



# Child abuse history in teen mothers and parent–child risk processes for offspring externalizing problems



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined whether child abuse history in teen mothers impacts offspring externalizing problems indirectly, through its influence on attachment and maternal hostility. In a longitudinal sample of 112 teen mother–child dyads, mothers reported on their own abuse experiences, attachment and maternal hostility were assessed via direct observations, and externalizing problems were measured using maternal reports. Compared with mothers with no abuse history, mothers with a history of sexual and physical abuse were more likely to have an insecurely attached infant, which predicted higher externalizing problems in preschool, which in turn predicted subsequent increases in externalizing problems in Grade 3. Furthermore, relative to the no abuse history group, mothers with a history of sexual and physical abuse showed more hostility toward their child at preschool, which in turn predicted elevated externalizing problems in Grade 3. Mothers' history of either sexual or physical abuse alone did not have significant indirect effects on externalizing problems. Fostering secure attachment and reducing risk for maternal hostility might be important intervention goals for prevention programs involving at-risk mothers with abuse histories.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the steady decline in adolescent pregnancies, the US still has the highest teen birth rate among developed countries (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers, & Singh, 2015). Many teen mothers have been exposed to multiple traumatic and stressful events during childhood that affect their psychological functioning and quality of life both before and after the birth of their child (Beers & Hollo, 2009). The same adverse childhood experiences that may have contributed to these mothers' early pregnancy might also influence the health and well-being of their offspring (Hillis et al., 2004). For instance, higher rates of teen pregnancy are evident in mothers with a history of child maltreatment (Madigan, Wade, Tarabulsky, Jenkins, & Shouldice, 2014), and the negative psychological and social consequences of child abuse can extend across generations (e.g., Collishaw, Dunn, O'Connor, & Golding, 2007). Research suggests that mothers who have been exposed to child maltreatment

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may transfer risk for poor social, emotional, and physical well-being to their offspring (e.g., Brand et al., 2010; Noll, Trickett, Harris, & Putnam, 2009).

Although the majority of mothers with a history of maltreatment do not victimize their own children (i.e., do not themselves become perpetrators) (e.g., Thornberry & Henry, 2013), offspring of teen mothers with an abuse history are at increased risk for being referred to authorities regarding child protection concerns (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Spieker, Bensley, McMahon, Fung, & Osslander, 1996). Child maltreatment is considered a major public health concern, and more recent intervention efforts focus on the prevention versus treatment of child abuse and neglect (Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009). To better understand the prevention of child maltreatment, it is important to examine mechanisms implicated in intergenerational cycles of psychosocial risk for family adversity. Parents' history of adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, may operate as distal risk factors for similar adverse outcomes in their offspring, by way of impacting the quality of the parent–child relationship (Belsky, 1993). Indeed, disrupted patterns of parent–child interaction appear to be proximal risk factors associated with child maltreatment. Some of these factors include high-risk parenting (e.g., harsh discipline, criticism), a disconnected or dysfunctional parent–child relationship, and child externalizing problems (e.g., persistent noncompliance, aggression) (Belsky, 1993; Cummings & Berkowitz, 2014). Of significance for informing the design of targeted interventions for maltreatment prevention in high-risk families, this longitudinal study evaluated the impact of teen mothers' abuse history on these family-level risk factors assessed at different developmental stages.

### 1.1. Parental abuse history and parent–child processes

Adolescent mothers, in general, have a heightened risk for disrupted caregiving due to their young age and lower cognitive readiness for parenting (Beers & Hollo, 2009). Those that have survived child maltreatment, however, may face even greater challenges in parenting (de Paúl & Domenech, 2000). Early childhood is a stressful period for many parents as children strive for greater autonomy, yet require high levels of guidance and emotional support. Parents with a history of child abuse may be more likely to demonstrate hostile parenting (e.g., critical and abrasive behavior toward child) during this developmental stage, due to poor emotion regulation (Smith, Cross, Winkler, Jovanovic, & Bradley, 2014) and cognitive biases toward aggressive responding in relationships (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011). Although prior research supports an association between parents' abuse history and hostile parenting, there are mixed findings with respect to whether a history of sexual or physical abuse in parents most strongly predicts elevated hostility toward their child (e.g., Banyard, 1997; Barrett, 2009). Considering the significant co-occurrence between these two types of abuse (Madigan et al., 2014), other studies have examined their combined effects. Past findings suggest that parents with a history of both sexual and physical abuse (i.e., dual abuse) are more likely to exhibit hostile parenting, compared with parents with a history of sexual or physical abuse only (Dubowitz et al., 2001; Ehrensaft, Knous-Westfall, Cohen, & Chen, 2015). This finding is in line with the view that exposure to different types of abuse has stronger associations with adverse outcomes than repeated exposure to a single type of abuse (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Higgins & McCabe, 2001; Madigan et al., 2014).

In addition to influencing parenting behavior, parents' maltreatment history can impact the quality of the parent–child relationship. Prior maltreatment in childhood may contribute to negative mental representations (or internal working models) of attachment experiences with parents' own caregivers, and consequently undermine their ability to sensitively attend and respond to the needs of their offspring (George, Solomon, Cassidy, & Shaver, 2008). Prior research shows that mothers who have been exposed to child sexual abuse tend to experience more difficulties bonding with their child (DiLillo & Damashek, 2003; Roberts, O'Connor, Dunn, & Golding, 2004; Wright, Fopma-Loy, & Oberle, 2012), and one past study using a sample of teen mothers demonstrated an association between their physical abuse history and heightened difficulties in the mother–infant relationship (Milan, Lewis, Ethier, Kershaw, & Ickovics, 2004). Furthermore, exposure to child sexual abuse—both alone and in combination with physical abuse—is predictive of less parental availability in the parent–child relationship (Ehrensaft et al., 2015). Young children rely on caregivers to attend to their emotional needs for security and comfort; thus, a lack of parental availability and responsiveness contributes to patterns of attachment insecurity. Indeed, offspring of mothers with a history of child abuse are at elevated risk for developing ineffective and disrupted attachment strategies (Kwako, Noll, Putnam, & Trickett, 2010; Lyons-Ruth & Block, 1996). Further research is needed, however, to evaluate relations between abuse history in teen mothers and attachment security in infancy. In sum, prior exposure to maltreatment in parents is a significant risk factor for problematic relations with their offspring in early childhood, including disruptions in the parent–child attachment relationship and hostile parenting.

### 1.2. Parental abuse history, parent–child processes, and offspring externalizing problems

The majority of survivors of child maltreatment do not victimize their own children; however, they may inadvertently transmit risk for psychopathology in their later offspring. For instance, results from longitudinal research demonstrate associations between mothers' exposure to child maltreatment and offspring problem behavior in preschool and early elementary school (Collishaw et al., 2007; Madigan, Wade, Plamondon, & Jenkins, 2015; Myhre, Dyb, Wentzel-Larsen, Grøgaard, & Thoresen, 2014; Rijlaarsdam et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2004). Some of these studies also evaluated parenting mechanisms that may (partially) account for this association, considering that ineffective parenting is involved in the development of early-onset externalizing problems (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Results indicated that parental hostility (e.g., harsh discipline) and/or parental affective symptoms (e.g., distress and anxiety) were significant mediating factors in the

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