Introduction

Parental reflective functioning refers to the parent’s capacity to identify and understand their child’s mental states and has been shown to play an important role in the intergenerational transmission of attachment (Slade et al., 2005).

The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2009) examines three elements of parental reflective functioning:
- Pre-mentalizing (PM), which includes an inability to hold the child’s mental states in mind and/or malevolent attributions about the child’s behavior
- Certain about the child’s mental states (CMS), refers to an acknowledgement that a parent’s thoughts about the child’s mental states are accurate
- Interest and curiosity in child’s mental states (IC; Luyten et al., 2014), which involves an interest in thinking about their child’s mental states

While research has examined parental reflective functioning assessed via parent interview and various parent and child correlates, there is a dearth of research utilizing the PRFQ, a self report measure of reflective functioning, particularly in a high-risk sample of mothers.

The current research sought to understand the association between parental reflective functioning and observed parenting behaviors.

Additionally, we hoped to show distinct differences between self-reported levels of parenting stress and aspects of the parenting relationship between optimal and non-optimal reflective functioning subtypes, based on scores from the PRFQ.

Finally, we aimed to show the Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2009) to be a useful measure for assessing self-reported parental reflective functioning.

Methods

Participants
Age: Mean = 26; Range = 18-42; SD = 5.7
Monthly Income: Median = $1500
73% receive services from WIC and 76% have public health insurance
Family status: Single parents = 64%:
First-time mothers = 50%
Race: African American = 47%:
Caucasian = 36%, Biracial = 12%, Other = 5%
Education: Some college = 57%, High school or less = 20%:
College or graduate degree = 13%

Procedures
A community sample of pregnant women (N=120) was recruited for a prospective longitudinal study on parenting. Mothers were interviewed during the third trimester of pregnancy (T1), and at three months (T2), 1-, 2-, and 3-years postpartum (T3, T4, and T5, respectively). The current study utilized data from the third and fifth waves of data collection (n = 80). At T5, the women were videotaped participating in a 10-minute free play interaction with their child. Free play interactions were coded to assess maternal behavior and affect by reliable undergraduate and graduate students trained by an “expert coder.”

Measures
The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2009) was used at T4 to measure parental reflective functioning. The Pre-mentalizing (α = .56), Certain about mental states (α = .71), and Interest and Curiosity (α = .85) subscales were used.

Results
A polythetic hierarchical cluster analysis was used to examine how the three elements of parental reflective functioning interact with one another and to identify subtypes of reflective functioning in our sample (see Figure 1). Cluster quality = 0.5, suggesting a fair level of cluster cohesion and separation. The analysis produced two subtypes:
1. Optimal reflective functioning subtype (56.2%): expressed higher levels of certainty about mental states and interest and curiosity and less pre-mentalizing tendencies
2. Non-optimal reflective functioning subtype (43.8%): expressed lower levels of certainty and interest and curiosity and more pre-mentalizing tendencies

Discussion
The results from our study suggest that a parent’s ability to think about his/her child’s mental states consists of three distinct aspects of reflective functioning and that these factors coalesce into two significantly different subtypes of parenting.

Moderate effect sizes on observed sensitivity, interference, covert hostility, and frightened/frustrating behaviors suggest a relationship between these behaviors and levels of parental reflective functioning. Mothers with higher levels of reflective functioning displayed more sensitivity, less interference, and less covertly hostile or frightening behavior. With a larger sample size, we may have found statistically significant differences.

Additionally, our findings suggest a relationship between optimal and non-optimal parenting on aspects of parenting stress and the parent-child relationship based on levels of parental reflective functioning. Mothers with higher levels of reflective functioning reported feeling less stressed. They also felt more attached, involved, and confident, and reported less relational frustration with their children.

These findings further enhance the value of the PRFQ as a promising self-report measure of parental reflective functioning. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of assessing reflective functioning, particularly in a high-risk sample of mothers.