

An Examination of the Association Between Parental Abuse History and Subsequent Parent-Child Relationships

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Introduction

Many parents have themselves experienced maltreatment as children. Assessment of these experiences is pertinent to understanding their long-term impact. In recent years, research has demonstrated that childhood victimization is a substantial risk factor for the development of later emotional, interpersonal, and/or adaptive functioning problems. Despite the gains in research conducted on parental abuse history, one area that still needs to be addressed is the impact of childhood maltreatment on later parenting skills and the parent-child relationship.

Research in this area has thus far primarily focused on extreme forms of dysfunctional parenting. For instance, many researchers have addressed the “intergenerational transmission of violence” hypothesis by exploring whether physical abuse experienced as a child increases the likelihood of committing violent acts toward one’s own children as an adult (Widom, 2000). Although the relationship between parental abuse history and later abuse of one’s own children is a concern, other research has begun to suggest that a history of abuse also puts one at risk for less extreme forms of parenting dysfunction. For example, some evidence suggests that mothers with a history of physical abuse may be less skilled and have more difficulties in their role as parents (Daro, 1988). Initial work has also linked maternal history of sexual abuse with premature promotion of child autonomy (Cole & Woolger, 1989), lower levels of maternal involvement (Lyons-Ruth & Block, 1996), and more permissive parenting practices (Rusico, 2001).

Despite these initial findings on childhood physical and sexual abuse, very little research has been conducted on the impact of childhood emotional abuse or neglect on the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, most previous research on the potential impact of parental abuse history has focused on a single form of childhood maltreatment. Despite indications that maltreatment types often co-occur, few child maltreatment researchers have examined their data from a *multi-type* maltreatment perspective. Instead, statistical procedures are often employed to isolate the effects of a specific form of maltreatment and to control for the presence of the other types of maltreatment (Briere, 1992).

The purpose of the present study was to assess the cumulative impact of childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect on the parent-child relationship. The current study investigated different aspects of the parent-child relationship, including parents’ level of satisfaction in their parenting role, level of parental attachment, level of involvement with their child, and the degree to which the child meets the parents expectations. In addition, subsequent analyses, examined the scores of individual forms of maltreatment as predictors of the parent-child relationship variables.

Method

Participants

Participants included 60 primary caregivers of children in Early Head Start or Head Start programs. The mean age of the caregivers was 28.78 (SD = 7.53; range 20 to 47). The vast majority of the sample was female (96.7%) and the biological parent of the child (95.0%). Forty-nine (81.7%) of the caregivers in the sample identified themselves as Caucasian and nine (15%) identified as African American. The sample was predominately low income with 68% earning less than \$20,000 per year. The children had a mean age of 47.07 months (SD = 9.68; range 30 to 63) and thirty-three (55%) of the children were male.

Measures

Comprehensive Child Maltreatment Survey (CCMS; Higgins & McCabe, in press): The CCMS is a 22-item measure that assesses occurrence and frequency of physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional maltreatment in the respondent's childhood. A Multi-type Maltreatment Composite Score was obtained by adding together the individual maltreatment items.

Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI; Gerard, 1994): A 78-item questionnaire that assesses parents' attitudes toward parenting and toward their child. Scores were obtained for four content scales (i.e., Parental Support, Satisfaction with Parenting, Involvement, and Limit Setting).

Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1986): Questionnaire consisting of 101 items in which subjects indicate the degree of stress they experience in their role as a parent. Subscales included in the study were Parental Competence and Parental Attachment.

Results

Correlational Analyses

Prior to conducting the regression analyses, a correlation matrix of the selected variables for the entire sample (N = 60) was constructed (Table 1). Results indicated that the Multi-type Maltreatment Composite Score (M = 19.10, SD = 19.90) was not significantly correlated to any of the parent-child relationship variables, as was the case for the Physical Abuse Total (M = 4.38, SD = 6.00) and the Neglect Total (M = 2.52, SD = 4.57). Whereas the Emotional Abuse Total (M = 9.48, SD = 7.84) had moderate correlations with the Parental Support and Parental Competence Scales and the Sexual Abuse Total (M = 2.71, SD = 7.09) had moderate correlations with the Involvement and Limit Setting Scales. Descriptive statistics for the Multi-type Maltreatment Composite Score and the individual maltreatment scales are presented in Table 2.

Multiple Regressions Using the Multi-type Maltreatment Composite as the Predictor

In order to assess the first aim of the study, multiple regression analyses were conducted entering demographic variables (i.e., caregiver's age, caregiver's level of education [less than high school vs. high school or above], child's age, child's gender) and the Multi-type Maltreatment Composite Score into a model predicting each of the various parent-child relationship indicators. The only model that was significant used the Parental Competence Subscale as the criterion variable, $F(5,53) = 3.512, p < .01, R^2 = .249$ (Table 3). In this model, a higher Multi-type Maltreatment Composite Score and younger parent age predicted increased feelings of parental incompetence.

