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Parenting daily hassles, child temperament, and social adjustment in preschool

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to explore the relations between child temperament, parenting daily hassles, and children's social adjustment in preschool. The participants were 122 preschool children ($M_{\text{age}} = 48.59$ months, $SD = 6.92$). Parents completed measures of child temperament and parenting daily hassles. Preschool social adjustment was assessed through teacher ratings and behavioral observations. Among the results, parenting daily hassles predicted child externalizing problems beyond the contribution of child temperament characteristics. As well, child temperament interacted with parenting hassles in the prediction of adjustment outcomes. Results are discussed in terms of the complex inter-associations between child temperament and stress and their contributions to child social adjustment.

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1. Introduction

Stress is a part of life for most children. It may be generated through major life events (i.e., war, parental death, ill-health), or more commonly through the stressors of daily life, such as homework, arguments with parents, fights with siblings, and peer teasing. These relatively minor stressful events, or daily hassles, may play a critical role in understanding stress and symptoms within individuals (Compas, Howell, Phares, Williams, & Ledoux, 1989). In fact, results from several studies have indicated that daily hassles are better predictors of adjustment than are major life events for adults (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981; Lazarus &

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Folkman, 1984) as well as for children and adolescents (Compas, Davis, & Forsythe, 1985; Rowlinson & Felner, 1989). In this regard, it has been argued that major life events may have their most significant impact on health and adjustment indirectly, by increasing the frequency and intensity of daily stressors, which in turn lead to symptoms (Compas et al., 1989; Farber, Primavera, & Felner, 1983).

The psychological and behavioral effects of stress on children's adjustment can be quite extensive. Children experiencing stress will generally show higher levels of maladaptive behavior than children who are not experiencing stress (e.g., Cowen et al., 1992; Creasey, Mitts, & Catanzaro, 1995). Some children experiencing stress may display internalizing problems, including depressive symptoms, clinging behavior, hypersensitivity, and social withdrawal. In contrast, other children may respond to stress by exhibiting externalizing behaviors such as hyperactivity, aggression, attention seeking, rough play, and non-compliance (Banez & Compas, 1990; Cowen et al., 1992; Rybski-Beaver, 1997; Strauss, Forehand, Smith, & Frame, 1986).

The underlying nature of the link between stress and adjustment is likely quite complex. Different kinds of stress likely have differential impacts on children (Compas et al., 1989; Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). As well, children may differ in their responses to stress as a function of their temperamental characteristics (Barton & Zeanah, 1990). The primary goal of the present study was to explore the associations between stress in the home (i.e., parental daily hassles), child temperament, and children's social adjustment at preschool. In addition, we sought to investigate how child temperament and parenting stress might *interact* in the prediction of child social adjustment.

1.1. Parenting daily hassles and child social adjustment

There is a large empirical literature linking parenting stress (in particular, maternal stress) to a wide range of child adjustment difficulties (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990; Holahan & Moos, 1987; Kyrios & Prior, 1990; Mash & Johnston, 1983; Myers et al., 1992; Pianta, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1990; Stewart, Deblois, & Cummings, 1980). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that children of parents who are experiencing high levels of daily parenting stress may be more adversely affected than if a major life crisis had occurred in the family (Kliewer & Kung, 1998).

Crnic and Greenberg (1990) described two types of daily hassles related to having children. The first includes hassles related to the everyday routine of the child's life (e.g., preparing them for school, sibling arguments, scheduling, housework), whereas the second is more directly related to undesirable child behavior (e.g., whining, misbehaving, being difficult to manage). Results from this study also indicated that parenting hassles related to challenging behaviors were more strongly associated with negative child outcomes than hassles due to general parenting tasks.

The effects of a stressor are influenced by the meaning this event has for the individual (Compas et al., 1989). In this regard, parenting daily hassles would seem particularly likely to have a significant impact on child social adjustment, given the obvious salience to both child and parent. In support of this notion, Creasey and Reese (1996) reported that parenting hassles were associated with child adjustment problems even when controlling for the effects of non-parenting hassles.

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