

Parenting stress and Child Behavior Problems: Examining Whether Marital Satisfaction Plays a Moderating Role

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Abstract

Parenting stress can have an important influence on parents' marital satisfaction, as well as child behavior problems. Parenting stress can impact marital satisfaction, which in turn may serve as a moderator for other family variables. The present study examines whether marital satisfaction moderates the relation between parenting stress and child behavior problems. It was hypothesized that parents experiencing high levels of stress and also lower marital satisfaction would report higher child behavior problems in comparison to parents who experience higher marital satisfaction. Fifty-three families were recruited from Stanislaus County, California. Data were collected as part of a larger study on family interactions in families of preschoolers with and without developmental delay. Parents of children aged 3-5 years completed 3 questionnaires: the Child Behavior Checklist Ages 1.5-5, the Quality of Marriage Index, and the Parenting Daily Hassles Scale.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, child behavioural problems, parenting stress

Introduction

Studies show that having a supportive social network can reduce parental stress, and in the case of a married couple, having a reliable or happy marital relationship can reduce parental stress. (Hostetler 2011). A study in 2015 found that marital satisfaction was significantly related to both parenting stress and child behavioral problems; parents who reported lower marital satisfaction had higher parenting stress and reported more child behavior problems (Robinson & Neece 2015). Child behavioral problems have been associated with affecting school performance and children repeating grades (Kim, Mazza, Zwanziger & Henry 2014). A study by State and Kern (2017) also found that teenagers who had less behavioral problems in high school had reported higher life satisfaction. It was also found that parental stress had also been linked to child abuse in a study conducted by Crum and Moreland (2017).

Methods

Participants

53 Families residing in Stanislaus County, California were recruited, with children ranging between the ages of 3 and 5 years.

Procedure

Data have been collected as part of a larger study on family interactions in families of preschoolers with

and without developmental risk. The larger study has recruited children with developmental risk, as well as typically developing children. All children were administered intelligence tests as a part of the larger study, using the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scales of Intelligence, 4th Edition (WPPSI-IV).

After recruitment, families were contacted by the laboratory coordinator to schedule each visit to the university. The research assistant or principal investigator obtained an informed consent form from the parents, then gave each parents a packet of questionnaires to complete. Each parent was instructed to complete questionnaires separately and to avoid discussing their responses. Parents were encouraged to return their questionnaires at their following visit. After the parent signed the consent form, informal assent was obtained from the child, then testing with the WPPSI-IV commenced. Testing with the WPPSI-IV was performed either by the principal investigator (a licensed clinical psychologist), or by trained research assistants (masters-level graduate students in either behavior analysis or counseling, trained and supervised by the principal investigator). Parents completed a packet of several questionnaires, of which 3 were used in the current study. When parents returned with their completed questionnaires at the second family visit, questionnaires were checked for completion by trained research assistants. Any incomplete items, or items for which the response was unclear, were addressed immediately with the parent. If items were left incomplete after the visit, the principal investigator

made attempts to collect any remaining questionnaire data by phone. Questionnaire data will be scored and entered by trained and supervised research assistants, with regular checks for reliability and accuracy.

Families received 3 forms of incentives to encourage participation in the study. Families received gift cards for participation in each phase of the study: \$40 for participation in the initial intellectual assessment, \$20 for completion of parent questionnaires, and \$40 for participation in the family visit. In addition to monetary incentives, a brief written summary of the child's intellectual functioning (written by supervised and trained research assistants) was provided, and focal children and their siblings were allowed to pick from a "prize bin" of small toys or stickers (each with a value of less than \$1) each time they visited the university.

Measures

The current study used 3 parent-completed questionnaires from the larger packet of questionnaires parents complete for the study.

Child Behavior Checklist

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla 2001) Ages 1.5-5 is a standardized form used for parents to measure the behavioral and emotional problems of their children aged 1.5 to 5 years old. The CBCL contains ratings of 99 forced-choice items and one open-ended item, which requests that the parent to add any additional problems not already listed. The items ask parents to rate frequency of various behavior problems as observed in their children, including emotionally reactivity, anxiety/depression, somatic complaints, withdrawal, attention problems, aggressive behavior, and sleep problems. The form also includes three open-ended questions for parents to describe physical and mental disabilities, and possible concerns about the child (Achenbach & Rescorla 2001). For each of the 99 scale questions, parents are able to respond 0 (Not True), 1 (Somewhat or Sometimes True) or 2 (Very True or Often True). High scores on the CBCL indicate greater emotional and behavioral problems.

A study conducted by Dutra and Campbell (2004) tested the reliability and validity of the CBCL by having over 200 psychologists and psychiatrists test it, and found it to be have both adequate internal reliability, as well as good convergent and discriminant validity.

