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Resilience in high-risk adolescents of mothers with recurrent depressive disorder: The contribution of fathers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of paternal emotional support as a resilience promoter in offspring of mothers with depression by considering the role of fathers' mental health and the quality of the couple relationship. Two hundred and sixty-five mothers with recurrent unipolar depression, partners and adolescents from Wales were assessed. Paternal emotional support, couple relationship quality, and paternal depression were assessed at baseline; adolescent mental health symptoms were assessed using the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment at follow-up. Results showed evidence of an indirect pathway whereby couple relationship quality predicted paternal emotional support ($\beta = -.21$, 95% CI $[-.34, -.08]$; $p = .002$) which in turn predicted adolescent depression ($\beta = -.18$, 95% CI $[-.33, -.04]$; $p = .02$), but not disruptive behaviours ($\beta = -.08$, 95% CI $[-.22, .07]$; $p = .30$), after controlling for relevant confounders. The findings highlight that fathers and the broader family system play an important role in enhancing resilience to depression symptoms in at-risk adolescents.

1. Introduction

Maternal depression is a common and consistently replicated risk factor for adolescent depression and antisocial behaviour (Garber, 2006; Goodman & Gotlib, 1999; Mars et al., 2012). However, whilst many young people with a depressed mother do experience serious and enduring psychological difficulties, others exhibit good mental health outcomes (Collishaw et al., 2016; Lewandowski et al., 2014; Pargas, Brennan, Hammen, & Le Brocque, 2010). Understanding factors that help promote resilience can

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be informative for designing preventative interventions (Beardslee, Solantaus, Morgan, Gladstone, & Kowalenko, 2012).

One area that has received little attention is the role that fathers play in promoting resilience in offspring of depressed mothers. A recent study of offspring of depressed parents identified paternal emotional support (i.e., the emotional relationship with the child reflecting warmth, support and responsiveness) as being strongly associated with adolescent mental health resilience (Collishaw et al., 2016). This initial finding is of potential significance in terms of implications for family-based prevention of adolescent depression, but also raises some important questions that remain unaddressed. The first of these considers the interplay between paternal emotional support and other family-based processes related to children's adjustment in the context of maternal depression. Related issues are the extent to which father's own mental health and the quality of the inter-parental relationship help enhance fathers' emotional support to adolescents, and the extent to which paternal emotional support helps explain links between these broader family factors and offspring adjustment. Second, it remains unclear whether the association between paternal emotional support and adolescent mental health simply reflects 'reverse causation', i.e. young people with better mental health seeking out or evoking greater paternal emotional support. The third question considers whether apparent beneficial effects of paternal emotional support might be better explained in terms of effects on mothers' depression symptom course? If alternative explanations such as these can be ruled out, this would provide much clearer evidence for the potential benefits of including fathers in family-based interventions aimed at preventing adolescent depression and disruptive behaviours. This study addresses each of these questions.

1.1. Resilience in young people with a depressed mother

Interest in resilience arises from findings showing substantial variation in outcomes for children and adolescents exposed to psychosocial adversity, with many individuals avoiding problems often associated with a given risk exposure and instead showing positive adaptation (Garmezy, 1971; Rutter, 1979). Definitions of resilience vary across studies (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001), but there is common agreement that it should be considered as a dynamic construct involving *better than expected* outcomes given the extent and severity of earlier adversity (Rutter, 2012, 2013).

Resilience processes may vary across development and also for different types of outcomes (e.g. depression and disruptive behaviour). Whilst many resilience studies have compared subgroups of at-risk children with more or less adaptive functioning, another more flexible approach that allows investigation of resilience in specific domains of adaptation involves controlling for the severity of risk or adversity. In particular, models controlling for risk severity can provide a more direct measure of adaptation in specific domains, highlighting better functioning compared with that shown by others experiencing the same level of risk. It has been argued that resilience reflects 'ordinary' adaptive processes that are common and potentially malleable, for example good quality family relationships (Masten, 2001), and as such might have important implications for preventative interventions (Collishaw et al., 2016).

Most previous studies of resilience to maternal depression have examined the characteristics of subgroups of children and adolescents exposed to depression who avoid emergence of mental health problems. These studies suggest that biological, psychological, and family factors are all important (Collishaw et al., 2016; Lewandowski et al., 2014; Pargas et al., 2010; Silk et al., 2007). Previous research has emphasised the importance of the child's relationship with the depressed parent, as well as broader aspects of the family system such as marital conflict and family communication (Beardslee, Gladstone, Wright, & Cooper, 2003; Pargas et al., 2010; Shelton & Harold, 2008). Less is known about whether and how fathers can help promote resilience when the child's mother suffers from depression.

1.2. The role of fathers in promoting resilience

Maternal depression is hypothesised to impact on risk of child and adolescent psychopathology through genetic and environmental routes (Lewis, Rice, Harold, Collishaw, & Thapar, 2011; Silberg, Maes, & Eaves, 2010; Tully, Iacono, & McGue, 2008), and it is becoming increasingly recognised that fathers might also contribute to risk processes underlying offspring depression and antisocial behaviour (Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001; Ramchandani, Stein, Evans, & O'Connor, 2005). To date, however, very little is known about the role fathers play in promoting resilience in adolescents affected by maternal depression. Understanding whether fathers can help mitigate the cross-generational transmission of psychopathology associated with maternal depression may help inform intervention and prevention efforts. Importantly, whilst a number of family-based interventions already exist, these rarely include both parents and do not specifically focus on fathers as a possible source of resilience for children and young people (Beardslee et al., 2012).

A longitudinal community-based study of children (assessed on four occasions from infancy to pre-school) examined paternal involvement (comprising of warmth, control or amount of time spent with infant) as a potential moderator of the association between maternal depression and children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (Mezulis, Hyde, & Clark, 2004). Findings showed that increased father involvement in infancy mitigated the impact of maternal depression when fathers' parenting was characterised by greater warmth and control, but exacerbated problems when fathers were themselves depressed. Studies extending into adolescence are an urgent priority, given that adolescence is a period of major psychological, biological and social change for young people, and a time of particular risk for the development of depression and other psychiatric problems (Kessler et al., 2007; Patton & Viner, 2007).

Our previous study of parents with recurrent depressive disorder highlighted cumulative influences of child, family, and peer influences on mental health resilience in a high-risk sample of adolescents (Collishaw et al., 2016). Paternal emotional support emerged as a particularly strong predictor of good mental health, contributing over and above other protective factors and maternal depression severity. The objective here is to address a number of important additional questions related to the role of paternal emotional support in enhancing resilience in families affected by maternal depression.

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