



Research article

Parents' perception of child behavior, parenting stress, and child abuse potential: Individual and partner influences

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ABSTRACT

Based on the Social Information Processing model of parenting risk for child abuse, the present study examined the associations between mothers' and fathers' perception of child behavior and child abuse potential, as well as whether parenting stress mediates the association between these constructs. Two hundred and fifty-nine mother-father couples raising preschool children answered the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), the Parenting Stress Index (PSI), and the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI). The results of dyadic path analysis showed that perception of child behavior was related to heightened parenting stress and abuse potential in both mothers and fathers. Concerning partner effects, we found that mothers' perception of child behavior problems was positively associated with fathers' parenting stress and that the higher the mothers' distress, the higher the fathers' risk of physical abuse. Finally, parenting distress partially mediated the association between parents' perception of child behavior and child abuse potential, with mothers' perception of their children as problematic showing a significant indirect effect through distress on their own abuse risk and on fathers' CAP as well. These findings suggest that parental distress may represent a critical mechanism by which parents' negative views of their children contribute to abuse potential. Moreover, mothers seem to influence fathers' tendency towards abusive behaviors.

1. Introduction

Child Abuse Potential (CAP) can be defined as 'a parent's self-report of the likelihood or possibility of abuse perpetration' (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010, p. 208), or, in other terms, as an estimate of the likelihood a parent will become abusive (Rodriguez, 2010). Many studies have used measures of CAP (1994, Milner, 1986) as predictive indices of risk of physical abuse (e.g., Walker & Davies, 2010; Chaffin & Valle, 2003), conceiving child abuse as occurring along a parent-child aggression continuum, in which mild physical discipline and abuse denote opposing endpoints (e.g., Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Rodriguez, 2018; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008).

Among the theoretical frameworks that have been advanced to understand how various risk factors contribute to the prediction of child abuse, Milner's (1993, 2000, 2003) Social Information Processing (SIP) model considers child abuse as an extreme consequence of parenting problems. Consistent with cognitive-behavioral theories of physical child abuse (e.g., Azar & Twentyman, 1986; Bugental et al., 2002), the SIP model proposes that parents' social-cognitive capacities are the basic building blocks underlying parenting behaviors (e.g., discipline responses), which can escalate into child abuse. More in detail, mothers and fathers hold a

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repertoire of preexisting cognitive schemas based on past experience (e.g., problem-solving strategies, attributional style towards children) that they bring into their parenting role (Azar, 2002). These schemas influence how information from any given new parent-child interaction is perceived and interpreted, and guide subsequent parenting behaviors (e.g., Camisasca & Di Blasio, 2014; Camisasca, Procaccia, Miragoli, Valtolina, & Di Blasio, 2017; Crouch & Milner, 2005). According to the SIP model, before implementing a discipline response, parents proceed through a series of cognitive stages: They must accurately perceive the situation (Stage 1), interpret their children's behavior in that situation (Stage 2), integrate available information (Stage 3), select their discipline response and monitor their behavior (Stage 4). Inaccurate perceptions, biased interpretations, failures in integrating information or to adequately monitor one's own disciplinary action may increase the likelihood of physical abuse.

Consistent with the SIP model (2000, Milner, 1993), existing evidence suggests that parents' cognitions such as perception of child behavior, attributions, and expectations are significant predictors of child physical abuse potential (e.g., Crouch et al., 2010; Dadds, Mullens, McAllister, & Atkinson, 2003; de Paúl, Asla, Pérez-Albéniz, & De Cádiz, 2006; Haskett, Scott, Grant, Ward, & Robinson, 2003; McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008; Rodriguez, 2018). For instance, research has shown that the abusive or at-risk parents tend to attribute negative child behavior to more internal causes (Dadds et al., 2003), to interpret information in more hostile way (Farc, Crouch, Skowronski, & Milner, 2008), and to rate their children's behaviors as more stressful (Dopke & Milner, 2000), than non-clinic or low-risk parents. Concerning parents' perception of child behavior, several studies have found that abusive parents hold highly negative views of their children's behavior (e.g., Culp, Howell, Culp, & Blankemeyer, 2000; Haskett et al., 2003; Kinard, 1995; Lau, Valeri, McCarty, & Weisz, 2006; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). In a clinical sample of mothers of children with diagnosed externalizing behavior problems, McElroy and Rodriguez (2008) found that child abuse potential was significantly associated with mothers' perception of child behavior problems as measured by the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), even though mothers' perception of their children as problematic did not independently predict CAP in this clinical sample. However, in a recent study employing a community sample (Rodriguez, 2018), mothers' reports of child behavior as problematic significantly predicted abuse potential, together with approval of physical punishment and negative discipline attributions. Significant associations between parents' negative views of their children and CAP have been found also in an Italian community sample (Miragoli, Stagni Brenca, & Di Blasio, 2011).

