



# Parenting stress and child behavior problems within families of children with developmental disabilities: Transactional relations across 15 years



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## ABSTRACT

Parents of children with developmental disabilities (DD) are at increased risk of experiencing psychological stress compared to other parents. Children's high levels of internalizing and externalizing problems have been found to contribute to this elevated level of stress. Few studies have considered the reverse direction of effects, however, in families where a child has a DD. The present study investigated transactional relations between child behavior problems and maternal stress within 176 families raising a child with early diagnosed DD. There was evidence of both child-driven and parent-driven effects over the 15-year study period, spanning from early childhood (age 3) to adolescence (age 18), consistent with transactional models of development. Parent–child transactions were found to vary across different life phases and with different domains of behavior problems.

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## 1. Introduction

Both case studies (e.g., Solomon, 2012; Zuckoff, 2002) and empirically constituted investigations (Fidler, Hodapp, & Dykens, 2000; Hastings, 2002; Hauser-Cram, Cannarella, Tillinger, & Woodman, 2013; Hayes & Watson, 2013; Lee, 2013) indicate that parents of children with developmental disabilities (DD) are at an increased risk of experiencing psychological stress compared to other parents. Although many facets of family life might contribute to such stress, children's problem behaviors have often been selected as a critical contributor (Azad, Blacher, & Marcoulides, 2013; Beck, Hastings, Daley, & Stevenson, 2004; Woodman, 2014). Children with DD often display more problematic behaviors than their typically developing peers (Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002; Baker et al., 2003; Deb, Thomas, & Bright, 2001; Dekker & Koot, 2003; de Ruiter, Dekker, Verhulst, & Koot, 2007; Green, O'Reilly, Itchon, & Sigafos, 2005; Herring et al., 2006) and behavior problems often lead to multiple adaptations on the part of parents (Keogh, Garnier, Bernheimer, & Gallimore, 2000).

Few studies to date have considered the reverse direction of effects, however, in families where a child has a DD. In families raising typically developing children, parenting stress has been found to contribute to child behavior problems (Anthony et al., 2005; Benzie, Harrison, & Magill-Evans, 2004; Morgan, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2002). There is growing empirical consensus that

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the same pathway of influence holds within families raising children with DD (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Indeed, much research on typically developing children and their parents indicates that transactional models, rather than models composed of unidirectional effects, often capture the complexity of children's developmental course (Sameroff, 2009). According to transactional models, development is the result of on-going reciprocal interactions between the child and his or her environment (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975), where the child is both the product and producer of his or her environment. A central component of transactional models of development is the equal emphasis placed on the influence of the child on the environment and the influence of the environment on the child (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). Obtaining evidence of the multidirectional chaining of such influences requires longitudinal data that captures attributes of the individual and the environment over time (Hastings, 2002; Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). The present study examines transactional relations between psychological processes in the family environment, namely, maternal stress related to parenting, and children's self-regulatory development, namely, behavior problems, over the course of 15 years, using data from a longitudinal study of children with DD and their families (Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Shonkoff, & Krauss, 2001; Shonkoff, Hauser-Cram, Krauss, & Upshur, 1992).

### 1.1. Parenting stress

Stress has been defined as “an individual's emotional and behavioral response to some unpleasant event” (Crnic & Low, 2002, p. 243), where the level of stress negatively affects the individual's behavior and functioning. Within Abidin's (1995) theoretical framework, parent-related stress represents the level of dysfunction in the parent-child system related to the parent's functioning in particular. Parent-related stress includes components of personality and pathology, such as the parent's subjective feelings of emotional availability to the child, parenting confidence, and investment in parenting (Abidin, 1995). Stressors related to situational factors also contribute to parent-related stress in this framework, such as spousal or partner relationships, perceptions of social isolation, parental health, and feelings of restriction in the parenting role.

A substantial body of literature has examined parent-related stress among mothers and fathers of children with and without DD. Some level of stress is considered normative and adaptive for all parents (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005), but parents of children with DD tend to report greater than average levels of stress during their child's infancy (Scott, Atkinson, Minton, & Bowman, 1997), early childhood (Baker et al., 2003; Britner, Morog, Pianta, & Marvin, 2003; Jeans, Santos, Laxman, McBride, & Dyer, 2013; Lopez, Clifford, Minnes, & Ouellette-Kuntz, 2008) and adolescence (Emerson, 2003). High levels of stress have been found to remain stable (Hanson & Hanline, 1990) or to increase over time for parents of children with DD (Gerstein, Crnic, Blacher, & Baker, 2009; Hauser-Cram et al., 2001; Neece et al., 2012). Parenting stress continues to be the focus of much research since it is associated with other aspects of parent well-being, including depression (Olsson & Hwang, 2001), marital conflict (Kersh, Hedvat, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield, 2006; Norlin & Broberg, 2013), and poor physical health (Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006).

In the broader child development literature, parenting stress has been associated with child adjustment (Deater-Deckard, 1998) and is suggested to exert its impact on child adjustment through parenting behavior. Parents high in stress may be less responsive, more authoritarian, and more neglectful in their parenting behavior (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Ponnet et al., 2013; Rousseau et al., 2013). Studies have also linked parenting stress to inconsistent discipline, lack of appropriate structure and guidance, and unrealistic expectations for children (Crawford & Manassis, 2011; Rodgers, 1998). As a result, these parenting behaviors may not support the development of children's self-regulation and coping strategies, which, in turn, have implications for their social and behavioral competence (Baumrind, 2013; Carver & Scheier, 2001). Although there is empirical evidence to support the impact of parenting stress on typically developing children's behavior (Anthony et al., 2005; Benzie et al., 2004; Morgan et al., 2002), this direction of effect has been understudied within families raising children with DD (Hastings, 2002).

### 1.2. Child behavior problems

Child problematic behavior can be distinguished along two major dimensions: internalizing behaviors, which include behaviors such as anxiety, sadness, social withdrawal, and fearfulness, and externalizing behaviors, which include behaviors such as over activity, poor impulse control, non-compliance, aggression toward others, and tantrums (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Werry & Quay, 1971). These categories were initially based on clinical classification systems but were later validated empirically as distinct dimensions of behavior (Cicchetti & Toth, 1991). Although there is a moderate degree of concordance between internalizing and externalizing problems (Kraatz Keiley, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 2000), they have unique antecedents and consequences (Ormel et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2009). Each dimension of problematic behavior may have a distinct transactional relationship with parenting stress across childhood and adolescence, although this possible distinction has rarely been examined within families raising a child with DD.

As previously noted, children with DD display heightened levels of behavior problems compared to their gender- and age-matched peers (Baker et al., 2003; Deb et al., 2001; de Ruiter et al., 2007; Dekker & Koot, 2003; Green et al., 2005; Herring et al., 2006). The prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems is estimated to be 3–7 times higher in children with intellectual disabilities than typically developing youth (Dekker, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2002; Dykens, 2000). Internalizing and externalizing behaviors remain highly persistent from childhood through adolescence in individuals with DD (Einfeld, Tonge, Turner, Parmenter, & Smith, 1999; Hauser-Cram & Woodman, under review; Totsika & Hastings, 2009; Tonge & Einfeld, 2000, 2003).

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