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Parenting stress among child welfare involved families: Differences by child placement

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of parenting stress and maltreatment underscores the importance of understanding the factors associated with parenting stress among child welfare involved families. This study takes advantage of a statewide survey of child welfare involved families to examine parent and child characteristics and concrete resources, in relation to parenting stress. Separate multivariate analyses were conducted by placement status given the difference in day-to-day parenting responsibilities for families receiving in-home supervision compared to those whose children are in out-of-home care. Across both groups, parenting stress was predicted by child mental health, a finding with critical implications for intervention to this vulnerable group of families. Parent mental health also predicted parenting stress for the in-home group and food insecurity predicted parenting stress in the out-of-home group. Findings confirm that stress varies by context and that a multi-dimensional framework, considering both psychosocial and concrete resources, is required to capture contributors to parenting stress.
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1. Introduction

Parenting has many rewards, but even under optimal conditions, it can be stressful. The numerous demands of caregiving can lead to emotional and physical fatigue, resulting in parent–child relationship strain (Deater-Deckard, 2004). Parenting stress has long been an area of interest to researchers concerned with child well-being (Abidin, 1992; Deater-Deckard, 2004). When parenting stress is high, the likelihood of punitive parenting (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1990) and child maltreatment increases (Black, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2001; Haskett, Smith Scott, Grant, Ward, & Robinson, 2003; Rodriguez, 2010), with implications for child well-being (Deater-Deckard, 2004). The intersection of parenting stress and maltreatment underscores the importance of understanding the factors associated with parenting stress among child welfare involved families, both to inform secondary prevention efforts and as an opportunity for targeted intervention with these vulnerable families.

Conceptually, parenting stress arises from the interaction of parent, child, and contextual factors (Deater-Deckard, 2004), arguing for research that is multi-dimensional and accounts for the unique circumstances surrounding child welfare involvement. The purpose of the study presented here is to examine parent and child characteristics and contextual factors such as parent resources, in relation to parenting stress in a statewide child welfare population. Recognizing that parenting stress can be affected by whether or not the parent has full-time responsibility for the care of the child, we examine stress separately for families with children in-home but under agency supervision and those whose children were in out-of-home placement. While there is a substantial body of literature examining parenting stress, there is a gap in our understanding of this phenomenon among families actively involved in the child welfare system. This study adds to the child welfare literature by bringing a multi-dimensional framework to the study of parenting stress and by examining possible differences by child placement status. Identifying predictors by placement status further reveals several points of intervention that may be unique to child welfare involved families given that parenting contexts can vary.

2. Parenting stress and child maltreatment

Researchers have linked high levels of parenting stress with an increased risk of child maltreatment (Curenton, McWey, & Bolen, 2009; El-Kamary et al., 2004; Éthier, Lacharité, & Couture, 1995). Due to the innate stress involved in parenting, all parents are subject to varying degrees of related stress (Abidin, 1992; Deater-Deckard, 2004). Although not all those with high levels of parenting stress maltreat their children, parenting stress has been linked to aspects of problematic parenting such as harsh parenting (Webster-Stratton, 1990), severe physical disciplinary practices (Pinderhughes et al., 2000), low parental warmth (Belsky, 1984; Rodgers, 1993), and negative and controlling behavior (Bigras, LaFreniere, & Dumas, 1996). Increased parenting stress can contribute to child behavior problems or can further exacerbate existing behavior problems (Margalit & Kleitman, 2006), which presents additional risk for maltreatment.

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3. Theoretical perspective

Parenting stress, the dependent variable of interest, theoretically is a consequence of the cumulative impact of day-to-day child rearing stressors (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990; Deater-Deckard, 2004), in the context of social, material, and individual resources (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1977). Daily stressors result from devoting significant time, physical and emotional energy, and considerable effort enacting the varied tasks necessary in the parenting role. While daily tasks considered alone may not elicit high levels of stress, researchers theorize that cumulative exposure can lead to substantial parenting stress (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). This manifests itself as caregiver stress and as relationship strain between a parent and a child (see Deater-Deckard, 2004 for a full overview). Taken together, the cumulative tasks and resource demands of parenting exert pressure in the form of *losses* on parents — for example, loss of time, energy, and control over one's self and life (Berry & Jones, 1995).

