Effects of Parent Stress and Distress on Parenting Quality and Child Behavior

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Introduction

- For their 2015 count of people homeless at a given time in Minnesota, Wilder (2015) found 1,542 homeless families with children.
- Because children experiencing homelessness are at increased risk for academic and behavioral problems (Masten et al., 2015), it is important to study malleable risk and protective factors.
- Parent stress and quality of parenting have been implicated as influential and malleable for child outcomes in many studies of children at risk (Masten, 2014).
- The current study had two primary aims:
  1. Examine whether perceived stress and distress predict parenting quality among families experiencing homelessness.
  2. Explore how stress and distress of parents and parenting quality are related to child behavior problems.

Method

109 parent-child dyads staying at emergency shelters over the summer participated in the current study.

Parents:
- 89% mothers, 5% fathers, 4% grandmothers, 1% stepfathers, and 1% other legal guardian
- 19 - 49 years of age (M= 30.7 years)
- 64% Black, 12% White, 8% Multiracial, and 16% Other
- 9% of sample was Hispanic

Children:
- 45% female and 55% male
- 4 – 6 years of age (M= 5.35 years)

Measures:
- Five Minute Speech Sample
  - Parents were audio recorded for five minutes about their child and their relationship together, which was later coded for features of expressed emotion.
    - Negativity (ICC= .84)
    - Warmth (ICC= .80)
- Perceived Stress Scale (α=.86)
- Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (α=.72)
- The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (α=.81)
  - Parents answered questions about their children’s behavior.
  - Composite score combining emotional, behavior, and peer problems.

Results

Aim 1: Hierarchical linear regression predicting FMSS Warmth

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>SE(β)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
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<td>.078</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal IQ</td>
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<td>.010</td>
<td>2.83**</td>
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**p < .01

Aim 2: Hierarchical linear regression with Warmth predicting Child Behavior Problems

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**p < .01, ***p < .001

Discussion

- Parent perceived stress and distress were not related to parenting warmth or negativity.
- Parent perceived stress, as well as parents’ expressed warmth and negativity, were directly related to child behavior problems in the expected directions.
- Parent perceived stress was a significant predictor of reported child behavior problems even when parental warmth or negativity were included in the model, indicating a unique additional effect.

Implications

- Although parents experiencing homelessness may experience increased stress and distress, our study suggests that parents may not allow these emotions to affect their parenting.
- Many interventions with families experiencing homelessness target parenting (Perlman et al., 2012). However, it is also critical to decrease perceived stress in parents due to the direct impacts of stress on children.
- Parental warmth may counteract the effects of parent stress on children.

Limitations & Future Directions

Limitations:
- Parents reported their stress and distress as well as their child’s behavior problems.
- This study was cross-sectional, which cannot provide information about the temporal order of these effects.

Future Directions:
- Include independent reporters of child behavior other than the parent, such as teachers.
- Longitudinal studies are needed to understand how these factors are working over time.
- Examine other factors that are associated with parent stress, such as mobility, risk, and adversity, to determine whether these other factors may explain why parent stress is directly linked to child outcomes.