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Intergenerational transmission of child abuse and neglect: Do maltreatment type, perpetrator, and substantiation status matter?

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ABSTRACT

A maternal history of childhood maltreatment is thought to be a potent risk factor for child abuse and neglect, yet the extent of continuity across generations is unclear, with studies reporting vastly different rates of intergenerational transmission. Disparate findings may be due to lack of attention to the nature of maltreatment experiences in each generation. We sought to expand the current literature by examining the role of maltreatment type, perpetrator identity, and substantiation status of reports to child protective services (CPS) on intergenerational maltreatment among adolescent mothers ($n = 417$) and their children. We found that when mothers had at least one report of childhood maltreatment (substantiated or not), the odds that they maltreated their children increased by 72% ($OR = 2.52$), compared to mothers who are not maltreated, but the odds were considerably lower when we limited analysis to substantiated reports. Both a maternal history of substantiated neglect and multiple type maltreatment (neglect *and* physical or sexual abuse) were associated with increased risk of child maltreatment, yet the likelihood of children experiencing multiple maltreatment perpetrated with their mothers identified as perpetrators increased over 300% when mothers had a childhood history of multiple maltreatment.

Child abuse and neglect is widespread and is associated with adverse consequences for children that cascade throughout the life course (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council [IOM & NRC], 2014), in areas including physical and mental health (Gilbert et al., 2009; Nanni, Uher, & Danese, 2012), insecure attachments (Baer and Martinez, 2006; Stronach et al., 2011), small brain size, and negative alterations to brain circuitry (Jedd et al., 2015; Pollak et al., 2010; Sheridan, Fox, Zeanah, Nelson, & McLaughlin, 2012). Worldwide, approximately 23 percent of adults have suffered physical abuse as a child, 36 percent have experienced emotional abuse, and 16 percent have experienced physical neglect (World Health Organization, 2014). In the U.S., child protective service agencies received 3.6 million reports of child abuse and neglect involving an estimated 6.6 million children in 2014 alone (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (USDHHS), 2016). The vast majority of maltreated children (79.5%) suffer neglect, and biological parents are most likely to be their perpetrators (88.6%). Children born to adolescent mothers are at especially heightened risk for maltreatment (Connelly & Straus, 1992), with one study showing that they were twice as likely to be maltreated than children of adult mothers (Stevens-Simon, Nelligan, & Kelly, 2001).

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While considerable progress has been made with regard to developing, disseminating, and evaluating programs that aim to address child abuse and neglect, the evidence on how best to prevent child maltreatment lags far behind (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Extant literature reflects a traditional approach to child welfare in the U.S., which focuses largely on child maltreatment once it has already occurred versus primary prevention (Stagner & Lansing, 2009). A critical step in developing effective prevention approaches is attaining a thorough understanding of its etiology so that programs can be designed to address the most salient risk factors (Dubowitz et al., 2014) and to promote protective factors that support resilient child and family functioning (Harper Browne, 2014; Horton, 2003). As there is no single cause of child abuse and neglect, etiological models informed by an ecological perspective implicate not only parents' individual characteristics, such as their histories of childhood maltreatment, but also the social environments in which children and their parents live, including neighborhood characteristics, poverty, or community violence (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006). A parental history of childhood maltreatment is postulated as one potent risk factor, yet the extent to which a mother's history of abuse or neglect increases the odds that she will maltreat her offspring is unclear.

1. Intergenerational child abuse and neglect

One reason that child abuse and neglect is so difficult to prevent may be that abusive and neglectful parenting is passed on from one generation to the next. However, a thorough review of the empirical literature reveals markedly inconsistent findings regarding the degree to which parents' own experiences of maltreatment in childhood predispose them to abusive and neglectful behavior. Studies support the intergenerational transmission hypothesis – that parents who experienced abuse and neglect when they were children are at elevated risk for maltreating their own children compared to non-maltreated parents (Heyman & Slep, 2002; Newcomb & Locke, 2001; Pears & Capaldi, 2001). However, criticisms for methodological weaknesses have been levied (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000). Kaufman and Zigler (1987) first estimated that approximately 30% of maltreated parents continued the cycle of maltreatment, Ertem et al. (2000) reviewed the literature over a decade later, concluding that much of the evidence was flawed and that transmission rates varied widely among studies (1% to 38%). A more recent review by Thornberry, Knight, and Lovegrove (2012) found mixed evidence of support for the intergenerational transmission hypothesis among studies with the strongest designs. As a result, it remains unclear the extent to which prevention efforts would benefit from focusing on this issue.

Several methodological challenges contribute to conflicting findings on intergenerational maltreatment, including inconsistent definitions, measurement techniques, and study designs. For example, associations among different measures of maltreatment (e.g., state child welfare records, self-reported child welfare system involvement, self-reported maltreatment) are weak to moderate at best (Leve, Khurana, & Reich, 2015). Official records from child protection service (CPS) are used most widely and have the advantage of being systematically collected, but this method has the disadvantage of undercounting actual instances of child abuse and neglect, as they only represent maltreatment that has been reported to child welfare authorities and also may constitute the most severe cases. There is also evidence that there is little association between substantiation status and child outcomes (Hussey et al., 2005). Thus, to identify a larger number of children who have been victimized, child maltreatment may best be defined as any report of abuse and neglect to CPS (i.e., both substantiated and unsubstantiated reports). Putnam-Hornstein, Cederbaum, King, Eastman, and Trickett (2015) tested this approach in a population-level longitudinal study on intergenerational maltreatment by adolescent mothers and found that a maternal history of either unsubstantiated or substantiated maltreatment was a strong predictor of maltreatment and CPS involvement in the next generation.

Another common measurement flaw is the failure to distinguish between intergenerational continuity and transmission, the former representing situations in which children of maltreated parents have been abused or neglected irrespective of whether or not the perpetrators were actually their parents, and the latter referring to a subgroup of these families in which parents who were maltreated also have been identified as the perpetrators of maltreatment (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Valentino, Nuttal, Comas, Borkowski, & Akai, 2012). Studies that do not distinguish perpetrators may find higher rates of intergenerational maltreatment than do researchers who narrow their investigations to instances in which the parent was both the victim and the perpetrator. Further, rates of continuity may vary depending on the number of perpetrators. Overall, a parental history of childhood maltreatment may be a stronger predictor of parent-perpetrated child maltreatment than of child maltreatment in general, though this remains to be explored in the empirical literature.

Another methodological issue that may affect rates of intergenerational transmission and continuity is the nature of the sample. Some subgroups are exposed to more risks associated with child maltreatment, such as adolescent mothers with young children. For example, parenting prior to adulthood may expose young families to a wide variety of factors (e.g., cognitive immaturity, single parent status, poverty, social isolation) that are linked to child abuse and neglect (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Whitman et al., 2001). Indeed, research suggests that teenage mothers are more likely than are adult mothers to perpetuate cycles of maltreatment, with recent prospective studies reporting rates of transmission as high as 54% by the time children reached 21 years of age (Valentino et al., 2012). Finally, one aspect of measuring intergenerational maltreatment that holds considerable promise for reconciling the debate about continuity versus discontinuity is type-to-type (e.g., physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse) transmission. At present, the majority of studies do not account for variation in the type of maltreatment in each generation (Kim, 2009).