

Childhood abuse and later parenting outcomes in two American Indian tribes[☆]

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Received 9 August 2003; received in revised form 19 July 2007; accepted 31 July 2007

Abstract

Objectives: To examine the relationship of childhood physical and sexual abuse with reported parenting satisfaction and parenting role impairment later in life among American Indians (AIs).

Methods: AIs from Southwest and Northern Plains tribes who participated in a large-scale community-based study ($n=3,084$) were asked about traumatic events and family history; those with children were asked questions about their parenting experiences. Regression models estimated the relationships between childhood abuse and parenting satisfaction or parenting role impairment, and tested for mediation by depression or substance use disorders.

Results: Lifetime substance use disorder fully mediated the relationship between childhood physical abuse and both parenting satisfaction and parenting role impairment in the Northern Plains tribe. There was only partial mediation between childhood sexual abuse and parenting role impairment in the Southwest. In both

[☆] This study was supported by National Institute of Health grants R01-MH48174 (S.M. Manson and J. Beals, PIs) and P01-MH42473 (S.M. Manson, PI), and a William T. Grant Foundation Faculty Scholars Award (A.M. Libby, PI).

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tribes, lifetime depression did not meet the criteria for mediation of the relationship between childhood abuse and the two parenting outcomes. Instrumental and perceived social support significantly enhanced parenting satisfaction; negative social support reduced satisfaction and increased the likelihood of parenting role impairment. Exposure to parental violence while growing up had deleterious effects on parenting outcomes. Mothers and fathers did not differ significantly in the relation of childhood abuse experience and later parenting outcomes.

Conclusions: Strong effects of social support and mediation of substance abuse disorders in the Northern Plains offer direct ways in which childhood victims of abuse could be helped to avoid negative attributes of parenting that could put their own children at risk.

Practice implications: Mothers were not significantly different from fathers in the relation of abusive childhood experiences and later parenting outcomes, indicating both are candidates for interventions. Strong effects of social support offer avenues for interventions to parents. The prevalence of substance use disorders and their role as a mediator of two parenting outcomes in the Northern Plains should focus special attention on substance use treatment, especially among those who experienced childhood victimization. These factors offer direct ways in which childhood victims of abuse can be helped to avoid negative attributes of parenting that could put their own children at risk of violence.

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Keywords: American Indian; Child abuse; Parenting; Social support; Substance abuse; Depression

Introduction

Childhood physical abuse and childhood sexual abuse have been shown to have negative long-term health consequences, including the development of psychiatric disorders (MacMillan et al., 2001; Mullen, Martin, Romans, & Herbison, 1996; Widom, 1999) and alcohol and drug use disorders (Langeland & Hartgers, 1998; Libby et al., 2004). A related literature reports on the influence of childhood abuse on social consequences, such as parenting behaviors and attitudes (Alexander, Teti, & Anderson, 2000; Banyard, 1997; Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2003; Zuravin & Fontanella, 1999); while diverse in design, these studies all found some negative effects. The importance of parenting outcomes is twofold: first, parenting plays a special role in the intergenerational transmission of health and health risks at the biological, psychological and environmental levels, as has been demonstrated for substance use among parental substance users (Avenevoli & Merikangas, 2003; Johnson & Leff, 1999), and second, parenting plays a role in the intergenerational transmission of childhood abuse (Cappell & Heiner, 1990; Newcomb & Locke, 2001; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991).

This study examined the empirical relationship between childhood abuse and later parenting for two representative samples of American Indian tribal communities. American Indian populations are an important case study due to elevated rates of trauma that increase risks for negative health and social outcomes (Libby et al., 2005). This study filled the gaps in prior work by (1) utilizing data with broader and more detailed measures of child and adult adversities; (2) using standardized clinical measures—depression and substance use disorders—as possible mediators of diminished parenting outcomes; (3) using a comparative approach with two American Indian populations with different social and cultural histories; and

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