



Child behavior problems: Mothers' and fathers' mental health matters today and tomorrow



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ABSTRACT

Informed by a family systems framework, this study utilizes the actor-partner-interdependence model to examine how parents' mental health, including depressive symptoms and parenting stress, predict their own (actor effects) and their partners' (partner effects) reports of their children's behavior problems among 730 low-income families. Further, we examine whether mothers' and fathers' mental health in early childhood predicts children's teacher-reported social development in fifth grade. Both mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and parenting stress were associated with their own (actor effects) ratings of child behavior problems when children were 3 years ($M = 37.16$ months, $SD = 1.53$); parenting stress exerted a larger effect than depressive symptoms. Further, ratings of child behavior were predicted by partners' parenting stress for fathers but not for mothers. Greater parent depression symptoms in early childhood was associated with higher fifth graders' hyperactivity, and fathers' greater depressive symptoms was associated with lower fifth graders' cooperation. Results indicate that the mental health of both parents predicts child social skills and problem behaviors, both in early childhood and later development.

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1. Background

1.1. Introduction

Young children's social-emotional development is vulnerable to parental depression and stress (Cummings, Keller, & Davies, 2005; Shaw, Winslow, Owens, & Hood, 1998). The extant literature overwhelmingly demonstrates that parental depression and stress place children at increased risk for negative outcomes including social, emotional, and behavioral impairment (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Cummings et al., 2005; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000; Qi & Kaiser, 2003; Shaw et al., 1998). This is particularly important given the prevalence of both depression and parenting stress amongst parents of young children (Crnic & Greenberg 1990; Davé, Petersen, Sherr, & Nazareth, 2010; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996), and the greater vulnerability of young children to parental characteristics and

behaviors (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). However, most studies focus primarily on mothers, ignoring the contributions of fathers' mental health to children's outcomes, and fail to take into account the potential effects that mothers' and fathers' mental health may have on each other. Thus, the current study tests whether mothers' and fathers' mental health – including both parenting stress and depression – are associated with their own and their partners' perceptions of children's behavior problems in early childhood, and whether these early parent mental health predictors predict children's social-emotional development into early adolescence.

1.2. Effects of parents' mental health on early social development

In general, parenting stress arises when there is a discrepancy between the perceived demands of parenting and the resources available to meet those demands (Abidin, 1995). Studies have shown that parents experiencing higher levels of parenting stress, which increases parents' irritability, and punitive actions, tend to demonstrate more authoritarian and harsh parenting behaviors (Abidin, 1990; Coldwell, Pike, & Dunn, 2006; Crnic et al., 2005; Vondra & Belsky, 1993), which affects children's prosocial behaviors, academic work, and emotional well-being (Crnic & Low, 2002;

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Deater-Deckard, 2004; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998; Webster-Stratton, 1990). Likewise, children's behavior problems have been found to increase parents' level of stress (Williford, Calkins, & Keane, 2007), which in turn exacerbate children's problem behaviors, indicating a bidirectional relationship between parenting stress and children's behavior problems (Baker et al., 2003; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012).

Similarly, parental depression is thought to influence child outcomes via its effects on parenting (Bigatti, Cronan, & Anaya, 2001; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Lovejoy et al., 2000; Pelaez, Field, Pickens, & Hart, 2008). Depressed parents engage in fewer positive parenting activities, such as warmth, physical affection, support, and providing routines (Cummings et al., 2005; Leadbeater, Bishop, & Raver, 1996; Lyons-Ruth, Wolfe, Lyubchik, & Steingard, 2002). In addition, depressed parents are more likely to be negative, hostile, intrusive, and unsupportive (Albright & Tamis-LeMonda, 2002; Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Davis, Davis, Freed, & Clark, 2011). These parenting characteristics have been directly linked to disruption in children's social-emotional development including increased problem behaviors and aggression (Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992).

Although the literature is quite clear that both parenting stress and depression negatively influence parenting and, by extension, children's social-emotional outcomes, much of this research focuses on mothers' mental health and excludes fathers (Anthony et al., 2005; Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Meadows, McAnahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Phares, Duhig, & Watkins, 2002). Although there is some research to suggest that maternal depression is more detrimental to children's well-being than is paternal depression (Meadows et al., 2007; Mitchell & Cabrera, 2009), a recent meta-analysis demonstrates that effect sizes for maternal and paternal depression on parenting are essentially equal (Wilson & Durbin, 2010).

Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin & Minuchin, 1974) posits that families are comprised of subsystems, including parental systems, which influence and are influenced by each other. Hence, parents' mental health status influences not only their own parenting, but also their partner's mental health (Katz, Beach, & Joiner, 1999; Meyler, Stimpson, & Peek, 2007) and parenting (Brennan, Hammen, Katz, & LeBrocque, 2002; Goodman, 2004; Hastings, Daley, Burns, & Beck, 2006; Pesonen, Rääkkönen, Heinonen, Järvenpää, & Strandberg, 2006; Ponnet et al., 2013). Thus, the interdependent nature of parental functioning requires that both maternal and paternal mental health be examined in concert together. Moreover, without accounting for both parents' mental health, it is likely that effects of one parent's mental health – either mother or father – on child development are overestimated.

Interestingly, the literature is conflicted on the influence of parents' mental health status on partners' mental health and parenting. Some research suggests that when one parent experiences a mental health issue, the other may compensate or buffer the child from negative consequences (Kahn, Brandt, & Whitaker, 2004; Lewin et al., 2014); others find no evidence of buffering (Meadows et al., 2007). Further, parents with a partner experiencing a mental health issue are more likely to suffer mental health issues themselves (Brennan et al., 2002; Goodman, 2004); and parents experiencing depression may increase their partners' stress levels (Hastings et al., 2006). Moreover, children with two parents experiencing mental health issues are at increased risk for problem behaviors (Meadows et al., 2007).

Despite a seemingly clear relationship between parent mental health and children's behavior problems, this robust line of research has been subject to a number of methodological limitations, several of which are addressed in the current study. One common

limitation is the use of parental reports of both their own functioning and their children's behavior. In this case, parents' appraisal of their children's behavior is heavily influenced by their own mental state (Dix & Meunier, 2009; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1988), which also suffers from shared informant variance not accounted for in most analyses. This may help to explain why ratings of children's behavior problems show surprisingly low consistency across informants (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987). One way this has been addressed is by using ratings of children's behavior from teachers or from both spouses, and results from these studies confirm that associations between parental mental health and children's behaviors are not just in parents' minds, nor limited to the context of their relationship (Anthony et al., 2005; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Farver et al., 2006). The use of spouses' ratings of child misbehavior thus provides evidence that parents' ratings of children's problematic behaviors are, at least in part, more than simply measures of the influence of mental health challenges on parental perceptions of children. In the current study we utilize mother, father, and teacher report in an attempt to ensure accurate, unbiased measurement of children's social-emotional skills.

1.3. Associations between mothers' and fathers' mental health and parenting

The small but important set of studies examining both mothers' and fathers' mental health and perceptions of child behavior problems has shown consistent moderate associations between mothers' and fathers' levels of parenting stress (e.g., Baker et al., 2003; Creasey & Jarvis, 1994; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). There are several possible reasons for such associations between parents' mental health. Some research suggests associations between the mental health and parenting of two parents is caused by other factors, such as shared-background (Belsky, Woodworth, & Crnic, 1996a; Simons, Lorenz, Conger, & Wu, 1992), assortative mating (Mathews & Reus, 2001), and child characteristics such as child gender (Simons et al., 1992), age (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996), temperament (McBride, Schoppe, & Rane, 2002), and behavior (Scaramella, Neppi, Ontai, & Conger, 2008; Williford et al., 2007).

Other research indicates a more direct influence of one parent's mental health or parenting on the mental health or parenting of his or her partner. There is evidence that, in two-parent, co-resident families, fathers may play a compensatory role in parenting, buffering the effects of maternal depression on children's outcomes (Hops et al., 1987; Lewin et al., 2014; Mezulis, Hyde, & Clark, 2004; Tannenbaum & Forehand, 1994). Thus, there is a possibility of either positive or negative associations between a parents' mental health and their partners' parenting or views of their child. Further, there is a reciprocal relationship in which mental health influences couple interactions and couple interactions influence each partners' mental health (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Simons et al., 1992). Thus, we may expect that one parent's mental health symptoms may influence the partner's symptoms, and that it is important to account for the residential status of fathers in this relationship.

In order to accurately detect the effects of mothers' and fathers' mental health on their children's development, the mental health of their partner must be considered. Although there are some inconsistencies in previous research regarding the relationships between mothers' and fathers' mental health and their parenting, there is consistent evidence that both parents' mental health – including both depression and stress – are associated with one another, and with child behaviors. However, the potential conflation of parents' self-reported mental health and parent-reported child behavior problems limits the conclusions that can be drawn about the true impacts of parents' mental health on children's behavior and development. Further, few previous studies examining both mothers' and fathers' mental health and perceptions of

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