2. Parenting stress as a mediator of the association between parents' perception of child behavior and CAP

In addition to the cognitive factors posited by the SIP model, research has examined the contribution of contextual and affective factors such as parents' experience of stress and negative affect to the risk of child physical abuse (e.g., depression, anger, anxiety; Crouch & Behl, 2001; Haskett et al., 2003; Nayak & Milner, 1998; Mammen, Kolko, & Pilkonis, 2002; Milner, 2000; Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). Parenting stress results from the parent's evaluation that the demands of the parenting role are exceeding his or her coping abilities (Abidin, 1995; Morgan, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2002) and it has been theorized as a complex, multi-determined process, including both parent-related sources and individual distress (e.g., Abidin, 1992; Camisasca, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2014; Camisasca, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2016; Camisasca, Miragoli, Milani, & Di Blasio, 2016; Deater-Deckard, 1998). High levels of parenting stress are thought to interfere with the caregiver's ability to effectively cope with parenting-related difficulties (Di Blasio et al., 2017; Di Blasio, Camisasca, Miragoli, Ionio, & Milani, 2017; Jackson & Huang, 2000), which may result in increased use of inappropriate disciplinary strategies and higher risk of physical abuse (Azar & Wolfe, 2006; McPherson, Lewis, Lynn, Haskett, & Behrend, 2009).

Indeed, several studies have documented a substantial relation between parenting stress and abuse potential (e.g., Crouch & Behl, 2001; Crum & Moreland, 2017; Haskett et al., 2003; Rodriguez, Baker, Pu, & Tucker, 2017; Rodriguez, Silvia, & Gaskin, 2017; Tucker, Rodriguez, & Baker, 2017; Webster-Stratton, 1988). Also, it has been shown that abusive parents report significantly higher levels of parenting stress and negative affect than non-abusive parents (Chan, 1994; Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Holden & Banez, 1996; Miragoli & Di Blasio, 2012; Miragoli et al., 2016; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991).

Thus far, researchers have generally considered parents' cognitive schemas (advanced by the SIP model) and contextual affective factors (parents' stress and negative affect) as independent predictors of abuse potential, testing their unique contribution to the explanation of variance in physical abuse risk (e.g., Haskett et al., 2003). Other studies, however, have proposed a transactional relationship between parental stress, child behavior problems, and child abuse potential (see Crum & Moreland, 2017): Reports of child behavioral difficulties have been found to contribute (even longitudinally) to increased parental stress (e.g., Krahé, Bondü, Höse, & Esser, 2015; Mash & Johnston, 1983; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Walker & Cheng, 2007) and this association is particularly strong in abusing parents (Estroff et al., 1984).

3. Mothers' and fathers' risk factors for child abuse potential

Although fathers have lower potential risk of becoming child physical abusers than mothers (Romero-Martínez, Figueiredo, & Moya-Albiol, 2014), research has shown that they are involved in more serious cases of maltreatment (e.g., Pittman & Buckley, 2006). It has thus been argued that more attention should be given to paternal risk factors for child abuse (e.g., Dubowitz, 2006; Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Guterman & Lee, 2005). Most literature on child abuse potential has so far employed samples of mothers (e.g., McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008; Montes, de Paul, & Milner, 2001), while less research has examined child abuse potential in father-mother couples (e.g., Margolin & Gordis, 2003; Pittman & Buckley, 2006; Romero-Martínez et al., 2014; Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991; Rodriguez, Baker et al., 2017, 2017b; Tucker et al., 2017).

Overall, existing research has found comparable risk profiles for fathers and mothers (e.g., Dubowitz, 2006; Pittman & Buckley,

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