The Association between Maternal History of Childhood Maltreatment and Child Abuse Potential

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Prevalence of Childhood Maltreatment

- Childhood interpersonal trauma (abuse and neglect) is relatively common according to research
  - 12-20% of women report childhood sexual abuse (Wijma et al., 2000)
  - 10-25% of adults report childhood physical abuse (WHO, 1999)
    - Half are girls (Trocme et al., 2001)
  - 15-33% of adults report childhood emotional abuse (Baker & Maiorino, 2010)
  - Many more experience neglect, as neglect is the most common form of childhood maltreatment
  - Rates are much higher in clinical samples
Intergenerational Transmission of Abuse

- Child maltreatment is more prevalent among low income families, and mothers more likely to be perpetrators of abuse (Currenton, McWey, & Bolen, 2009)

- Research suggests that child maltreatment influences later parenting, particularly among single parents (Gelles, 1989; Serbin & Karp, 2003)

- Childhood abuse experiences and later abusive parenting referred to as the intergenerational transmission hypothesis (Milner et al., 1990)

- Rate of intergenerational transmission of abuse varied widely, ranging from 18% to 70% (Conger, Nellpl, & Scaramella, 2003; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987)

- Childhood physical abuse (Milner et al., 1990) and childhood sexual abuse (Hall, Sachs, & Ravens, 1998) have been associated with abusive parenting.
  - Less research has been done examining effects of childhood emotional abuse
Theoretical Explanations

- Research has documented several mechanisms to explain intergenerational transmission of abuse:
  - 1) Aggressive and abusive parenting is a learned behavior (Bandura, 1977; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992)
  - 2) Abuse causes difficulty with emotion regulation, which carries over into parenting role (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993)
  - 3) Dissociation from abuse impacting one’s ability to cope with demands of parenting (MacFie, Cicchetti, & Toth, 2001)
  - 4) Abuse impacts normal developmental tasks and impacts ability to parent later in life (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995)
  - 5) Insecure attachment patterns transmitted over generations (Alexander, 1992; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 1988)
Child Abuse Potential in Mothers

- **Child abuse potential** - likelihood of an individual (parent) to become a child abuse perpetrator in future
  - Does not mean they will become abusers
  - Useful for prevention in at-risk families
  - Less frequently examined than actual transmission of abuse

- Child abuse potential most commonly assessed in families or mothers with young children (Hall, Sachs, & Ravens, 1998; Medina, Margolin, & Wilcox, 2000)

- Little research has examined child abuse potential in high-risk pregnant women prior to the birth of her child
The Present Study

- Prevalence of childhood maltreatment is relatively common in women

- Prior theoretical and empirical research has documented the intergenerational transmission of abuse
  - Likelihood of abused children becoming abusive parents

- Important to examine child abuse potential in at-risk families (i.e., low income families, single parents), or those with history of childhood maltreatment

- Useful for prevention efforts if examined in PREGNANT women

- This study examined associations between various forms of childhood maltreatment and pregnant women’s child abuse potential
Participants

• 120 pregnant women (in last trimester) from community in southeastern Michigan
• Average age = 26 (Range = 18-42, $SD = 5.7$)
• Racial/Ethnic self-identification:
  • 47% African American
  • 36% Caucasian
  • 13% Biracial
  • 4% other ethnic groups
• Marital Status:
  • 64% single (never married)
  • 28% married
  • 4% separated
  • 4% divorced
• 30% first time mothers
Participants Continued

• Highest level of education obtained:
  • 20% high school diploma/GED or less
  • 44% some college or trade school
  • 36% college degree

• Median monthly income = $1,500 (range = $0 - $10,416)

• Involvement in Social Services:
  • 88% WIC
  • 62% food stamps
  • 90% public health insurance
  • 20% public supplemental income
Procedures

- Participants were recruited via fliers, mostly from:
  - community-based health clinics (23%)
  - Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program (18%)
  - regional-level university and community college (16%)
  - “community baby shower” (11%)
  - word of mouth (11%)

- Interviewed in last trimester of pregnancy at home (78%) or at research office (22%)
  - 2 ½ to 3 hours
  - Compensated with a $25 gift card
Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998)

- 28-item self-report inventory designed to assess experiences of five types of childhood maltreatment:
  - emotional, physical, and sexual abuse
  - emotional and physical neglect
- 5 items each per subscale, with scores ranging from 5-25 for each
- Higher scores indicate greater severity of childhood maltreatment
Childhood Trauma Questionnaire

- In the present study, coefficient alphas were:
  - Emotional abuse = .91
  - Physical abuse = .90
  - Sexual abuse = .95
  - Emotional neglect = .92
  - Physical neglect = .84

- Inter-correlations ranged from $r = .35$ (sex abuse & physical abuse) to $r = .81$ (emotional abuse & emotional neglect)
Brief Child Abuse Potential Inventory (B-CAP; Ondersma, Chaffin, Mullins, & Lebreton, 2005)

- Brief version of the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI)
- 34-item questionnaire that assesses dimensions believed to be related to risk for child abuse
- Subscales: distress, rigidity, happiness, family conflict, loneliness, feelings of persecution
- Uses forced choice format ("agree" vs. "disagree") to assess for child abuse potential
- Abuse Total Scale was used
- KR-20 (alpha) = .82 for this study
- Higher scores indicate greater child abuse potential
Results: Rates of Childhood Trauma

- Child Emotional Abuse = 68%
- Child Physical Abuse = 58%
- Child Sexual Abuse = 28%
- Child Emotional Neglect = 75%
- Child Physical Neglect = 49%

- High rates of childhood trauma overall

- Presence of childhood trauma was based on ANY endorsement even “rarely”, given how serious the items are:
  
  **Emotional Abuse:** People in my family called me things like “stupid” “lazy” and “ugly”
  
  **Physical Abuse:** I was punished with a belt, a board, a cord, or some other hard object
  
  **Emotional Neglect:** converse of “I know there was someone to take care of me and protect me”
  
  **Physical Neglect:** I didn’t have enough to eat, I had to wear dirty clothes
Results: Associations between Childhood Trauma and B-CAP

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<tr>
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<th>(Brief) Child Abuse Potential</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CTQ Emotional Abuse</td>
<td>.50**</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTQ Physical Abuse</td>
<td>.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTQ Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>.34**</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTQ Emotional Neglect</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTQ Physical Neglect</td>
<td>.32**</td>
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**p < .01.
Conclusions

• All forms of childhood abuse and neglect were significantly related to child abuse potential during pregnancy

• Emotional abuse and emotional neglect were most HIGHLY correlated with child abuse potential during pregnancy

• Suggests that it is important to assess, identify, and treat emotional forms of childhood trauma in expectant mothers

• The majority of research has examined the impact of physical and sexual maltreatment only
  • Consequences of emotional maltreatment largely overlooked by researchers
Conclusions

- Would results have been similar in non-pregnant women?
  - Pregnancy is a unique, highly “relational”/emotional time

- Providers working with low-income pregnant women should assess for all forms of childhood maltreatment and not overlook the significance of emotional abuse.

- Results suggest that parenting may already be compromised among victims of childhood maltreatment before the child is even born.

- Assess for early precursors of parenting in order to prevent future child maltreatment.
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