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Mental Health Problems in Young Children: the Role of Mothers' Coping and Parenting Styles and Characteristics of Family Functioning

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Abstract

The present study investigates the mother-related characteristics of family functioning that are associated with their children's mental health problems. The sample embraced 194 young children with symptoms of mental and behavioral disorders and their mothers. The children were diagnosed during play therapy; the mothers were examined by using standardized interviews and questionnaires which measure coping and parenting styles. Behavioral and emotional disorders were more typical for boys of younger age and are related to authoritarian or rejecting parenting styles in their mothers who underestimated the importance of emotional contacts. The mothers demonstrated maladaptive coping styles. The family environment was characterized by a focus on material values, violence and alcohol abuse situations, transgenerational stereotypes of female domination. The results indicate a dysfunctional role of mothers' coping and parenting styles in relation to their children's mental health.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in factors determining children's psychological well-being and mental health. Although there have been dozens of studies into the environmental and parental predictors of child behavior problems by far fewer studies have investigated the role of maternal factors in children mental health. Meanwhile, the parenting qualities of mothers and fathers have diverse but strong correlations with children's mental health [1]. Maternal characteristics are very important in predicting child behavior problems and cognitive competence [2]. Moreover, the psychological well-being of mothers raising children with developmental and health problems is connected with their children's behavioral symptoms [3]. On the other hand, most studies of health problems in children are focused on health in adolescents or developmental problems in children [4]. The mental health of young children without developmental disorders in association with maternal psychosocial characteristics has been understudied [5]. That is why the purpose of the present study was to find particular relationships between young children's emotional well-being and the mother-related characteristics of family functioning. The research was designed to test the hypothesis concerning the negative impact which mothers' maladaptive coping and disharmonious parenting styles have on their children's mental health.

2. Method

The sample of the study was formed of preschool children and their mothers living in the Chuvash republic and its capital Cheboksary, who visited a psychotherapist and a clinical psychologist due to mental health problems (MHP) in their children. The first group of the participants included 194 young children aged 3-7 years (115 boys and 79 girls). Most of them were referred to the mental health clinic by a pediatrician. The children's clinical symptoms met the criteria for ICD-10 disorders of psychological development or behavioral and emotional disorders with its onset usually occurring in childhood and adolescence. All the children joined an outpatient treatment program. The second group of the participants was these children's mothers. Their age ranged from 25 to 47 years and they did not report any history of mental disorder. The problem areas of child behavior, areas of tension and anxiety were assessed during 30-minute sessions of play therapy with the children and their mothers. These sessions helped to replicate usual emotional and behavioral experiences that occur in the families.

All the 194 mothers were diagnosed using standardized interviews and questionnaires to measure their coping and parenting styles: 1) a standardized socio-cultural interview about their educational and professional background, financial wellbeing, cultural variables and the characteristics of family functioning [6]; 2) a coping mode inventory (E. Heim), a self-report instrument for revealing 26 specific coping modes in the cognitive, emotional and behavioral areas of mental activity [7]; 3) a coping strategy indicator (J.H. Amirkhan), a 33-item self-report measurement of three basic coping strategies – problem-solving, social support-seeking and avoidance [8]; 4) an inventory for analyzing family relationships (E. Eidemiller and V. Justickis) that was administered to determine a parenting style [9]. The results of the examination of the mothers were compared to those of normal group respondents (NGR) and the group of respondents with psychological disorders (RPD) that can be found in literature [6].

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Children's Mental Health

According to the clinical and psychological examination, various MHP in children met the criteria for ICD-10 disorders of psychological development or behavioral and emotional disorders. No signs of mental retardation or other developmental disorders were diagnosed in them.

The most frequent reason for visiting a mental health professional in every fourth child (24.2%) was behavioural and emotional disorders (F98) highly associated with psychosocial problems in his or her family. The most common forms were stuttering with a frequent repetition or prolongation of sounds or syllables (n=26), nonorganic

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