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Family resilience elements alleviate the relationship between maternal psychological distress and the severity of children's developmental disorders

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ABSTRACT

Background: Family resilience is the process through which family members withstand and rebound from adversity.

Aims: In this study, we examined the effects of family resilience on the psychological distress of mothers of children with developmental disorders (DD).

Methods and Procedures: A Family Resilience Elements Questionnaire was developed, which measured the degree to which mothers possess elements of family resilience. The participants were 274 mothers of children with DD. We performed a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to predict maternal psychological distress.

Outcomes and Results: The analysis revealed that maternal psychological distress was increased by higher severity of children's DD and decreased by higher family resiliency. Moreover, there was a significant interaction between the severity of children's DD and family resiliency, where family resiliency moderated the relationship between maternal psychological distress and the severity of children's DD. Specifically, the slope predicting maternal psychological distress based on the severity of children's DD was decreased by increasing family resiliency.

Conclusions and Implications: These findings indicated that family resiliency reduced maternal psychological distress and alleviated the relationship between maternal psychological distress and severity of children's DD. Thus, we suggest that clinicians need to take account of family resilience in interventions for children with DD and their mothers.

What this paper adds?

Mothers of children with developmental disorders (DD) experience unique challenges and difficulties, and they are at high risk for mental health problems (e.g., Singer, 2006). In the present study, we examined how the positive adaptation of family members to

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living with children with DD can be effective for improving maternal mental health. The positive adaptation is associated with family resilience, which is the process through which family members withstand and rebound from adversity (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993; Walsh, 2015). In this study, we developed the Family Resilience Elements Questionnaire (FREQ) for measuring family resiliency and examined the relationship between maternal psychological distress, the severity of children's DD, and family resiliency. The severity of children's DD was related to maternal psychological distress in typical families, whereas this association was not found in resilient families. These findings indicated that family resilience elements alleviated the relationship between maternal psychological distress and the severity of children's DD.

1. Introduction

In raising children with developmental disorders (DD), such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disability (ID), and specific learning disorder (SLD), mothers experience unique challenges and difficulties. For example, children with DD often experience difficulties in school, public places, and in the community, and their mothers must manage these challenges, which can place a burden on the mothers. Moreover, these difficulties may not be well understood by the people around them, and some strangers may attribute the children's difficulties to their mothers' parenting. These circumstances may increase the likelihood for negative outcomes in mothers of children with DD. Empirical research has reported of these difficulties: the mothers of children with DD have higher levels of stress (Baker-Ericzén, Brookman-Fraze, & Stahmer, 2005; Bekbo, Konstantareas, & Springer, 1987) and depressive symptoms (Bailey, Golden, Roberts, & Ford, 2007; Singer, 2006) and lower quality of life (Mugno, Ruta, D'Arrigo, & Mazzone, 2007) than mothers of children with typical development (TD).

Furthermore, the severity of the DD has been associated with increases in maternal mental health problems. A meta-analysis revealed the association between the severity of children's ADHD symptoms and parenting stress (Theule, Wiener, Tannock, & Jenkins, 2013). Similarly, the severity of ASD symptoms was also found to be positively associated with maternal stress (Halstead, Ekas, Hastings, & Griffith, 2018; Hastings & Johnson, 2001; Hill-Chapman, Herzog, & Maduro, 2013). Children's behavioral and emotional problems increased maternal mental health problem in families of children with ASD and those with ID (Herring et al., 2006). Thus, in the present study, we considered that the severity of the children's DD would increase the child-rearing burden on mothers, contributing to maternal mental health problems.

Maternal mental health problems have been associated with inappropriate parenting (Rodgers, 1993), which can exacerbate the severity of the children's DD (Suzuki et al., 2016). Thus, it is important to consider the factors that may alleviate the impact of the severity of the children's DD on maternal mental health (e.g., maternal resilience). Social support has been shown to be one of these factors (Suzuki et al., 2015a). Additionally, appraisal support is inversely related to anxiety in mothers of children with ADHD and ASD (Lovell, Moss, & Wetherell, 2012). In a previous study of mothers of children with ASD, a larger social network size was associated with improvements in maternal well-being, and greater negative valence of support was associated with a higher level of depressive symptoms (Smith, Greenberg, & Seltzer, 2012). There are several kinds of support resources for mothers of children with DD. Ekas, Lickenbrock, and Whitman (2010) reported that the support of a partner, family, and friends was found to be differently associated with positive and negative outcomes in mothers of children with ASD. In a review of the literature, Boyd (2002) showed that informal support (i.e., assistance from family, friends, or neighbors) was more effective for reducing mental health problems in mothers of children with ASD compared with formal support (i.e., assistance provided by an organized group or agency). In addition, he suggested that mothers of children with ASD initially seek support from their family (Boyd, 2002; Konstantareas & Homatidis, 1989). Thus, we considered that the relationship with family members would be important for the mental health status of mothers of children with DD.

However, family support does not always have a positive influence on mothers of children with DD. In a previous study, we reported that some partners and family did not understand the characteristics of children with DD, and their involvement negatively influenced the mothers and children (Suzuki et al., 2015b). Moreover, family members are influenced by the children with DD. Having children with a disability increased the likelihood of parental divorce (Corman & Kaestner, 1992; Mauldon, 1992; Reichman, Corman, & Noonan, 2004). In addition, siblings of children with ASD have been found to view their brother or sister as a burden (Bågenholm & Gillberg, 1991). These findings suggest that some family members of children with DD may behave inappropriately, resulting in mental health problems for the mothers of children with DD. Thus, the positive adaptation of family members to living with children with DD is a crucial factor for improving maternal mental health.

People's ability to adapt to difficulties has been studied using the concept of "resilience." Some researchers have referred to resilience as a dynamic process that encompasses a positive adaptation to significant adversity or difficulties (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Other researchers have defined resilience as the ability or characteristics to overcome difficulties (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Smith et al., 2008). In order to avoid the confusion relative to the difference in the definition of resilience, we used the term "resilience" to describe the dynamic process, and "resiliency" to describe the degree to which a person possesses resilience elements, either the ability or characteristics. Furthermore, the definitions of resilience has differed across the populations that are being studied (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004), with examples such as children in adverse situations (Garnezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Rutter, 1985; Werner, 1989), individuals exposed to disaster (Bonanno, Galea, Bucchiarelli, & Vlahov, 2006) and loss of spouse (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005), and family members (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993; Walsh, 2015). In this study, we focused on the positive adaptation of family members who are living with children with DD. Thus, family resilience is used to describe the process through which family members withstand and rebound from adversity such as the challenges and problems surrounding children with DD. Furthermore, we considered that the elements of family resilience function as mother's resilience elements.

Several measures of family resiliency have been proposed. Walsh (2015) suggests that family resilience includes three aspects:

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