



Maternal self-efficacy and hostile-reactive parenting from infancy to toddlerhood

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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study of maternal self-efficacy (SE) and hostile-reactive parenting (HRP) was conducted with a community sample of 1836 mothers. Mothers completed questionnaires when their child was 4.5, 16.6 and 28.5 months of age. Maternal SE showed little change, whereas HRP sharply increased from 4.5 to 28.5 months. Structural equation models suggest these initially correlated variables did not influence each other over time, but rather became increasingly independent. Three distinct developmental trajectories were fitted for both maternal SE and HRP. In contrast to the overall portrait of stability, 12.6% of mothers followed a trajectory of declining SE. Likewise, 12.1% of mothers showed initially high and sharply increasing HRP. Few mothers (3.1%) simultaneously followed both of these trajectories, yet overall, SE and HRP trajectories were modestly associated ($\tau_b = -.23, p < .0001$). Failure to support the expected reciprocal influences between SE and HRP over time, as well as maternal and child contributions to early manifestations of maternal HRP and their evolution are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Early childhood is an intense developmental period for both children and their parents. Over their first years of life, children rapidly acquire new motor, verbal, cognitive, emotional and social skills. During this period of development, children's parenting needs also change (Barnard & Solchany, 2002). As infants become toddlers, parents are called upon to develop their parenting repertoire and revise their strategies to comfort, stimulate, guide and discipline their child. Inadequate parenting is seen as bearing important consequences for children's socio-emotional, behavioral and cognitive development (e.g., Bornstein, 2002; Bowlby, 1982). Accordingly, much research has focused on the negative social and emotional outcomes associated with poor parenting. A number of studies have reliably documented that parental lack of responsiveness, coercive, hostile, rejecting or controlling parenting are associated with the emergence of externalizing behavior problems in early to middle childhood (e.g., Marchand, Hock, & Widaman, 2002; Morrell & Murray, 2003; Pettit & Bates, 1989; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994).

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1.1. Parental self-efficacy and parenting strategies

To promote healthy child development through adequate parenting it is necessary to understand its development throughout early childhood. Parental cognitions are argued to play a role in the emergence or the maintenance of inadequate parenting strategies. Parental self-efficacy, that is parents' perception of their ability to carry out the various tasks associated with their parental role (Coleman & Karraker, 1997), is considered essential to the development of adept parenting (Bandura, 1989; Bornstein, 2002; Coleman & Karraker). Bandura (1977, 1989, 1997) argues that self-efficacy beliefs actively contribute to enhance individuals' performance on challenging tasks by motivating them to persevere in the face of difficulty. According to Bandura (1977, 1997), self-efficacy is primarily derived by one's prior performance accomplishments, but can also develop from other sources, such as vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological or emotional arousal. Thus, the relation between self-efficacy and performance is conceived as reciprocal in nature, with both factors influencing and being influenced by environmental factors (Bandura, 1977, 1989, 1997).

The association between parental self-efficacy beliefs and parenting has been well documented. Previous research reports that mothers who feel more efficacious in their parental role also respond more competently to their child's needs, exhibiting greater warmth, sensitivity (Teti & Gelfand, 1991) and responsiveness (Donovan & Leavitt, 1985; Donovan, Leavitt, & Walsh, 1990, 1997). In contrast, lower maternal self-efficacy and low perceived parental power have been associated with an increased likelihood of responding in a hostile, coercive or even aggressive manner to a child's difficult behavior (Bondy & Marsh, 1999; Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989; Bugental, Lewis, Lin, Lyon, & Kopeikin, 1999; Gross, Sambrook, & Fogg, 1999). However, with the exception of a few experimental studies (Donovan & Leavitt, 1985; Donovan et al., 1990, 1997), results are generally limited to correlations between concurrent assessments of these parental variables.

Various authors argue that self-efficacy mediates the association between various parental, child and contextual risk factors and parenting quality (Bugental & Cortez, 1988; Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Donovan & Leavitt, 1985; Teti & Gelfand, 1991). However, according to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977, 1997), the relation between parental self-efficacy and parenting strategies is likely to be reciprocal, with each one influencing the other over time. To our knowledge, this hypothesis has yet to be empirically tested with respect to parental self-efficacy and parenting strategies.

1.2. The development of parental self-efficacy and hostile parenting

Research documenting the changing and evolving nature of parental self-efficacy and parenting over infancy and toddlerhood is scarce, as most research relies on cross-sectional correlational studies (see Bugental & Johnston, 2000), conducted almost exclusively with small convenience samples. A few longitudinal studies have examined mean changes in maternal self-efficacy over the first few months following birth or from 1 to 3 years after birth. This research suggests maternal self-efficacy gradually increases from the prenatal to early postnatal period (Hudson, Elek, & Fleck, 2001; Porter & Hsu, 2003), yet shows little change from 4 months to 3 years after birth (Elek, Brage-Hudson, & Bouffard, 2003; Gross, Conrad, Fogg, & Wothke, 1994; Hudson et al., 2001; Knauth, 2000; Reece & Harkless, 1998). Consecutive assessments of maternal self-efficacy are reported to be strongly correlated during both the early postnatal period and over the toddler years, sharing 35–46% of variance over 1–6-month periods (Gross et al., 1994; Knauth, 2000; Porter & Hsu, 2003). Yet, knowledge of maternal self-efficacy across the child's early years of life is derived from a series of short-term studies, spanning at most 12-month periods.

In contrast, the evolution of maternal hostile-reactive parenting from infancy to toddlerhood has not been explicitly considered, with the exception of a study conducted with mothers of twins (Forget-Dubois et al., 2007). Research suggests that the emergence of independent locomotion in infants is associated with elevated parental expectations of compliance, greater use of verbal prohibitions and greater expressions of hostility (i.e., anger and physical punishment; Campos, Kermoian, & Zumbahlen, 1992). Considering that children in the middle of their second year are more mobile, express greater bids for autonomy and more oppositional behavior than infants, it is expected that this increased parenting challenge is met with more coercive or hostile parenting responses. Accordingly, Patterson (2002) has argued that coercive family processes are likely to emerge when the child is 10 to 18 months of age; when difficult child behavior is met with incompetent parenting. This is likely to reinforce children's display of difficult and aggressive behavior. Furthermore, aggressive caregiver behavior is likely to beget hostility and difficultness from the child, which in turn elicits more hostile parenting responses. Thus, the expression of maternal hostility is likely to increase in the child's second year and, through bidirectional influences between parent and child, fuel subsequent increase in maternal coercive or hostile parenting over time. A mean increase in maternal hostile-reactive parenting has been documented in mothers of twins, assessed when children were 4.5, 18 and 30 months of age (Forget-Dubois et al., 2007). Yet, to our knowledge, no other study has explicitly examined the increase in maternal hostility over this period.

In sum, the scarcity and lack of continuity of longitudinal research from infancy to toddlerhood provides an unclear picture of the evolution of parental self-efficacy and hostile-reactive parenting over a developmental period marked by dramatic changes in the child's cognitive, behavioral and emotional skills. Although correlation coefficients may suggest some degree of stability in the rank order of individuals on parental measures, they do not consider the possible heterogeneity in the developmental trajectories of parental cognitions and parenting strategies. Thus, the overall sample means and correlations may mask the presence of sub-groups or clusters of mothers following distinct developmental patterns of SE and HRP. Does parental self-efficacy increase over time when an initially high level is observed during infancy, but deteriorate when the

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