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Maternal emotion and cognitive control capacities and parenting: A conceptual framework



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Emerging evidence suggests that maternal emotion and cognitive control capacities are critical to the development and maintenance of parenting practices and may be related to parents' ability to seek and use parenting help. The purpose of this paper is to present a cohesive conceptual framework on the intersection of maternal emotion and cognitive control capacities and parenting based on a review of literature.

Methods: We conducted a comprehensive literature review of articles published between 2000 and February 2014 that addressed maternal emotion and cognitive control and parenting. The 35 articles identified were assigned a methodological quality score.

Results: Low maternal emotion and cognitive control capacity is associated with increased risk of engaging in child maltreatment, whereas higher maternal emotion and cognitive regulation is associated with sensitive, involved parenting. Contextual factors, such as SES and household organization, play a complex and not clearly understood role on the association between maternal

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cognitive control and parenting. A conceptual framework was developed based on the results of the literature review.

Conclusions: The conceptual framework developed can be used to inform future research and practice. Longitudinal studies that assess the temporal relationship of maternal emotion and cognitive control and parenting are necessary to establish causality. Research that addresses how maternal emotion regulation and cognitive control capacities are related to mothers' enrollment and participation in parenting and early intervention programs is an important next step to strengthening policy and intervention work.

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Parents take pride in the accomplishments of their children. Almost without exception, they want to be good parents and they want the best outcomes for their children. Unfortunately, this desire to parent well does not always translate into actual practice. For example, in a nationally representative sample of 0–17 year olds in the United States, 10.2% reported experiencing some form of child maltreatment in the previous year (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009), with parents being the perpetrators of abuse in the majority (80%) of cases (United States Government Accountability Office, 2011). While most parents do not abuse or neglect their children, many struggle to engage in warm, responsive caregiving (referred to generally in this paper as positive parenting) and to form healthy attachments with their children.

Multiple parent skills training and home visiting programs have been implemented that are designed to help parents strengthen positive parenting skills. Despite the demonstrated success of several of these programs (Gross et al., 2009; Olds et al., 1997; Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009), none has been successful with all parents (Duggan et al., 1999; Nievar, van Egeren, & Pollard, 2010). Given the availability of effective interventions, understanding the factors that help explain why some parents do not master positive parenting skills or fail to maintain skills when learned is critical for advancing child abuse prevention as well as reducing child and adolescent behavioral and emotional problems and disorders.

A promising but new area of research that goes beyond the oft-cited 'lack of motivation' and 'chaotic family' explanations is that of parents' emotion and cognitive control capacities. Emerging evidence from various fields suggests that emotion control and cognitive control capacities are critical in the development and maintenance of parenting practices (Deater-Deckard, Wang, Chen, & Bell, 2012; Sonuga-Barke, Daley, & Thompson, 2002). Moreover, aspects of these cognitive control deficits can be managed and even improved in adults (Melby-Lervag & Hulme, 2013; Shipstead, Redick, & Engle, 2012).

The current review comes at a time when there is increasing interest in parental executive functioning and other emotion and cognitive control capacities. This review builds on an overview of the neurobiology of parenting by Barrett and Fleming (2011) and a review of maternal ADHD and self-regulation and their impact on parenting (Johnston, Mash, Miller, & Ninowski, 2012). The available research literature pertaining to parental emotion and cognitive control capacity and caregiving is informative but lacks an organizing framework that is necessary for researchers and practitioners to fully understand the implications of the results and build on them. Thus, **the intent of this review is to critically synthesize this research into a cohesive framework that will highlight the important role that maternal emotion and cognitive control capacities have on day-to-day parenting, their influence on intervention uptake, and the malleability of these capacities in adults.** We have chosen to focus on mothers rather than fathers because the majority of research on parent emotion control and cognitive control has focused on the mother. Many of the results discussed in this paper are likely to be applicable to fathers, although there are sufficient differences in the ways that fathers approach parenting that this hypothesis should be fully tested.

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