



# Influencing factors on mothers' parenting style of young children at risk for developmental delay in South Korea: The mediating effects of parenting stress



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## ABSTRACT

Parenting style is regarded as one of the most significant factors for children's development, especially for children with or at risk of developmental delay. Due to the importance of parenting style, this study explored factors that affect the parenting style in families with children at risk for or with developmental delay in South Korea. Guided by the Transactional Model of Development and the Belsky's Model of Parenting, this study specifically addressed the influence that parent, child, and social context characteristics have on parenting style. This study is a secondary data analysis of 470 mothers who participated in the second wave of the Panel Study on Korean Children conducted in 2009. The results showed that mother's employment, mother's age, parenting stress, and social support were significantly related to mother's parenting style. There were two major implications. First, early intervention programs need to provide services to both parents and children in order to improve children's outcomes. Second, mothers of children at risk of developmental delay need to be encouraged to participate as active agents in their children's development.

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## 1. Introduction

The autism spectrum prevalence in South Korea was 2–3% in 2011, although under- or over-estimation is possible (Kim et al., 2011). This surprising percentage attracted attention from both professionals and parents. In June 2011, the “Welfare Support Act for Children with Disabilities” bill, which was designed to support the well-being of children with disabilities and to promote early diagnosis and early intervention programs, was passed in South Korea. To comply with this Act, the Korean government recently began to build a service delivery system for young children with disabilities.

Parallel to this social environment, the capacity for detecting and diagnosing developmental delay increases when children are less than three years of age (Landa, Holman, & Garrett-Mayer, 2007; Lord & Luyster, 2006). A number of studies have suggested that children who are diagnosed with or at risk of developmental delays need to receive attention and intervention as early as possible to fully develop their potential (Dawson et al., 2004; Majnemer, 1998; Shonkoff, & Hauser-Cram, 1987). Timely engagement with early intervention programs and responsiveness to children's risk or impairment will reduce the magnitude between a typical developmental trajectory and a developmentally delayed trajectory (Ramey & Ramey, 1998).

During the past 30 years, a large number of empirical and theoretical studies have supported the argument that parenting style is predictive

of or associated with children's cognitive, communication, and social-emotional development (Kochanska & Aksan, 2004; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006). In particular, for young children under 3 years of age, parenting style has been identified as a primary factor affecting child development (Bornstein & Tamis-Lemonda, 1997; Paavola, Kunnari, & Moilanen, 2005; Van Londen, Juffer, & Van Ijzendoorn, 2007). Although parenting style that reflects their own cultural value (Jullan, McKenry, & McKenry, 1994; Zervides & Knowles, 2007) might differ by ethnic groups (Cote & Bornstein, 2004), parenting style is still essential for the early development of all young children, whether they are at risk of developmental delay or are developing normally (Lee, 1998; Park, 2007).

Despite the importance of positive parenting, parents of children who have or are at risk of developmental delay face parenting challenges. The characteristics of these children might make it difficult for parents to sustain pleasurable interactions, which may consequently generate stress and feelings of failure (McConachie, Randle, Hammal, & Le Couteur, 2005; Park, 2007). In addition, parents of children with developmental delay show a higher rate of directiveness compared with parents of normally developing children (Mahoney, Fors, & Wood, 1990). Instead of being sensitive and responsive, which are key characteristics for parenting young children, parents tend to teach or demand tasks to make children meet the expected developmental milestones associated with their chronological age (Han, 1995). When children who have or are at risk of developmental delay are not capable of conducting these tasks, both children and parents might want to stop their interaction (Mahoney & MacDonald, 2007).

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Given the importance of a positive parenting style and the challenges these parents face, it is crucial to explore the factors that contribute to parenting style in order to strengthen supportive protective factors and reduce risk factors. However, few investigators have examined the factors influencing parenting style in families of children who have or are at risk of developmental delay, although many researchers have emphasized the need for a positive parenting style. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the factors that influence mothers' parenting style in South Korea and to encourage positive parenting in families with children who have or are at risk of developmental delay.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Definition of parenting style

Parenting style has various definitions according to specific areas of research focus and child age. Baumrind (1967) introduced three types of parenting styles: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative. In brief, the permissive parenting style includes non-punitive, acceptant, and affirmative methods to address children's impulses and actions. The authoritarian parenting style includes shaping, controlling and evaluating the child's behaviors and attitudes to make child meets an absolute parental standard. The authoritative parenting type, which has been reported to be an optimal style (Baumrind, 1973; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994), follows the child's own interest and needs while emphasizing the parent's perspective as an adult. These parents might direct the child's activities through emotional support, high standards, and granting autonomy (Baumrind, 1967). Although Baumrind's (1967) definition has been used in many studies, it is rarely used for children who are under 3 years.