Quality of Marriage Index

The Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) is a six-item, unidimensional index of marital quality (Norton 1983). Respondents answer the first five items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The sixth item is answered on a 10 point scale ranging from 1 (extremely low) to 10 (extremely high). Higher scores on the QMI reflect a

happy and content marriage, whereas low scores reflect an unhappy marriage. QMI has strong evidence for reliability, allowing clinicians to efficiently monitor couples' relationship status' and progress over time (Woods 2013), and has been named as an accurate global assessment of marital satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach 2000). The QMI's validity was supported as it correlated with the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens & Bugaighis 1986).

Parenting Daily Hassles Questionnaire

The Parental Daily Hassles Questionnaire (PDH; Crnic & Greenberg 1990) is a 20-item measure of typical everyday events in parenting and parent-child interactions. For each question, a parent rates the frequency of occurrence of daily hassles on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (rarely), to 4 (constantly). The parent also rates the intensity of the hassle on a 5-point scale from 1 (no hassle) to 5 (big hassle).

The PDH's reliability has been affirmed as it has been used in various other studies to test for parental stress. In one particular study conducted by Lutz et al. (2012), they chose the PDH specifically because the intensity and frequency of the PDH are highly correlated with one another ($r = .78$). Regarding validity, Crnic and Greenberg (1990) have demonstrated evidence for strong discriminant validity of the hassles measure.

Analysis

Data was analyzed for relevant covariates, which were included in all analyses (yearly family income, parental total years of education, and child race). Child level of developmental risk (typically developing or developmentally at-risk) was included as a covariate, with children in "at-risk" category having either an IQ below 85, or parent-reported diagnosis of a developmental disability. Mothers and fathers' results were run separately, then compared using qualitative comparisons. To test if marital satisfaction moderated the relation between parenting stress and child behavioral problems, a moderation analysis was conducted using a multiple linear regression. The independent variables of the regression are parental stress (as measured by the PDH) and marital satisfaction (as measured by the QMI), as well as a calculated variable representing the interaction between these two predictors, which is created by multiplying the independent variable and moderator together after each variable has been centered to have a mean of 0. The dependent variable of the regression is child behavior problems (as measured by the CBCL). If the interaction was significant, moderation is supported. If found, the direction of the interaction will be interpreted from

plotting the interaction and from an analysis of the simple slopes.

Results

Results did not support the hypothesis that marital satisfaction acts as a moderator for the relationship between parenting stress and child behavioral problems. However, other interesting results were found from both mothers' and fathers' data.

Mothers

Results indicated that maternal parenting predicted child internalizing behaviors (i.e., clinginess, withdrawal, and sadness) with a trend of significance in predicting child externalizing behavior problems (i.e., physical aggression) as well as child total problem behaviors (i.e., anxiety, being prone to nightmares, and refusing to eat). Mothers with higher stress also reported having children with more behavior problems.

Maternal data also revealed a statistically significant relationship between developmental group and internalizing child behavioral problems, along with a trend toward significance for developmental group predicting externalizing behaviors. Overall, children in the developmental risk group showed higher behavior problems.

Fathers

Father parenting stress showed a trend toward significance in predicting child internalizing and externalizing behaviors. It was also shown that higher parenting stress was associated with higher behavior problems. Fathers of children of color reported their children as having more internalizing child behavioral problems in comparison to fathers of white children.

Developmental group significantly predicted fathers' ratings of internalizing, externalizing, and total child behavioral problems. Children in the developmental risk group showed higher behavior problems.

Discussion

Results from the present study did not support the hypothesis that marital satisfaction acts as a moderator for the relationship between parenting stress and child behavioral problems. One possibility on why we did not find moderation is that parenting stress and child behavioral problems might have been the incorrect variables to look at. Marital satisfaction could still be a moderator, but for other variables such as perceived family social support and child behavioral problems. High marital satisfaction could be an influencer to perceived family social support and as a result could affect child behavioral problems. And although moderation was not found, maternal findings are

consistent with past research showing that mothers' stress and marital satisfaction predicts child behavioral problems (Marchland, 1998; Query, 2001).

Despite the paternal results not showing a relationship between the main variables of interest, child race was associated with fathers' ratings of child internalizing problems. These results are somewhat consistent with past research showing that children of color have more externalizing behavioral problems than Caucasian children ("Children of color," 1998; Hoffman, 2018). Because this research is observational and not experimental, the relationship between child race and child behavioral problems is based solely on parents' perception; this research does not imply that a child's race is a cause for more behavioral problems. Our findings also support past research in that there is a relationship between developmental group and child behavioral problems (Neece, 2014).

Suggestions for Future work

The paternal results might be giving an accurate picture of how fathers perceive their families, but future studies should also consider observational data collection to enrich our understanding of how both mothers and fathers perceive their children's behavior. Those wishing to conduct similar studies such as this should consider parenting stress and marital satisfaction as targets of intervention for families who have children experiencing behavioral problems and also continue to research marital satisfaction as a moderator for other variables.

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