly based on the extent to which parents believe in their ability to comfort and nurture their child. This finding, together with the findings from chapter 2 and 3, provides us with new points of view when developing prevention programs or intervention methods for promoting the adaptation to parenthood.

Another aim of the current thesis was to study the contribution of parenting self-efficacy to the development of the infant-mother relationship. Results presented in chapter 5 showed that some psychosocial variables, albeit not parenting self-efficacy, served as predictors for the infant-mother attachment relationship, additionally to maternal state of mind. Women whose parenting stress levels increased later than those in the majority group were at risk for developing a resistant attachment relationship, whereas women who experienced a serious life event during the first year after birth had a higher chance of developing an avoidant attachment relationship. These findings might be a starting point for further studies on factors involved in the adaptation to parenthood as predictors of the infant-mother attachment relationship.

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From expecting to experiencing