



Links between physical abuse in childhood and child neglect among adolescent mothers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 April 2012

Received in revised form 20 July 2012

Accepted 20 July 2012

Available online 28 July 2012

Keywords:

Child neglect

Adolescent parenting

History of childhood maltreatment

ABSTRACT

Children born to the youngest mothers are at substantial risk for neglect. Neglect is multiply determined, but a maternal childhood history of maltreatment is an especially influential parenting determinant. This study investigated the etiology of neglect among very young mothers (<17 years; $n = 92$), focusing on adolescents' experiences in childhood. We hypothesized that a history of childhood physical abuse would increase the odds of neglect, whereas a history of childhood positive care would decrease the odds of neglect. Results showed that one in four mothers was neglectful, and neglect was four times as likely with a maternal history of physical abuse in childhood than with no history of maltreatment. As expected, a maternal history of positive care in childhood decreased the likelihood of neglect. Mothers with a history of both childhood physical abuse and positive care were not at increased risk for neglect, suggesting a compensatory effect of care experiences within the context of an abusive relationship. Findings affirm that adolescent mothers are at considerable risk for perpetuating cycles of maltreatment leading to child neglect, and that nuanced descriptions of their childhood histories are essential for understanding cycles of maltreatment.

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1. Introduction

Child neglect occurs more frequently than any other form of child maltreatment. In 2009, 78% of the 763,000 victims of child maltreatment in the U.S. experienced neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families [USDHHS], 2010). The literature on child maltreatment increasingly suggests that neglect is the most harmful to children's development (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002), affecting multiple developmental domains (e.g., cognitive, socioemotional, physical, neurobiological) in ways that differ from the effects of abuse (De Bellis, 2005; Kim & Cicchetti, 2006). Nevertheless, it has been infrequently studied. Most studies to date conflate neglect and abuse, making it difficult to determine neglect's unique etiology and how to focus efforts to prevent it from occurring in the first place (Dubowitz, 2007).

Parents comprise 80% of child maltreatment perpetrators (USDHHS, 2010), and children born to the youngest mothers are at especially high risk of being victimized when compared to children of older mothers (de Paúl & Domenech, 2000; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Sidebotham & Golding, 2001; Stier, Leventhal, Berg, Johnson, & Mezger, 1993). A longitudinal study conducted by Stier et al. (1993) found the rate of neglect to be 2.4 times higher among adolescent parents under age 18 than among parents between the ages of 19 and 34 years.

The precise nature of the association between maternal age and child neglect is not clear. Adolescent mothers tend to have limited cognitive maturity, emotional maturity, and knowledge of child development (Borkowski et al., 2007). In addition, adolescent mothers often live and raise their families in challenging social contexts. A disproportionate number experience childhood abuse, are socially isolated, are single parents, achieve low levels of education, and raise their children in impoverished neighborhoods (Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Meade, Kershaw, & Ickovics, 2008). In combination with the more normative stress of navigating the developmental tasks of adolescence (e.g., identity, autonomy, peer acceptance) and adjusting to the demands of motherhood, these disadvantages may overwhelm a young mother's personal resources and lead to insensitive or neglectful parenting (Noria, Weed, & Keogh, 2007). Indeed, young mothers often are less affectionate, flexible, patient, and sensitive with their children than are their older counterparts (Sommer et al., 1993).

Despite the personal, social, and financial challenges young parents encounter, early parenting does not always lead to poor outcomes for adolescents and their children (Borkowski et al., 2007; Easterbrooks, Chaudhuri, Bartlett, & Copeman, 2011). The life trajectories of teen mothers are highly variable, including positive adaptation to adversity, or *resilience* (Easterbrooks et al., 2011; Whitman, Borkowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001). Research is needed to elucidate pathways of resilience in the context of high risk for child neglect. Given the salience of early child-bearing contexts to adolescent parenting, studies that use an ecological approach (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006) are well suited to identify factors that reduce a young

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mother's chances of neglectful parenting. The current study utilizes an ecological perspective to explore relationship based factors that contribute to risk and resilience among teen mothers.

2. Ecological perspectives

Ecological perspectives presume that ontogenetic development is shaped through transactions between an individual and his or her developmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 1991). From this viewpoint, the ecology of early childbearing is an influential parenting determinant (Afifi, 2007; Gaudin, 2001). Furthermore, heightened risk for neglectful parenting is understood to be a consequence of multi-level forces that contribute to a mother's inability to meet her child's basic needs (Belsky, 1993; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006).

For young mothers, proximal social contexts in general (e.g., child care, school, family), and relationships within the family of origin in particular, influence teen parenting and contribute to variation in parent-child interactions (Moore & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). This point is illustrated by a substantial empirical literature showing that the quality of care a mother receives in childhood, both positive (e.g., childhood care) and negative (e.g., childhood abuse), shapes her parenting style (Ainsworth, 1968; Belsky, 1993; Bowlby, 1977). Consequently, maternal childhood histories have particular relevance to research on the antecedents of neglect.