Broader contextual factors, defined as social, material, and individual resources, are conceptualized as contributing to or buffering parenting stress. Research shows that social resources such as the presence of a partner can reduce parenting stress, while increases in the number of children in the family can produce additional stress (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005). We draw on family economic stress frameworks (Barnett, 2008) to understand the role of material resources in parenting stress. Theoretically, economic disadvantage can lead to parental distress, which in turn can negatively influence parenting practices (Barnett, 2008; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007). Research supports this theoretical pathway across racially diverse families (Barnett, 2008), which is important in child welfare given the disproportionate representation of families of color in this system (Hill, 2006). In our own research with child welfare involved families we have found that economic hardship is frequently experienced as housing insecurity and food instability (Marcenko, Lyons, & Courtney, 2011). We conceptualize individual resources as the presence or absence of parent chronic risk factors that can interfere with parenting and create parenting stress. These factors include parent mental health (Gray, Edwards, O'Callaghan, Cuskelly, & Gibbons, 2013), substance use (Kelley, 1992), and intimate partner violence (IPV; Kalil, Tolman, Rosen, & Gruber, 2003). Child mental health is also seen as an individual resource in our model. A parent perceived child mental health problem is a strong predictor of parenting stress (McPherson, Lewis, Lynn, Haskett, & Behrend, 2009).

Due to the conceptualization of parenting stress as the cumulative impact of day-to-day parenting *and* given that child welfare involved families comprise the population of concern, our analysis must account for the special circumstances this poses for families. When children are removed from their parent's care, day-to-day parenting responsibility is reduced and parent/child interactions are altered. Even with this change, they remain parents and continue to experience the emotional aspects of parenting including deep concern for their children's wellbeing (Gerring, Kemp, & Marcenko, 2008). When children remain in the home, but under the supervision of the child welfare agency, daily parenting responsibility continues with the added pressure of agency scrutiny. Given these unique contexts, this study examines parenting stress separately — for families whose children are placed outside of the home and for those whose children remain in the home. We build on the parenting stress literature, ecological models, and family economic stress theory to examine potential predictors of parenting stress including social, material, and individual resources.

4. Literature review

4.1. Social resources/family structure

Single parenting and family size are the family structure factors most often associated with parenting stress (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Taylor, Washington, Artinian, & Lichtenberg, 2007). The majority of families who come to the attention of the child welfare system are parenting alone (Marcenko et al., 2011), putting them at high-risk for parenting stress. As a consequence of limited social resources, these solo parents must manage primary parenting responsibilities without the support of additional adult help in the household (Cooper et al., 2009). Family size, or number of children in the household, can attenuate family and parent resources and thereby increase parenting stress. In an examination of the relationship among parent stress, health, childcare characteristics, and social support, Taylor et al. (2007) found that as number of children in the home increased so did levels of parenting stress.

Issues of poverty may further complicate family structure characteristics and their impact on parenting stress (Black et al., 2001; Pears & Capaldi, 2001). To understand the relative impact of income and social support on parenting stress, Cain and Combs-Orme (2005) conducted a study of 103 African American families. Examining four family configurations (mother and baby; mother, baby, and grandmother; mother, baby, and unmarried partner; and mother, baby, and married partner), they found that as total family income decreased, parental distress increased with no impact from family configuration on parenting stress. Similarly, a study comparing White and non-White families with medically fragile children found that for White families increased social support, and child developmental indicators were correlated with decreased parenting stress, but for families of color, parenting stress was negatively correlated only with income (McDowell, Saylor, Taylor, Boyce, & Stokes, 1995). These results support the hypothesis that for families of color income is a stronger correlate of parent stress than additional adult support or child disability.

4.2. Material resources/economic hardship

Poverty is a complex, and often intergenerational, phenomenon that may exert significant influence on parenting stress. Evidence has suggested that poverty, as measured by income, correlates with parenting stress (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; McDowell et al., 1995). However, income alone may insufficiently capture the impact lack of resources has on parenting. For instance, Gershoff et al. (2007) found that material hardship (food insecurity, housing instability, inadequate medical care, and duration of financial trouble) increased parenting stress, which decreased positive parenting behavior. They suggest that a material hardship framework better facilitates an understanding of the influence of economic disadvantage on parenting stress. This conceptualization is aligned with family stress models which generally identify economic disadvantage as causing parent distress which has direct implications for parenting strategies and parenting stress (for complete overview see Barnett, 2008). The interconnected relationship between family structure and poverty is evident, particularly for families involved in the child welfare system as parents struggle to parent in an environment of diminished financial and social resources (Marcenko et al., 2011).

4.3. Individual resources/chronic parent risk factors

Several chronic psychosocial factors, including parent mental health, IPV, and substance abuse, put parents at-risk for child maltreatment as well as elevated levels of parenting stress. The association between depression and parenting stress has been broadly confirmed in the literature, particularly in the postnatal period (Gray et al., 2013; Leigh & Milgrom, 2008) and among parents caring for children with disabilities (Anastopoulos, Guevremont, Shelton, & DuPaul, 1992). Findings from one of the few studies that compared mothers with and without a history of maltreating their children indicated that the maltreating mothers' had significantly higher levels of both psychological distress and parenting stress compared with mothers without a history of maltreatment (McPherson et al., 2009). Mother's psychological distress predicted parenting stress only for the maltreatment group (McPherson et al., 2009).

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