The Association between Child Abuse Potential during Pregnancy and Post-partum Parental Responsivity and Harsh Parenting


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INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is a serious and pervasive problem in the United States. 3.3 million cases of suspected child abuse were reported in 2010 alone (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Given the prevalence of abuse, it is critical that risk of child abuse be identified at its earliest stage, perhaps prenatally. Furthermore, child abuse potential is predictive of negative child outcomes. Rodriguez (2003) found that high levels of child abuse potential were associated with greater anxiety and depression symptoms in children, regardless of actual parental abuse. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of child abuse potential in the mother-child relationship, as it may influence certain variables related to poor child outcomes. These variables include:

- Low maternal responsivity, or the level of appropriate response to the needs of one’s child, predicts the development of insecure attachment styles and influences cognitive abilities, such as language development (Kochanska & Coy, 2003; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baunwell, 2001). Maternal emotional distance is associated with low maternal responsivity, while a mother’s ability to take the perspective of her child predicts higher levels of responsivity (Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997).
- Harsh parenting styles, including physical discipline, criticism, and hostility, influence a child’s emotional and social wellbeing. In particular, harsh and insensitive parenting predicts maladjusted social information processing, which can manifest in increased child aggression (Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992).

Researchers have also found that harsh parenting predicts child and adolescent depression (Bender, Allen, McElhaney, Antonishak, & Moore, 2007). One predictor of harsh parenting is maternal psychological health. For example, mothers with high levels of negative emotion and low predictability of emotional responses display more harsh parenting (Lorber & Slep, 2005).

- Knowledge of infant development is also associated with child abuse risk among adolescent mothers (Dukewich, Borkoski, & Whitman, 1986). Mothers who have high knowledge of infant development and those who were less likely to overestimate infant abilities display higher quality of mother-infant interaction (Huang, O’Brien Caughy, Genovese, & Miller, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to assess the relationship between prenatal child abuse potential and observed parental responsivity and harsh parenting practices. We hypothesize that high prenatal child abuse potential will predict lower levels of maternal responsivity and higher levels of harsh parenting (low levels of child acceptance) at 1 year post-partum. To explore potential intervention pathways, we hypothesize that knowledge of infant development will either mediate or moderate the relationship between child abuse potential and maternal responsivity and harsh parenting practices.

METHOD

A community sample of pregnant women (N = 120) was recruited from public locations as well as programs and agencies in southeast Michigan. During the third trimester of their pregnancy, and again at 1 year post-partum, participants completed questionnaires about their personal history, current and past relationships, psychosocial experiences, and general health at a home visit or in the research lab.

- Age: Mean = 20; Range = 18 – 42, SD = 5.7
- Monthly Income: Median = $1,500
- Family Status: Single Parents = 64%; First-Time Mothers = 30%

Descriptive Data for Study Variables

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The Mediating Effects of Knowledge of Infant Development

Knowledge of infant development was significantly correlated with harsh parenting (i.e., harsh parenting), but not with responsivity 1 year after birth (see Table 2). The possible mediating effect of knowledge of infant development on the relationship between prenatal child abuse potential and low acceptance/harsh parenting 1 year after birth (CIs [-197, -0.202]). See Figure 3.

DISCUSSION

Understanding the relationship between child abuse potential and later parenting practices can help to inform effective interventions to improve the parent-child relationship and prevent future child abuse. These early interventions have the capacity to influence the parent-child relationship before and after birth. It was not surprising that child abuse potential predicted the mothers’ responsivity and harsh parenting when the child was 1 year of age. However, given the significant association between parental responsivity and harsh parenting, it was unexpected that knowledge of infant development showed such a strong relationship with harsh parenting while the association between knowledge of infant development and responsivity did not even approach significance. This may reflect the measurement of responsivity, which, unlike the measurement of harsh parenting, included items related to the mothers’ interactions with the researchers in addition to items related to interactions between mother and child. It is also possible that knowledge of infant development can be useful in preventing overt negative parenting behaviors but does not increase positive behaviors, such as displays of warmth and frequency of positive verbalizations. The finding that knowledge of infant development helps explain the relationship between child abuse potential and harsh parenting suggests that prenatal interventions focused on increasing parents’ knowledge of infant development. Considering that child abuse potential was measured prenatally in this study, it is likely these interventions could be effective even when implemented before the child has been born.

Future studies should further examine the relationship between child abuse potential and harsh parenting to better inform early interventions that target child abuse prevention. The influence of knowledge of infant development should also be further examined. More research with high-risk populations is needed, as this group would stand to benefit greatly from preventative parenting interventions, but is understudied in the current literature.