



Research article

The role of negative parental attributions in the associations between daily stressors, maltreatment history, and harsh and abusive discipline



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ABSTRACT

Negative parental attributions are related to parent and family stressors and are thought to be important predictors of subsequent disciplinary actions and, potentially, abusive parenting. We examined if negative parental attributions mediate the relation between daily stressors (i.e., low SES, parenting stress, partner-related stress) parents' own history of child maltreatment, and harsh and abusive parenting. Mothers ($n = 53$) completed a computerized attribution task and reported on daily stressors, their own history of child maltreatment and their discipline strategies. Mothers' negative parental attributions mediated the association between parenting stress (but not the other stressors) and harsh and abusive discipline. These findings implicate that interventions to decrease (the risk of) child abuse should not only focus on reducing abuse-related stressors, but also target negative parental attributions.

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1. Introduction

The research literature identifies many different types of risk factors for harsh and abusive parenting (Stith et al., 2009). Different types of daily stressors, such as socioeconomic strain, marital discord, and parenting problems have been studied as risk factors for harsh and abusive parenting, and are found to negatively influence parents' ability to use positive and effective discipline strategies (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013; Liu & Wang, 2015; Puff & Renk, 2014). In addition, parents' own history of child maltreatment is found to be a crucial risk factor for the parent to maltreat their own children (e.g., Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Pears & Capaldi, 2001). A possible underlying mechanism that explains why current stress and past experiences of maltreatment relate to harsh and abusive parenting is parental attributions (i.e., parental interpretations and evaluations of child behavior; Milner, 1993, 2003). According to the Social Information Processing (SIP) model negative parental attributions are important predictors of subsequent disciplinary actions and potentially, harsh or abusive parenting (Milner, 1993, 2003). The model theorizes that parents who attribute responsibility and hostile intent to the child and evaluate the behavior as more serious and wrong, are at risk for child abuse. Further, high stress levels and the experience of childhood maltreatment are thought to predict negative parental attributions (Milner, 1993, 2003). This implies a mediation model from current stressors and past maltreatment via negative attributions to harsh and abusive parenting that has not yet been empirically examined as such. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore negative

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parental attributions as mediators that may explain why current stress and childhood maltreatment relate to the use of harsh and abusive discipline.

Stress can be caused by a broad range of factors. At the family level an important source of stress is low socioeconomic status (SES). The Family Stress Model (FSM; Conger & Conger, 2002; Conger & Donnellan, 2007) posits that parents with a low SES experience elevated levels of stress because of the economic hardship (e.g., low income, high debts, work instability) they encounter. As a consequence, parents will be more irritable, harsh, and inconsistent in their disciplinary practices. Several empirical studies support this relation between a low SES and the use of harsh discipline and abusive parenting. For example, low educational level and unemployment predict harsh discipline (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994), and physically abusive parents were found to be significantly more often parents with a low education, a low income, a lower occupational level, and being more often unemployed than non-abusive parents (Cappelleri, Eckenrode, & Powers, 1993; Euser et al., 2013; Sedlak et al., 2010; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). Moreover, poverty levels are associated with higher rates of child maltreatment (Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy, & Dineen, 2014; Sedlak et al., 2010).

An additional family-related stress factor that is linked to more harsh discipline and abusive parenting, is stress caused by interparental conflict and marital dissatisfaction (i.e., partner-related stress). Empirical evidence extensively demonstrates the relation between partner-related stress and abusive parenting. For example, abusing parents and those at risk for abusive parenting have been found to be more dissatisfied with their relationships (Chan, 1994; Salisbury, Henning, & Holdford, 2009), report less support from their partners (Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991), and hold less positive opinions of their partners (Smith, Hanson, & Noble, 1974), compared to other parents. In addition, marital conflict and low marital quality are related to the use of more coercive and harsh discipline (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004; Coln et al., 2013; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006).

Another source of stress at the family level that might be particularly relevant in predicting harsh and abusive parenting is the stress a parent experiences in relation to parenting tasks and challenging child behaviors (i.e., parenting stress). Parenting stress results from a disturbance in balance between parents' perceptions of demands of parenting and their perceptions of their resources meeting those demands (Deater-Deckard, 2004). In general, the difficulty that arises from the responsibility of raising children, leads to higher levels of stress (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). Nevertheless, feelings of competence in parenting and the experience of level of demandingness can differ greatly among parents. We would like to emphasize that this is not to be confused with negative parental attributions. For example, parents can experience their children as highly demanding (i.e., stressful), without attributing this behavior as negative (e.g., "It is normal for young children to be demanding"). According to the Parenting Stress Model (Abidin, 1990), parents who experience high levels of challenging child behavior, dysfunctional parent-child interactions and low levels of available resources (i.e., parenting stress), are also parents who engage in more negative, authoritarian parenting. Research demonstrates that parenting stress is indeed a risk factor for the use of harsh and abusive discipline. For example, parenting stress is related to the use of more corporal punishment and psychological aggression (Anthony et al., 2005; Liu & Wang, 2015; Rodgers, 1998), and more authoritarian, power-assertive discipline strategies (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). Additionally, it has been found that abusive mothers experience significantly more parenting stress than non-abusive mothers (Chan, 1994).

In addition to risk factors at the family level, a parent's own history of child maltreatment is seen as a crucial risk factor for the parent to become maltreating to their own children (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011). This is supported by many studies that confirm the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, and studies that found a relation between childhood maltreatment and the use of harsh and abusive discipline (Coohey & Braun, 1997; Dixon et al., 2005; Newberger et al., 1986; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991).

Some research has been done on mediating mechanisms that might explain the relation between stress and harsh and abusive discipline practices and the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment. For instance, the relation between economic stress and harsh parenting was found to be mediated by parental depression (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994; Parke et al., 2004), and the intergenerational continuity of abuse has been found to be partially mediated by early childbearing and cohabiting with a violent person (Dixon et al., 2005). However, most research demonstrates the direct associations of stress and prior childhood maltreatment with the use of harsh and abusive parenting without testing mediational pathways. Based on the SIP-model, we examine parental attributions as possible mediators that may explain why stress and childhood maltreatment relate to harsh and abusive parenting.

Parental attributions are defined as parental interpretations and evaluations of child behavior (Milner, 1993, 2003). The SIP-model theorizes that when parental attributions are biased, the quality of parenting behavior can be compromised and might even take the form of abusive parenting. Parents who have biased attributions are hypothesized to attribute more responsibility and more hostile intent to the child (e.g., "he spilled the milk because he wants to get back at me"), and evaluate child behavior as more serious, wrong, and blameworthy compared to other parents. In addition, these parents are expected to be less able to think of alternative explanations for the child's behavior (e.g., "he spilled the milk, because he is too young to hold the cup straight") and are believed to ascribe negative child behavior to internal, stable, and global child characteristics. The more the parent attributes the child behavior as negative, the higher the chance that the parental disciplinary response will be harsh, and may subsequently result in abuse (Milner, 1993, 2003).

Furthermore, the SIP-model describes that the current experience of stress and the experience of childhood maltreatment are risk factors for the parental attribution to become biased. Stress is thought to be responsible for the parent's automatic and rigid rather than controlled and flexible information processing (Milner, 1993, 2003). Empirical evidence shows that people who are (chronically) stressed show cognitive impairments, such as problems in learning and memory (Kuhlmann, Piel, &

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