3. Links between maternal childhood histories and parenting

Fundamental conceptions of parenting are learned from early relational experiences in the family of origin (Ainsworth, 1968; Bowlby, 1977), and mothers who received warm and responsive care as children are more likely to be empathetic and sensitive parents than mothers who received insensitive care (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; van Ijzendoorn, 1995). A maternal history of childhood abuse is associated with abusive and neglectful parenting (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Lansford et al., 2007). However, childhood experiences are often multi-dimensional and intergenerational transmission processes are not straightforward. For some individuals, a childhood history consists of both disturbances within the parent-child relationship and experiences of sensitive, responsive caregiving (Lieberman, Padrón, van Horn, & Harris, 2005). Because maternal backgrounds commonly involve contradictory experiences of care and maltreatment, studies using unidimensional descriptions of early relationships are likely to yield reductionist explanations of intergenerational processes. More nuanced characterizations of maternal childhood histories are essential to differentiating among parents who do and do not break cycles of maltreatment.

Selma Fraiberg introduced the term "ghosts" to describe parents' enactment with their children of punitive or neglectful experiences from childhood (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975). This description of intergenerational processes fails to account for parents who break cycles of maltreatment. Accordingly, Lieberman et al. (2005) proposed the complementary metaphor of "angels," representing the repetition of benevolent influences from the past in parent-child interactions in the present. The authors postulated that in families wracked by violence, "Ghosts and angels coexist in dynamic tension with each other, at times actively struggling for supremacy..." (p.506). From this standpoint, even troubled childhoods involve paradoxical experiences that, if incorporated into research, may provide important insights into cycles of maltreatment.

3.1. Intergenerational cycles of maltreatment

A history of childhood physical abuse is more common among mothers who maltreat their children than among nonmaltreating mothers. Kaufman and Zigler (1987) estimated the transmission

rate to be 30% ($\pm 5\%$). Despite methodological flaws of the intergenerational maltreatment literature (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000), there is general consensus among maltreatment researchers that most parents with a history of abuse do not maltreat their own children (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2009; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987).

Few studies have explored this phenomenon among adolescent parents. Crockenberg (1987) found that parents between the ages of 17 and 21 years who experienced childhood rejection by caregivers showed angry and punitive parenting with their children. Another study by de Paül and Domenech (2000), comparing adolescent mothers (<21 years) to adult mothers, found that teen mothers with a history of abuse had the highest risk of maltreating children. Neither study examined antecedents of neglect or provided findings for younger mothers (i.e., <17 years). We identified only one study that investigated relations between an adolescent mother's childhood history and neglect of her own children; the researchers found that neglectful mothers (<18 years) were *not* more likely than nonmaltreating mothers to have a history of childhood abuse (Zuravin & DiBlasio, 1992). Additional research is needed to reconcile disparate findings on intergenerational continuity and discontinuity in cycles of maltreatment, and to identify processes that allow adolescent mothers to overcome the odds against them and parent effectively.

Most studies of intergenerational transmission of maltreatment do not distinguish among types of maltreatment. The majority of research either utilizes a single construct (e.g., maltreatment) or focuses exclusively on abuse. This is problematic for several reasons. First, use of the umbrella term "child maltreatment" fails to account for the heterogeneity of children's maltreatment experience (Heller, Larrieu, D'Imperio, & Boris, 1999). Second, such approaches do not clarify the unique etiology of neglect (Dubowitz, 2007). Third, intergenerational cycles often involve different forms of maltreatment in each generation, yet we do not yet understand how these different patterns unfold. Parents who neglect their children, for example, may have experienced abuse in childhood, but there is little research examining type-specific transmission processes (Kim, 2009). The present study aims to address some of these gaps.

4. Overview of the current study

The current study investigates links between the maternal care-receiving histories of very young mothers (<17 years) and their risk for child neglect. We hypothesized that: (a) a childhood history of physical abuse would increase the risk of neglect, (b) a childhood history of positive care would decrease the odds of neglect, (c) some adolescents would experience both positive care and physical abuse in childhood relationships with their mothers, and (d) positive care-receiving experiences would moderate the relation between a maternal childhood history of abuse and risk for child neglect (i.e., mothers with history of abuse who received good care from their mothers would be less likely to neglect their children than mothers with a history of abuse who did not receive good care).

5. Method

5.1. Sample and procedure

Participants were 92 adolescent mothers enrolled in an evaluation of a universal statewide prevention home visiting program for first-time young parents (≤ 21 years). Mothers participating in the program were interviewed and completed questionnaires in their homes shortly after program enrollment and every six months thereafter for a period of 18 months. Data collection commenced in 1998 and was completed in 2006, when cumulative records of child maltreatment were obtained from state child protective services. Participants under 17 years old at

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