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Parenting children with down syndrome: An analysis of parenting styles, parenting dimensions, and parental stress

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ABSTRACT

Background: Effective parenting is vital for a child's development. Although much work has been conducted on parenting typically developing children, little work has examined parenting children with Down syndrome.

Aims: The purpose of the current study was to compare the parenting styles and dimensions in mothers of children with DS and mothers of TD children.

Methods and procedures: Thirty-five mothers of children with DS and 47 mothers of TD children completed questionnaires about parenting, parental stress, child behavior problems, and child executive function.

Outcomes and results: We found that mothers of children with DS use an authoritative parenting style less and a permissive parenting style more than mothers of TD children. Additionally, we found that mothers of children with DS use reasoning/induction and verbal hostility less and ignoring misbehavior more than mothers of TD children. All of these differences, except for those of reasoning/induction, were at least partially accounted for by the higher levels of parental stress in the DS group.

Conclusions and implications: Parenting interventions should be focused on reducing parental stress and training mothers to parent under stress in an effort to improve parenting techniques, which would, in theory, improve long-term child outcomes for children with DS.

What this paper adds?

The current study is the first study to fully examine parenting styles and dimensions in mothers of children with Down syndrome (DS) in comparison to mothers of typically developing (TD) children. Both parenting styles and dimensions were measured in an effort to gain the most complete picture of parenting children with DS. The study highlights both differences and similarities in parenting between mothers of children with DS and mothers of TD children, offering insight into potential parenting interventions for mothers of children with DS. The current study also examined the effect of parental stress on parenting styles and dimensions. Repeatedly, stress has been found to be higher in mothers of children with DS than in mothers of TD children, and the current study directly links this increased stress to differences in parenting.

1. Parenting children with down syndrome: an analysis of parenting styles, parenting dimensions, and parental stress

Effective parenting is vital for a child's intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development. Although much work has been

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conducted on parenting typically developing (TD) children, little work has examined parenting children with Down syndrome (DS). However, parenting has a major influence on a child's development regardless of the child's intellectual functioning. The current study compared parenting in mothers of children with DS to mothers of TD children to gain a better understanding of the role parents play within the DS population.

1.1. Parenting styles and dimensions

Baumrind's (1971) development of parenting styles provided a framework from which subsequent parenting research was shaped. From this work, she developed three parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. The different parenting styles are indicative of varying parental characteristics that are used to socialize children, and each parenting style is a particular combination of parenting responsiveness and demandingness (Baumrind, 1996). Baumrind's three parenting styles have consistently predicted child outcomes including social competence, academic performance, psychosocial development and problem behavior (e.g., Baumrind, 1991; Weiss & Schwarz, 1996).

Authoritative parents stress parental control through the use of warm, responsive parenting by providing explanations, treating the child as an individual, and working to promote the child's autonomy. Such parents apply firm control when necessary but are not overly restrictive; they take into consideration their child's point of view but never base the final decision solely on the child's desires. Finally, they utilize skills of reasoning, clear communication, and rational discussion when interacting with their child. Authoritative parenting has been repeatedly associated with the most positive child outcomes (e.g., Baumrind, 1991; Milevsky et al., 2007; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). Authoritarian parents emphasize parental control by demanding obedience, frequently using punishment, and providing little warmth, affection, or nurturance. Such parents maintain a rigid, absolute standard for their children and value obedience above all else; they utilize punitive and forceful measures in times when the children's belief contradicts their own. They frequently restrict the child's autonomy and engage in limited communication with the child, instead preferring that the child simply accept whatever they say to be true. Authoritarian parenting is associated with several negative outcomes including low self-esteem, decreased happiness, decreased academic success, increased alcohol and drug use, and increased anxiety (e.g., Baumrind, 1991; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Wolfradt et al., 2003). Permissive parents have limited parental control and, while they are warm, they place few demands on their children. Such parents completely accept their children's desires and actions and require little of their children in terms of household responsibility and obedient behavior. They attempt to use reason and discuss family decisions and rules with their children but never apply power to accomplish parenting goals. Permissive parenting is associated with more negative child outcomes including decreased self-control, self-reliance, and academic success (e.g., Dornbusch et al., 1987; Furnham & Cheng, 2000).

A common critique of Baumrind's parenting styles is that they were developed from homogenous samples consisting of Euro-American, well-educated middle class families. Many have questioned if these parenting styles would result in the same child outcome in families of a different race or socioeconomic status (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996), and results have found that authoritative parenting is not the only form of adaptive parenting. For example, researchers have identified a "no nonsense" parenting style in African American and low-income parents (Brody & Flor, 1998; Carpenter & Mendez, 2013). No nonsense parenting combines authoritarian parenting (i.e., physical discipline and control) with warmth and affection, and it has been found to be related with child competence for those living in a dangerous context and/or low-income families. This exemplifies the fact that contextual and demographic factors need to be included in the analysis of parenting styles.

Another critique of Baumrind's parenting styles is that parents may not perfectly fit into one style; rather, one's overarching pattern of parenting may exhibit aspects of more than one style. To provide a more detailed understanding of parenting techniques, some researchers examine parenting dimensions instead of styles. Parenting dimensions piece apart aspects of each parenting style, such as parental warmth or hostility, and measure these aspects on a continuum where parents can be high or low on each dimension (Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005). While consensus has yet to be reached on the exact number and name of the parenting dimensions, research has repeatedly found support for the existence of dimensions such as warmth, hostility, involvement, ignoring, directiveness, and autonomy as well as the use of these dimensions to predict child well-being (for review, see Skinner et al., 2005). Further, factor analyses have confirmed that parenting styles break down into reliable parenting dimensions (e.g., Olivari, Tagliabue, & Confalonieri, 2013; Robinson, Mandaleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995). Examining parenting at the more detailed dimensional level should allow for a clearer understanding of parenting for researchers, reducing theoretical ambiguity and seemingly inconsistent findings and improving communication with parents about what child rearing practices are most beneficial.

1.2. Parenting children with intellectual and developmental disability

Parenting styles and dimensions have been discussed at length in parents of TD children, but limited attention has been granted to parenting children with intellectual disability (ID). ID is characterized by both intellectual deficits and adaptive functioning impairments with onset during the developmental period (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with ID typically have an IQ of 70 or below and impairments in one or more aspect of daily life such as communication, social/interpersonal skills, academic skills, work, or personal independence.

Research has repeatedly found that parents of children with ID show higher stress levels than parents of TD children (Baxter, Cummins, & Yiolitis, 2000; Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Shonkoss, & Krauss, 2001; Norlin & Broberg, 2013; Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006). Much of this added stress comes from experiences of increased child behavior problems (e.g., Meppelder, Hodes, Kef, & Schuengel, 2015; Sloper, Knussen, Turner, & Cunningham, 1991), greater care-giving demands (Crnic, Friedrich, & Greenberg, 1983;