Multiple Regressions Using Individual Maltreatment Scores as the Predictors

Next, multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess the relative contribution of the individual types of maltreatment (i.e., physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, sexual abuse)

in predicting each parent-child relationship variable. To this end, a similar model was constructed with each of the individual maltreatment scales and demographic variables as the predictors. Results suggest that emotional abuse and age of caregiver are predictive of level of parental support, $F(8,50) = 2.38, p < .05, R^2 = .276$. Additionally, a childhood history of emotional abuse and neglect, caregiver's level of education, and caregiver's age were predictive of level of parental competence, $F(8,50) = 3.57, p < .01, R^2 = .364$. Results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 4.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess the cumulative impact of childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect on the parents' subsequent parent-child relationships. In addition, analyses examined the ability of the individual forms of maltreatment to predict the parent-child relationship variables.

The Multi-type Maltreatment Composite Score was only predictive of one of the parent-child relationship variables. In this model, those caregivers who had a greater history of maltreatment in their childhood and were currently younger parents were more likely to feel incompetent in their role as a parent. In the subsequent analyses assessing the predictive ability of the individual forms of maltreatment, neither a childhood history of physical abuse or sexual abuse were predictive of the parent-child relationship variables. However, a greater history of childhood emotional abuse and younger parent age were associated with caregivers who have little emotional support and practical help in their role as a parent. Additionally, history of emotional abuse and neglect, along with younger parent age and lack of a high school diploma, were predictive of greater feelings of incompetence as a parent.

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size, which does not permit the generalizability of the present findings to other populations. Therefore, results should be further explored using different and larger samples in order to more fully understand the relationship between childhood maltreatment history and subsequent parent-child relationship indicators. In addition, the CCMS is a brief measure of childhood maltreatment and future studies should contain more detailed assessments of maltreatment history. Assessment of parent-child relationship variables should be obtained from other methods of assessment besides self-report, and should consider using a multiple method assessment approach.

References

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Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Selected Family Contextual and Parent-Child Relationship Variables and the Maltreatment Scores

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. CCMS Multi-Type Mal. Total	1.00														
2. CCMS Physical Abuse Total	.883**	1.00													
3. CCMS Emotion Abuse Total	.871**	.761**	1.00												
4. CCMS Neglect Total	.764**	.656**	.699**	1.00											
5. CCMS Sexual Abuse Total	.603**	.368**	.245	.170	1.00										
6. Caregiver's Age	.096	.066	.093	.022	.098	1.00									
7. Caregiver's Education Level	.200	.109	.184	.114	.192	.127	1.00								
8. Child's Age	-.039	.042	.042	.002	-.164	-.046	-.211	1.00							
9. Child's Gender	.102	.081	.089	.278*	-.059	.117	.053	-.232	1.00						
10. Parental Support (PCRI)	.212	.165	.259*	.024	.154	-.341**	.077	-.054	-.067	1.00					
11. Satisfaction w/ Parenting (PCRI)	-.158	-.128	-.102	-.146	-.127	-.222	-.026	.051	-.017	.394**	1.00				
12. Involvement (PCRI)	.075	.003	-.002	-.090	.267*	.033	.009	-.045	-.138	.295*	.410**	1.00			
13. Limit Setting (PCRI)	.167	.043	.100	-.062	.362**	-.138	-.082	-.035	-.065	.462**	.385**	.554**	1.00		
14. Competence (PSI)	.178	.165	.267*	.043	.037	-.364**	-.257*	.154	-.004	.560**	.521**	.250	.441**	1.00	
15. Attachment (PSI)	-.043	-.016	-.018	-.051	-.054	-.156	.074	.181	.003	.308*	.672**	.474**	.357**	.462**	1.00

* p < .05.; **p < .01

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Maltreatment Scores

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Multi-type Maltreatment Total	19.10	19.90	0 – 111
Physical Abuse Total	4.38	6.00	0 – 32
Emotional Abuse Total	9.48	7.84	0 – 32
Neglect Total	2.52	4.57	0 – 23
Sexual Abuse Total	2.71	7.09	0 – 32

Table 3
Regression Coefficients for Multi-Type Maltreatment Composite Score and Family Contextual Variables Predicting Parental Competence Scores

	Standardized β Weight	Significance Level
Caregiver's Age	-.359	.004
Caregiver's Education Level	-.241	.448
Child's Age	.095	.688
Child's Gender	.050	.058
Multi-type Mal. Total	.257	.040

Table 4
Regression Coefficients for Individual Maltreatment Types Predicting Parent-Child Relationship Indicators

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variables	Standardized β Weight
Parental Support	Caregiver's Age	-.401**
	Caregiver's Education Level	.043
	Child's Age	-.051
	Child's Gender	.023
	Physical Abuse Total	-.033
	Emotional Abuse Total	.514*
	Neglect Total	-.332
	Sexual Abuse Total	.120
Parental Competence	Caregiver's Age	-.394***
	Caregiver's Education Level	-.273*
	Child's Age	.115
	Child's Gender	.140
	Physical Abuse Total	-.061
	Emotional Abuse Total	.618**
	Neglect Total	-.361*
	Sexual Abuse Total	.088

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$