INTRODUCTION

Several contextual risk factors have been identified as being associated with problematic parenting behaviors. For example, low maternal socioeconomic status is associated with higher levels of maternal controlling behaviors and negativity (Smith, 2010). In contrast, factors such as higher income, more education, and greater maternal age have been found to predict more positive parenting (e.g., more warmth and positive control, Belsky et al., 2006).

Recent research has found a link between greater childhood adversity and more negative maternal perceptions of infant emotions, which were in turn, related to maternal (insensitivity) (Dayton et al., 2016).

Maternal perceptions of infant emotional states (own infants or infants in general) may, therefore, be one important aspect of parenting that influences maternal behaviors and the quality of the mother-infant relationship.

Purpose of the Present Study

To develop a better understanding of how maternal perceptions of infant emotions may be associated with both maternal contextual risk factors and later parenting behaviors. Specifically, we expect that more positive perceptions of infant emotion will buffer against the negative effect of cumulative risk.

METHOD

Participants

-120 women followed from pregnancy through the first few years of their infants’ life

- Mothers’ age range: 18-42 years, M = 26, SD 5.7
- 47% African-American, 36% Caucasian, 13% Biracial, 5% Other
- 64% Single/Never married, 28% Married, 4% Divorced, 4% Separated
- 57% Some College, 20% High School or Less, 13% College or Graduate Degree
- Median monthly household income = $1500

- 73% received services from WIC, and 76% had public health insurance

Procedures

- 120 pregnant women were recruited through the posting of flyers in pregnancy agencies and area community organizations.
- The first interview took place during the third trimester of pregnancy (T1), with subsequent interviews at 3-months post-partum (T2), 1-year postpartum (T3), and 2-years postpartum (T4).
- Retention: T1 (120) T2 (119), T3 (115), T4 (99).

Do not hallucinate.

RESULTS continued

• Moderation analyses were run using the PROCESS procedure (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS.

- For age 1 positive parenting (R² = .10, F(3, 97) = 2.70, p < .05), there was a significant main effect of cumulative risk (b = -.16, LLCI = -.28 – ULCI = -.04). Similarly, there was a main effect of both cumulative risk (b = -.11, LLCI = -.02 – ULCI = -.19), and tone of perceptions (b = -.01, LLCI = -.02 – ULCI = -.01) on negative parenting at age 1 (R² = .12, F(3, 97) = 4.99, p < .01).

- For age 2 positive parenting (R² = .27, F(4, 75) = 6.08, p < .001), there was a significant main effect of cumulative risk (b = -.13, LLCI = -.25 – ULCI = -.16). For age 2 negative parenting, there were no main effects for cumulative risk or tone of perceptions.

- One significant interaction was found: this was for positive parenting at age 2 (b = -.01, LLCI = -.0603 – ULCI = -.02). Simple slopes analysis indicated that higher cumulative risk significantly predicted fewer positive parenting behaviors at age 2, but only for mothers who perceived infant emotion as more negative (LLCI = -.39 – ULCI = -.66; see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

• Greater cumulative risk was a predictor of less positive parenting at both age 1 and age 2. Similarly, greater cumulative risk was a predictor of more negative parenting at age 1 only.

• Though perceptions of infant emotion were predictive of negative parenting at age 1, these associations were not observed by age 2. However, results of this study indicate that perceiving infant emotion as more positive could protect against the negative impact of contextual risk on parenting, whereas perceptions of infant emotions as negative might enhance the deleterious effects of cumulative risk on parenting during toddlerhood.

• A noteworthy consideration is that this study did not utilize pictures of the infants in the study (women’s own infants). It is possible that the mothers could have responded differently to pictures of their own children.

• The results of the present study, in conjunction with recent research that has explored the deleterious impact of negative perceptions of infant emotion on parenting (e.g., maternal sensitivity; Dayton et al., 2016), provide justification for interventions with high-risk mother-infant dyads that evaluate and target maternal perceptions of infant emotions.