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The influence of support and stress on maternal attitudes^{☆,☆☆}

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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines an expanded version of Belsky's (1984) multi-dimensional process model of parenting to determine whether changes in stress and support influence maternal attitudes during the first year of a child's life.

Method: Data were collected from mothers of newborns eligible for Hawaii's Healthy Start program who had been randomly assigned to home visitation ($n = 108$) or control ($n = 104$) status. Multiple regression analyses were used to test hypotheses regarding the influence of change in contextual sources of support and stress on parenting attitudes as measured by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI) Abuse Scale. A post hoc analysis of variance was conducted to explore interactions among the predictor variables and home visitation.

Results: Stress in the form of change in public assistance status led to more punitive parenting attitudes while increased support from the partner and from close associates emerged as significant predictors of less punitive parental attitudes. The exploratory analyses suggest that home visitation may moderate the impacts of stress and support on maternal attitudes.

Conclusions: In line with Belsky's (1984) process model of parenting, increased stress adversely impacted maternal attitudes regarding physical punishment while increased support exerted favorable effects. The results also support further elaboration of Belsky's model including the expansion of marital support to include unmarried partners and the need to consider the impact of formal support sources on parenting.

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Introduction

As studies continue to document the adverse effects of poor parenting on a child's immediate and long-term developmental prospects, identifying the mechanisms that either impede or enhance parenting becomes critical. Theories largely derived from the child maltreatment literature have posited that characteristics of the child, parent and the surrounding environment interact to determine parental functioning (Belsky, 1984; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Rutter, 1987; Vondra & Belsky, 1993). In general, the empirical base provides support for this multi-dimensional approach. Past research reveals that maternal childrearing attitudes are influenced by child characteristics such as neonatal health (Snow, 1998), maternal attributes including the experience of abuse as a child (Miller, Handel, Gilner, & Cross, 1991), maternal depression (Cadzow, Armstrong, & Fraser, 1999; Kotch, Browne, Dufort, Winsor, & Catellier, 1999), young maternal age (National Research Council, 1993), and the settings in which the parent-child relationship are embedded such as the mother's informal support network (Coohey, 1995; Kotch et al., 1999; Thompson, 1995).

To date, however, few studies have explored how *change* among these dimensions shapes parenting. Parenting studies often rely on cross-sectional data that provide a snapshot of the relationship between the child, parent, and their immediate environment at a given point in time (e.g., Bogenschneider, Small, & Tsay, 1997; Peterson & Hawley, 1998) or longitudinal studies that use early indicators to explain subsequent parent attitudes (Cadzow et al., 1999) or behaviors (Kotch et al., 1999). While these studies report a strong association between partner support and positive parenting, little evidence exists demonstrating that a change in partner support leads to a change in parenting attitudes, evidence needed to establish a causal link from support to parenting. Some evaluation studies have investigated the impact of support programs on parenting attitudes over time (see Cerny & Inouye, 2001), but have not examined whether simultaneous changes in other dimensions of the parent's environment contribute to change in parenting, a key component of these multi-dimensional theories.

In this article, data from a longitudinal study of at-risk mothers of newborns are used to examine an expanded version of Belsky's (1984) process model of parenting. According to Belsky and his co-workers, the combination of parental attributes, child characteristics, and contextual sources of support and stress are the primary determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984; Vondra & Belsky, 1993). Belsky contends that child characteristics contribute the least to the parenting system while parental attributes represent the strongest influence. Support and stress, representing the middle subsystem, are the foci of this study. Support and stress often function as the least stable components of the parent environment in contrast to the more stable and enduring nature of child and parental attributes. This study seeks to illuminate the process by which changes in levels of support and stress during the first year of the newborn's life influence maternal attitudes toward childrearing.

Support and stress

In Belsky's (1984) model, the marital relationship, social network, and work environment constitute the primary sources of support and/or stress for parents. While retaining this overall framework, the current study extends these components of support and stress. First, the increase in the percent of never married parents combined with the decline in US marital rates (Fields & Casper, 2001) argues for the inclusion of unmarried partners when assessing the influence of the primary "marital" relationship. Studies suggest that partners, whether married or not, represent significant sources of support (or stress) for parents (Coohey, 1995; Crnic, Greenberg, Rogozin, Robinson, & Basham, 1983).

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