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Mental Health Challenges and Parenting Attributes in a Rural Early Head Start Sample¹

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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 who are stressed 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 (Burton, Lichter, Baker, & Eason, 2013), which compounds the impact of isolation and stress and is related to maternal depression (Knitzer, 2000) and negative parent-child relationships (Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006).
- The purpose of the current study is to examine the interrelationship of parental stress, maternal depression, parental competence, and parent-caregiver relationships.

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.

Procedure

- Prior to participating in the Getting Ready intervention, parents or guardians and Early Childhood Care Providers completed a questionnaire.

Measures

- Parenting Stress Index (PSI- SF; 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 (CES-D; Radloff, 1985)
 - 20 questions that estimates an individual's level of depression

- Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC; Johnston & Mash, 1989)
 - 17 questions that measure parenting self-esteem (i.e., parents' beliefs on their own parenting practice)
- Parent Caregiver Relationship Scale (PCRS; 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

- Parental stress was significantly and positively related to maternal depression, indicating that parents experiencing higher levels of stress also tended to have higher maternal depression scores ($r = .420, p < .001$).
- Parental stress was significantly and negatively related to the parent-caregiver relationship, indicating that 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 parents experiencing higher levels of stress also tended to have lower parent sense of competence scores ($r = -.601, p < .001$).
- Maternal depression was not significantly related to the parent-caregiver relationship ($r = -.112, p = .099$).
- Parent-caregiver relationship was significantly and negatively related to the depression, indicating that 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 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 greater feelings of depression, 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.
 - Sample is drawn from a larger study examining the efficacy of an intervention designed to facilitate school readiness among disadvantaged young children (i.e., Getting Ready). As such, all participating children were enrolled in Early Head Start.
 - Findings are limited to one rural region.
- Future research is needed to:
 - Determine strategies that can build rural parent's sense of competence and strengthen parent-caregiver relationships while reducing stress.
 - Discern unique and specific characteristics of rural settings that impact parenting practices.

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Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Parents and Children

<i>n</i> =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%

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%

Table 3.

Demographic Characteristics of Teachers

<i>n=52</i>	
Age	$M = 31.9$ years ($SD = 9.44$) 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	$M = 62.13$ months ($SD = 58.82$) Range = 0 – 228 months
Home Visiting Services	$M = 26.68$ months ($SD = 33.99$) Range = 0 – 192 months
Home Visiting Services with Early Childhood Focus	$M = 27.2$ months ($SD = 38.47$) Range = 0 – 192 months