The purpose of the current study is to examine the relationship between maternal mental health (stress and depression) and parental competence and relationships with supportive caregivers. The sample is comprised of 242 parents with children under the age of three in highly impoverished rural communities. Parental stress was negatively related to parent-caregiver relationships and parental sense of competence, while parental sense of competence was negatively related to parental depression and positively related to parent-caregiver relationships. These findings demonstrate the importance of promoting parental engagement and providing support for impoverished rural parents with young children.

Introduction

The first five years of a child’s life are crucial in developing cognitive, social and emotional skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). During this vulnerable developmental period, parent engagement with their child is highly predictive of a range of important child outcomes (Love et al., 2005). Parents experiencing greater amounts of stress and have less social support frequently report feeling less competent in their parenting practices (Raikes & Thompson, 2005). Unfortunately, parents who live in rural areas tend to experience isolation, stress, and limited access to support systems (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004). Families in rural areas are prone to poverty (Barton, Lichten, Baker, & Eason, 2013), which compounds the impact of isolation and stress and is related to maternal depression (Knitzer, 2001) and negative parent-child relationships (Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006).

Method

Participants

Part of a larger, randomized study examining the effectiveness of Getting Ready with at-risk children aged birth to five years. 242 children under the age of three and their parents who reside in highly impoverished rural communities. See Tables 1, 2, and 3 for demographic information.

Mental Health Challenges and Parenting Attributes in a Rural Early Head Start Sample

Amanda L. Moen, Shannon R. Holmes, Sonya A. Bhatia, & Susan M. Sheridan

Abstract

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Parents and Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M = 24.71 years (SD = 5.35)</td>
<td>M = 10.86 months (SD = 7.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range 12 - 49 years</td>
<td>Range 18.4 - 34.4 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male 51%</td>
<td>Female 94.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic 38.5%</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic 61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown 0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

- Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995)
- 36 questions that measure parent stress and distress, parent-child dysfunctional interactions, and behavioral characteristics of difficult children
- Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1985)
- 17 questions that measure parenting self-esteem (i.e., parents’ beliefs on their own parenting practice)
- Parent Caregiver Relationship Scale (Elicker, Noppe, & Noppe, 1997)
- 35 questions that measure the quality of the relationship between parents and caregivers via trust/confidence, collaboration and affiliation (i.e., liking).

Results

Future research is needed to:

- Determine strategies that can build rural parent’s sense of competence and strengthen parent-caregiver relationships while reducing stress.
- Sample is drawn from a larger study that examined the efficacy of an intervention designed to promote parent-engagement and partnership (i.e., Getting Ready).