The effects of maternal depression on child outcomes during the first years of formal schooling

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A B S T R A C T
Depression among parents, particularly maternal depression, is an important factor in children's lives. Among mental health disorders, depression is one of the most common and can be a debilitating and chronic condition. Depression is associated with many negative outcomes and difficulties throughout the life course (Miech & Shanahan, 2000; Teitler & Reichman, 2008).

Women are nearly two times more likely than men to experience depression (Kessler, 2003). Over 10 percent of women ages 18–39 suffer from depression at any given time, with lifetime prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) for women estimated at over 20 percent (CDC, MMWR 2012; Curry et al., 2014). Nearly 75% of those who have experienced an episode of depression will have a subsequent episode (Keller & Boland, 1998; Kessler, Zhao, Blazer, & Swartz, 1997). Individuals with depression can have difficulty maintaining relationships and have increased negative interactions with others (Coyne, 1976; Segrin & Dillard, 1992). Mothers with depression can have difficulty parenting, have more negative interactions with their children, and have been found to provide less cognitive stimulation compared to mothers without depression (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Turney, 2012).

Parental capacity to support children through elementary and middle school is influenced by many factors, including parents' mental health. Parents play an important role in students' engagement with and success in school. Students' perceptions of support from parents and family cohesion have been linked to student competence (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Wentzel, 1998) and parental neglect or lack of support is linked to school failure (Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter 1997). School disengagement is an important predictor of subsequent academic failure (Crosnoe, 2002), and school attendance is one form of school disengagement. Disengagement from school can begin in the early elementary grades. When young children become disconnected from school early on, it may persist and have long-term consequences for academic motivation and achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Children's early success in school in terms of both achievement and behavior has been linked to subsequent success (Duncan et al., 2007; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Raver, 2003). Given the links between children's early achievement, behavior, and attendance for later school-related outcomes, it is important to understand the association between maternal depression and these outcomes across elementary school.

While a large body of research explores the association between maternal depression, often measured as depressive symptomology, and child development (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Goodman & Goodman, 1999; Garmezy & Mednick, 1970; Kupelian, 2008; Troughton, Delap, & Caine, 2002; Troughton, Delap, & Caine, 2003; Troughton, Delap, & Caine, 2004).
Gotlib, 2002; Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Turney, 2012), little research
has examined the association between maternal depression and
school-aged children’s classroom behaviors, academic achieve-
ment, and school attendance. It is important to note that, like much
of the related research (Augustine & Crosnoe, 2010; Goodman &
Gotlib, 2002; Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Turney, 2011, 2012), while
we refer to maternal depression throughout this study, our mea-
sure is an indicator of depressive symptoms rather than an official
diagnosis of depression. Among the few studies that have exam-
ined the relationship between maternal depression and children’s
developmental outcomes in elementary school (Ashman, Dawson,
& Panagiotides, 2008; Augustine & Crosnoe, 2010; Bodovsky & Youn,
2010; Essex, Klein, Miech, & Smider, 2001), little attention has been
given to the importance of the timing, persistence, or severity of
maternal depression. The current study aims to address this gap in
the literature. Using a nationally representative longitudinal sam-
ples of kindergarteners, we examine the relationship between the
timing, persistence, and severity of maternal depression and chil-
dren’s school behaviors, academic achievement, and attendance in
third and fifth grades.

Maternal depression and child development

Theoretical perspective

Both life course and developmental theories posit that mater-
nal depression—including its timing, persistence, and severity—is
likely to influence children’s school behavior, achievement, and
attendance. Life course theory suggests that development is deter-
mined, in part, through responses to changes in the contexts in
which development occurs. From this perspective, the association
between a mother’s depression and her child’s school outcomes
may vary depending on when in the child’s life it occurs, whether
the mother’s depression is chronic or episodic in nature, and the
severity of her depression (Elder & Shanahan, 2006).

Timing. Theory and research suggest that maternal depression that
occurs earlier in a child’s life will likely affect the child more
than maternal depression experienced during later years (Elder &
Shanahan, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This is due, in part,
the fact that early experiences are particularly salient for chil-
dren’s developmental outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Family
is more influential for younger children than for older children and
adolescents who spend more time in school and with their peers
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Shonkoff
& Phillips, 2000). Maternal depression is associated with negative
interactions with children and less optimal parenting during early
dehipline (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Turney, 2012).

Young children may be more susceptible to the effects of mater-
nal depression given that home and familial contexts are more
salient for them. Thus, maternal depression early in elementary
school, when children are still very young, might be more detri-
mental to their school outcomes and set them on a less positive
trajectory than maternal depression experienced later in ele-
mentary school or high school, when peer relationships become
particularly important (Magnusson & Stattin, 2006). However, the
association between maternal depression and child outcomes has
been documented from infancy through adolescence, with no spe-
cific age group appearing to be particularly vulnerable or resilient
(Cummings & Davies, 1994; Rutter, 1990).

Persistence. While children of depressed mothers are more likely
to encounter a variety of disadvantages than children of non-
depressed mothers, those children whose mothers are chronically
depressed—for whom maternal depression persists over time
or occurs multiple times—may be more vulnerable than chil-
dren whose mothers experience a single episode of depression
(Cummings & Davies, 1994). As we note above, the majority of peo-
ple who become depressed will experience a subsequent episode or
episodes of depression (Keller & Boland, 1998; Kessler et al., 1997).
Thus, maternal depression measured once a child enters school
might be capturing depression that is persistent or reoccurring.
However, a snapshot of maternal depression for school-age chil-
dren may, instead, indicate a single or first episode of depression.

Children whose mothers experience a single episode of depres-
sion may experience fewer, if any, lasting negative impacts; but
children whose mothers are persistently depressed may be more
likely to accumulate disadvantage over this extended period and
thus be more likely to experience lasting negative effects (Campbell,
2010). Mothers who experience a single episode of depression
might be more capable of coping with the illness and, with a relatively
brief duration and lack of reoccurrence, their chil-
dren may only experience negative consequences of the mother’s
depression during the episode, if at all, rather than experiencing
lasting negative effects (Campbell, 2010). Neither developmen-
tal nor life course theories suggest which might matter more for
children’s development, the timing of maternal depression or its
persistence.

Maternal depression and context

The influence of maternal depression on child development
might be more pronounced in certain family contexts. Maternal
depression is more common among economically disadvantaged
families (Belle, 1990), and some evidence suggests that maternal
depression might have a larger negative effect on child well-being
among families with low incomes (Goodman et al., 2011). Mothers
living in poverty are more likely to have additional stressors that
limit their ability to compensate for, cope with, or seek treatment
for depression.

Depression is more common among ethnic minorities relative to
white women (Bromberger, Harlow, Avis, Kravitz, & Cordal, 2004;
Plant & Sachs-Ericsson, 2004), and people with lower levels of edu-
cation and racial/ethnic minorities are much less likely to receive
treatment for depression (Olff et al., 2002). High levels of famil-
ial stress related to poverty may mediate the relationship between
maternal depression and child well-being (Dawson et al., 2003).
However, the existing literature is mixed with regard to whether
higher levels of income or maternal education buffer children from
the negative effects of maternal depression, as well as to whether
the effects of maternal depression vary by race/ethnicity (Augustine
& Crosnoe, 2010; Goodman et al., 2011; Turney, 2011, 2012). In
addition to exploring whether the effects of maternal depression
vary by its timing, persistence, and severity, we explore whether
or not there are differential effects of maternal depression for
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