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## Do maternal concerns at delivery predict parenting stress during infancy?<sup>☆</sup>

Terri Combs-Orme<sup>a,\*</sup>, Daphne S. Cain<sup>b</sup>, Elizabeth E. Wilson<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> College of Social Work, University of Tennessee, Henson Hall 204, Knoxville, TN, USA

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Work, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA

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### Abstract

**Objective:** In a previous study, we found that new mothers could and would express concerns about their parenting, including concerns about maltreatment and poor care. In this study, we examine the utility of early maternal concerns for predicting parenting stress in the first year. Parenting stress is important because it has been shown to be related to maltreatment and poor parent-child relationships.

**Method:** A sample of 246 mothers were interviewed shortly after delivery in a publicly funded hospital about their parenting concerns, and 93% were reinterviewed in their homes about their parenting when the infants were 6 to 12 months old. Standardized measures with demonstrated psychometric properties were employed, including a measure of parenting stress due to the demands of the parenting role, characteristics of the child that make him or her difficult to care for, and stress due to difficult interactions.

**Results:** Multiple regression results indicate that both mothers concerns at delivery and sociodemographic variables are significant predictors of all three types of parenting stress in infancy. Maternal concerns were more powerful than sociodemographics in predicting stress related to the demands of parenting, while sociodemographics were more powerful for the prediction of stress related to difficult child characteristics and difficult mother-infant interaction.

**Conclusions:** These findings suggest that knowledge of new mothers' parenting concerns might be useful for predicting parenting problems, as well as for engaging mothers in and enhancing the effectiveness of parenting services.

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*Keywords:* Mother; Parenting stress; Parent-child

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\* Corresponding author.

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## Introduction

The perinatal period has been identified as a period of both high risk for parenting problems and high potential for primary prevention of those problems (Guterman, 1999). Indeed, the period extending from just before to just after delivery has been referred to as a “window of opportunity” (Helfer, 1987) because of the generally high receptivity of new parents to advice and assistance (Schmitt, 1987) and the fact that bad parenting practices have not yet become habitual (Daro, 1988).

In recognition of the importance of this brief period to the prevention of child abuse and neglect, early intervention programs based on home visiting have proliferated (Daro & Winje, 1998), but questions remain about whether services should be universal, that is delivered to entire populations, or targeted to those deemed for some reason to be at risk. Guterman’s (1999) meta-analysis demonstrated significant, though modest, advantages associated with the universal approach. He speculated that methods of targeting based on risk may result in less effective outcomes because they screen in candidates who are less likely to use the services effectively.

In addition, screening methods may miss parents who need services and falsely identify others as being at risk for poor parenting or maltreatment. A review and discussion of screening methods for the targeting of these services (Caldwell, Bogat, & Davidson, 1988) showed that assessment for risk of abuse is costly, lacks predictive validity, and may be destructive for the large proportion of “false-negatives,” that is families who are categorized as being at risk falsely. Screening for risk of neglectful parenting is even less effective (Cox, 1998). Moreover, although ecological theories now emphasize the multiple causes of child maltreatment and poor parenting (Belsky, 1993), few assessment procedures are able to address the many individual, family, and community factors that influence parenting (Caldwell et al., 1988).

What is apparent from Guterman’s review and from an examination of the body of research about the delivery of prevention services in the perinatal period, is that potential service recipients’ assessments of their own risks of maltreatment and poor parenting and their need for services do not appear to be considered in the targeting of prevention services. Faver, Crawford, and Combs-Orme (1999) reviewed research suggesting that clients often do not use services productively because they do not feel them to be relevant to their lives, so failing to determine whether parents feel that they are at risk to maltreat or provide poor parenting seems unwise. This is particularly true given the high drop-out rates of at-risk families from prevention programs (Cox, 1998). Self-assessment of risk for poor parenting might be a true indicator of risk, as well as an indicator of motivation to seek assistance with parenting. The purpose of the current study is to examine the utility of mothers’ self-reports of concerns about parenting as predictors of early parenting problems.

### *Previous research*

In an earlier study, we (Combs-Orme, Martin, Fox, & Faver, 2000) documented that new mothers can and will report feelings of being at risk to provide poor care for their infants, and that their assessments appear to have some validity. We interviewed 170 delivering mothers in four large hospitals administering a measure of their concerns about providing good care, the Maternal Concerns Scale (MCS; Combs-Orme et al., 2000), and an empirical screening instrument for the risk of abuse (the Child Abuse Potential Inventory; Milner, 1986). The 170 mothers represented a 90.8% response rate and included a diverse sample of mothers, including 38.2% African-Americans and a broad spectrum on income and education.

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