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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Being a mother of preterm multiples in the context of socioeconomic disadvantage: perceived stress and psychological symptoms[☆]

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KEYWORDS

Prematurity;
Multiple births;
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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to examine the differences between mothers of preterm multiples and mothers of preterm singletons regarding perceived stress and maternal psychological symptoms, and to explore the putative adverse amplified effect of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Method: Ninety-five mothers of 1-year-olds born preterm participated in this cross-sectional study. Data collection was carried out in two public hospitals from Northern Portugal. To assess maternal perceived daily stress and psychological symptoms, mothers completed two questionnaires. Mothers reported on socioeconomic factors, including family poverty, parent unemployment, and low education, and two groups of family socioeconomic disadvantage were created. A child medical risk index was calculated.

Results: Results indicated that mothers of preterm multiples reported higher levels of stress than mothers of preterm singletons. Moreover, and specifically regarding psychological functioning, mothers of preterm multiples reported more symptoms than mothers of preterm singletons, but only when living in a context of socioeconomic adversity.

Conclusions: The results of the present study have important implications for practice. Mothers of preterm multiples are at higher risk to present mental health difficulties, in comparison to

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Prematuridade;
Nascimentos
Múltiplos;
Ajuste Psicológico
Materno

mothers of singletons, especially when exposed to socioeconomic adversities. The development of psychosocial intervention programs and public policies are of decisive importance in helping mothers of multiples adjust to parenthood.

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Ser mãe de múltiplos prematuros no contexto de desvantagem socioeconômica: estresse percebido e sintomas psicológicos

Resumo

Objetivo: Este estudo visou examinar as diferenças entre mães de múltiplos prematuros e mães de filhos únicos prematuros a respeito de estresse percebido e sintomas psicológicos maternos e explorar o efeito adverso amplificado putativo da desvantagem socioeconômica.

Método: 95 mães de crianças com idade de um ano nascidas prematuras participaram deste estudo transversal. A coleta de dados foi feita em dois hospitais públicos do norte de Portugal. Para avaliar o estresse diário percebido e os sintomas psicológicos maternos, as mães responderam dois questionários. As mães relataram fatores socioeconômicos, incluindo pobreza familiar, desemprego dos pais e baixo nível de escolaridade, e foram criados dois grupos de desvantagem socioeconômica familiar. Foi calculado um índice de risco médico infantil.

Resultados: Os resultados indicaram que as mães de múltiplos prematuros relataram maiores níveis de estresse que as mães de filhos únicos prematuros. Além disso e especificamente com relação ao funcionamento psicológico, as mães de múltiplos prematuros relataram mais sintomas que as mães de filhos únicos prematuros, porém apenas quando morando em um contexto de adversidade socioeconômica.

Conclusões: Os resultados deste estudo possuem importantes implicações para a prática. As mães de múltiplos prematuros apresentam maior risco de dificuldades de saúde mental, em comparação a mães de filhos únicos, principalmente quando expostas a adversidades socioeconômicas. O desenvolvimento de programas de intervenção psicossocial e políticas públicas é de importância decisiva ao ajudar as mães de filhos múltiplos a se ajustarem à maternidade.

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Introduction

Every year, an estimated 15 million babies are born preterm worldwide (<37 gestational weeks) and this number is rising. In Portugal, where this study was conducted, approximately 7.7% of children were born prior to term in 2014, while in 2001 it was about 5.6%.¹ Such significant increase constitutes an important public health issue. Indeed, younger and more fragile infants are surviving their neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) stays, with many of them exhibiting high rates of special needs as they grow older.² Several mental health problems have also been reported for parents. Evidence has revealed that mothers of preterm infants often show elevated stress levels and psychological difficulties, which, in turn, seem to compromise their parenting abilities and, consequently, child development.³ Therefore, more research focused on the impact of medical and social risk factors on parental adjustment is crucial in the field of prematurity.

Research conducted during the last decades has provided a growing body of evidence on the adverse effects of child health risks for parents' psychological functioning.⁴ Recently, researchers have been particularly interested in the putative aggravating role of being a mother of multiples. Adding to the stresses of being a parent of a preterm

(more fragile) infant, families of preterm multiples are often exposed to additional health and emotional demands, including prolonged hospitalization, child cerebral palsy, hemorrhage, and developmental delays.^{5,6} Moreover, mothers with multiple gestation pregnancies and their partners have to care for and relate to more than one baby, to whom they may have been separated during their first days after delivery. Such parents often experience more financial pressures, fatigue, social isolation, and practical difficulties that emerge from the need of looking after for more than one infant at once.⁷ Not surprisingly, researchers have recently revealed that mothers of preterm multiples are more likely to be depressed, to present elevated anxiety, and to experience more parenting stress.⁸⁻¹¹

Despite the importance of the findings described above, the research in this field is still characterized by a lack of studies focused on the identification of environmental factors that may buffer the negative effects of multiple births on the psychological well-being of mothers of preterm infants. This gap in the literature is notable, given years of research highlighting the negative impact of family psychosocial adversities on women's psychological functioning. For instance, Goyal et al.¹² showed that first time mothers exposed to low socioeconomic status were 11 times

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