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Research article

Child maltreatment as a function of cumulative family risk: Findings from the intensive family preservation program



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ABSTRACT

This study examined child maltreatment as a function of cumulative family risk in a sample of at-risk families ($N = 837$) who were referred to an intensive family preservation program because of child behavior problems or suspected child abuse and neglect. The goal of this intensive family preservation program is to improve parenting skills and reduce immediate family stressors that may lead to an increased risk of child abuse and neglect. The findings indicate that the most prominent family risks comprising the cumulative risk scale in our sample were socio-economic disadvantage (e.g., income, unemployment, housing instability) and parental characteristics (e.g., mental/physical health, parental use of alcohol, domestic violence). Further, the results demonstrated a strong quadratic trend in the relationship between cumulative family risk and child maltreatment, and identified a risk threshold effect at three cumulative family risks after which the child risk for maltreatment increased exponentially. These findings are interpreted in the light of the current research on differentiative interventions, supporting differentiated services to the families with low vs. higher risk for child maltreatment.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a significant social problem in the United States. Current reports indicate that in 2014, approximately 6.4 million children were referred to Child Protective Services due to suspected child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Child maltreatment may include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, and neglect. These adverse experiences have significant consequences on children's functioning later in life and are associated with a wide range of mental, emotional, and behavioral problems (Gilbert et al., 2009). Thus, there is a need to understand the precursors of child maltreatment to guide the development of new or refine existing preventive interventions aimed to ensure children's safety and security in their homes.

It has been widely recognized that there is not a single factor that is related solely to child maltreatment (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998). Child abuse tends to occur in families who experience a combination of several risk factors, who are stressed, and who lack social support. Past research indicates that the most predictive family risk factors for child maltreatment include indices of socio-economic marginalization (e.g., poverty, unemployment, lack of education), poor family interactions (e.g., violence between family members, serious marital problems that affect parenting), parental dysfunction (e.g., mental health/behavioral/medical problems that might also affect parenting), and/or neighborhood violence (e.g., unsafe environments for children

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to play outside, acceptance of the use of physical punishment/violence toward children). Recent evidence from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II indicates that about half of the families reported for child maltreatment experienced a combination of several severe stressors, including unemployment, drug use, poverty, and neighborhood violence (Casanueva, Smith, Dolan, & Ringeisen, 2011). These kinds of risk factors put the family at an elevated risk for having one or more children removed from home.

A cumulative risk approach offers a framework for investigating the combined influence of interrelated stressors on family functioning and child outcomes (Appleyard et al., 2005; Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005). However applications of the cumulative risk framework for family-preservation programs (Duppung Hurley, Griffith, Casey, Ingram, & Simpson, 2011; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2012; Parra, Ross, Ringle, Samson, & Thompson, 2016; Silovsky et al., 2011) aimed at reducing family stressors, improving parenting skills and family functioning, and creating a safe environment for children at home have been limited. The current study is designed to address this gap by examining predictive associations between cumulative family risk and child maltreatment, using data from at-risk families referred to an intensive family preservation program because of child behavior problems or suspected child abuse and neglect.

1.1. Cumulative risk hypothesis

The cumulative risk hypothesis proposes that the sheer number of risk factors is a more robust predictor of adverse child outcomes than any single risk considered individually (Sameroff, 1979). Certain family risk factors, such as domestic violence and drug abuse in the household may co-occur with specific forms of child abuse. For these reasons, it is important to consider all possible family risk factors that can potentially contribute to child maltreatment. Ignoring certain family risks that could be associated with child maltreatment may lead to flawed assumptions about the potential single causes for child maltreatment (Felitti et al., 1998). The cumulative risk approach addresses the accumulation of the factors, rather than the severity of risks or the duration of risk exposure. Cumulative risk models define risks dichotomously; for example, the presence of parent mental health issues would be considered as a risk, while the absence of mental health issues would be considered as no risk. Consequently, cumulative risk is constructed by adding together multiple dichotomous risks affecting family life. For instance, a child living with parents who are struggling with unemployment, physical health, and domestic violence would be considered as having three risks. By adding stressors across multiple levels of the family environment, the cumulative risk approach could allow child welfare professionals to identify children and families who may need immediate interventions and refer them to enhanced, tailored services (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013), particularly if research identifies screening cutoff points after which accumulating risks have more damaging effects. By creating a cumulative risk index, a number of studies have examined associations between the number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and variety of psychological and health-related outcomes (e.g., Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Felitti et al., 1998).

Notwithstanding the potential value of a cumulative risk approach, the current research literature does not agree on whether the relation between cumulative risk and child maltreatment follows a linear additive model or quadratic model reflecting a risk threshold. Recent evidence from empirical studies suggests that the effect of cumulative risk factors on child maltreatment may follow a non-linear, threshold effect, such that after accumulating a critical number of family risk factors, a child's chances for maltreatment change dramatically (e.g., Appleyard et al., 2005; Horan & Widom, 2015; Lamela and Figueiredo, 2015; Lamela & Figueiredo, 2015). The conceptual model of stress vulnerability suggests that under highly stressful conditions individuals become more vulnerable to stress exposure, and the impact of stress on the individual operates via a nonlinear threshold effect, resulting in significant increase in negative outcomes after an organism surpasses a quantitative limit of stressors (Besser, Priel, Flett, & Wiznitzer, 2007). Indeed the medical research has long been arguing that linear models of stress provide insufficient information for understanding the relationship between stress and negative outcomes, and have proposed the use of non-linear models accounting for stress threshold (Aldwin & Stokols, 1988; Kessler, Magee, & Nelson, 1996). However, one of the major limitations of current child welfare research is that the majority of studies still consider a linear, more restrictive relationship between the number of family risks and child maltreatment, such that every additional risk experienced by the family is associated with an incrementally higher probability of negative child outcomes (Sameroff, 1979). The additive assumption of the linear approach might underestimate individual reaction to stress under conditions of heightened accumulated stress, which could lead to flawed conclusions about the effects of family risks on child abuse and neglect. An understanding of whether the effect of cumulative family risks is linked with a specific "cutoff point" after which the probability of child maltreatment accelerates, could help prevention research to identify families with greater risk for child maltreatment (e.g., if families with three or more risk factors have significantly greater risk for child maltreatment than those with two or fewer) in order to refer them to intense and tailored services.

In a recent meta-analysis of 196 studies, Evans et al. (2013) examined how exposure to cumulative risk factors in childhood is associated with a variety of detrimental outcomes in children. Their findings highlighted various applications of the cumulative risk approach in predicting children's academic, cognitive, and socio-emotional outcomes. In child welfare research the cumulative risk framework has been used in a context of examining predictive associations between exposure to cumulative risks in childhood and long-term behavioral, and socio-emotional adjustment in adulthood (e.g., Topitzes, Pate, Berman, & Medina-Kirchner, 2016; Villodas et al., 2016; Wade et al., 2016). Finely, only a few studies have specifically examined child abuse and neglect as a function of cumulative family risks (e.g., Silovsky et al., 2011; Wekerle et al., 2007), and applications of the cumulative risk approach in a context of preventing child abuse and neglect in family preservation programs are still rare.

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