

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

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Abstract

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, Lichter, 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.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Parents and Children
n = 242

| | Parents | Children |
|--------------|---|--|
| Age | <i>M</i> = 24.71 years (<i>SD</i> = 5.35) Range = 12 - 49 years | <i>M</i> = 10.86 months (<i>SD</i> = 7.07) Range = 1.84 - 31.44 months |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 5.1% | 52.9% |
| Female | 94.9% | 47.1% |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic | 38.5% | 33.9% |
| Non-Hispanic | 61.5% | 43.1% |
| Unknown | 0% | 30% |

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Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Families

| | |
|---|---------------------|
| Annual Household Income | |
| Under \$14,000 | 65.7% |
| \$14,001 to \$22,000 | 21.4% |
| \$22,001 or more | 12.9% |
| Other Support Received | |
| Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) | 93.5% Yes, 6.5% No |
| Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) | 26.9% Yes, 73.1% No |
| Food Stamps | 61.6% Yes, 38.4% No |
| Education Level | |
| Through 12 th Grade or less | 41.5% |
| High School Diploma or GED | 31% |
| Some training beyond High School, but no degree | 22.5% |
| Vocational Certificate or College Degree | 5% |

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)
 - 20 questions that estimates an individual's level of depression
- Parenting Sense of Competence (Johnston & Mash, 1989)
 - 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).

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Teachers
n = 52

| | |
|---|--|
| Age | <i>M</i> = 31.9 years (<i>SD</i> = 9.44) Range = 19 - 57 years |
| Education Level | |
| High School Diploma | 3.8% |
| Some training beyond High School, but no degree | 32.7% |
| Vocational Certificate | 7.7% |
| Two Year College Degree | 36.5% |
| Four Year College Degree or more | 19.3% |
| Relevant Experience | |
| Early Childhood Setting | <i>M</i> = 62.13 months (<i>SD</i> = 58.82) Range = 0 - 228 months |
| Home Visiting Services | <i>M</i> = 26.68 months (<i>SD</i> = 33.99) Range = 0 - 192 months |
| Home Visiting Services with Early Childhood Focus | <i>M</i> = 27.2 months (<i>SD</i> = 38.47) Range = 0 - 192 months |

Results

- Parental stress was significantly and negatively related to the parent-caregiver relationship, indicating that rural parents experiencing higher levels of stress also tended to have lower parent-caregiver relationship scores ($r = -.276, p < .001$).
- Parental stress was significantly and negatively related to the parent sense of competence, indicating that rural parents experiencing higher levels of stress also tended to have lower parent sense of competence scores ($r = -.601, p < .001$).
- Parent-caregiver relationship was significantly and negatively related to the depression, indicating that rural parents experiencing higher parent-caregiver relationship scores also tended to have lower depression scores ($r = -.487, p < .001$).
- Parent-caregiver relationship was significantly and positively related to parent sense of competence, indicating that rural parents with higher parent-caregiver relationship scores also tended to have higher parent sense of competence scores ($r = .538, p < .001$).

Discussion

- These findings demonstrate the importance of providing support for impoverished rural parents with young children.
 - Parents with higher stress levels reported lower relationships with caregivers and less positive beliefs about their own parenting.
 - Parents who reported feeling competent in their parenting practices tended to report less feelings of depression and greater relationships with caregivers.
- Limitations to the present study include:
 - Results are correlational and should be interpreted as such.
 - Findings are limited to one rural region.
- Future research is needed to:
 - Discern unique and specific characteristics of rural settings that impact parenting practices.
 - 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).