Instead of grouping parenting styles into typologies, researchers who study young children define parenting styles as specific interpersonal parental behaviors or characteristics that influence child development. For example, sensitivity, responsiveness, affect, reciprocity, directiveness, negativity, quality of stimulation, frequency of interaction, and involvement have been identified to be great influences, either positive or negative, on child development (Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1997; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001). In this case, any elements of parental interpersonal behaviors that are associated with various areas of child development are defined as parenting style. As this study focuses on the young children, the parental behaviors or characteristics will be used as the definition of parenting style.

### 2.2. Conceptual framework and literature review

Like other child development related theories, the Transactional Model of Development (TMD) (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975) posits that child development is influenced by the quality and frequency of interactions between parents and children. However, the TMD also emphasizes the important effects that children have on parent-child interaction. The TMD presupposes that both the parent and the child can mutually alter and shape their relationship (Belsky, 1984). Both parents and children learn how to interact with each other and mutually shape their relationships over time. Parents develop their parenting style through repetitive interaction (Kaye, 1976). In particular, young children with or at-risk for developmental delay are more likely to influence their relationship with parents due to their difficult behaviors and special characteristics. Because the TMD places a strong emphasis on how the child influences the parent, it is suitable for the research in the field of early intervention. Thus, the TMD is widely used by researchers as a conceptual model (Cicchetti & Tucker, 1994; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998) or for the purpose of developing early intervention programs (Mahoney, Boyce, Fellw, Spiker, & Wheeden, 1998).

Several studies support the TMD. Korner (1971) described the influence of young children's behaviors and capacity to take in external situations on parenting style because parents try to tune in to child

behaviors. Sameroff and Fiese (1990) additionally explained that a child's difficult temperament might motivate parents to reduce the time spent with their children due to decreased pleasure from interaction. Clark, Kochanska, and Ready (2000) state that social-emotional problems, such as negative emotionality, behavioral problems, distress-proneness, low sociability, and irresponsibility, are obstacles to positive parenting that arise in early childhood. In the same matter, several studies posit that children's enhanced language may encourage greater engagement with parents and promote joint attention to objects and active interactions. These child capacities could inspire a more positive parenting style (Bornstein, Hendricks, Haynes, & Painter, 2007; Steelman, Assel, Swank, Smith, & Landry, 2002; Yoder & Warren, 2001). The developmental status of children who have or are at risk of developmental delay has unique and differentiated characteristics compared with normally developing children, and these differences may affect parenting style. Keogh, Garnier, Bernheimer, and Gallimore (2000) stress that families of children with developmental delays make adaptations (e.g., time spent together and degree of activity complexity) appropriate to their children's developmental level. Based on the TMD and the research supporting it, the temperaments and levels of development of children with or at risk of developmental delay might be the critical factors that influence the parenting style in their families.

The TMD additionally considers social contextual factors, such as economic factors and social support, to be factors that influence parenting style (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). Social support is defined as the "emotional, psychological, affiliative, informational, instrumental, or material aid and assistance provided by personal social network members" (Dunst, Trivette, & Jordry, 1997, p. 501). Several professionals have highlighted that positive supportive relationships for parents are linked to more positive parental functioning in areas such as maternal interactive behavior and maternal parenting satisfaction (Crnic & Stormshak, 1997; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975).

Belsky (1984) emphasized parents' own contribution to their parenting style. Notably, research has reported that parents' psychological wellbeing in terms of depression and parenting stress influence their ability to effectively interact with their children (Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Mahoney, 2009). This observation potentially exists because stressed mothers may be more irritable, critical, and severe in their interaction with their children (Webster-Stratton, 1990). Symptoms of depression, including loss of interest, fatigue, anxiety, and irritability, may be associated with parenting difficulties (Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000; Mezulis, Hyde, & Clark, 2004). Parental self-efficacy, defined as the parents' judgment about their own effectiveness in managing parental tasks and duties, is additionally considered to be a parental characteristic that contributes to parenting style (Jones & Prinz, 2005; Sanders & Woolley, 2005; Tucker et al., 1998). A high level of parental self-efficacy is associated with positive parenting behaviors, maternal sensitivity, and warmth (Teti & Gelfand, 1991; Tucker et al., 1998).

### 2.3. Mediating role of parenting stress

Hastings (2002) conceptualized the model that postulated the circular relationship between behavior problems in children with developmental disabilities, parental stress, and parental behavior. According to Hastings (2002), parental stress mediates the relationships between child behavior problems and parental behavior. Parental behavior subsequently influences child behavior problems. Hastings (2002) additionally emphasized the need for empirical research on these complex, related variables.

Although most parents experience some degree of parental stress, research indicates that parents of children who have or are at risk of developmental delay are more likely to have higher levels of parenting stress (Davis & Carter, 2008; Estes et al., 2009). Major contributors to parental stress include challenging behaviors and other characteristics, as well as autism-related symptoms, such as lower levels of social

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