Title: Child Behavior Problems and Marital Satisfaction as Predictors of Stress among Parents of Children with Developmental Delays

Authors: Megan L. Krantz\(^1\), Merideth Wistriuk\(^2\), & Cameron L. Neece\(^1\)

\(^1\)Loma Linda University, \(^2\)Valley Children’s Hospital

Introduction: Parents of children with developmental delays (DD) report higher levels of stress as compared to parents of typically developing children (Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002; Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Shonkoff, & Krauss, 2001). This is particularly concerning given the well-established relationship between parental distress and the development of social and behavioral difficulties among children with developmental delays (Baker et al., 2003; Donenberg & Baker, 1993; Neece & Baker, 2008; Neece, Green & Baker, 2012). Research suggests that as child problem behaviors increase, parents’ psychological health and well-being decrease (Beck, Hastings, Daley, & Stevenson, 2004; Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Hastings, 2003). Little is known about protective factors against stress for parents of children with DD. Marital quality, for example, may be protective against parenting stress; greater marital quality has been associated with decreased parenting stress among parents of children with DD (Kersh, Hedvat, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield, 2006). Previous research suggests a link between marital satisfaction and parent stress (Gerstein, Crnic, Blacher, & Baker, 2009; Kersh, et al., 2006), and both marital satisfaction and parent stress have been independently associated with child behavior problems (Henderson, Sayer, & Horne, 2003; Neece et al., 2012). Despite these findings, few studies have explored the relationship between marital satisfaction, child problem behaviors, and stress among parents of children with DD. In the current study, we sought to better understand this relationship by examining problem behaviors, marital satisfaction, and the interaction between these factors as predictors of parent stress. Further, we tested whether changes in behavior problems and marital satisfaction through an empirically-supported stress-reduction intervention (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1992) predicted changes in parent stress.

Method: In the current study, we used data from the Mindful Awareness for Parenting Stress (MAPS) Project, which included 80 parents of children, ages 2.5 to 5 years old, with DD (parent mean age = 36.8; Hispanic/Latino = 49.4%; family income < $50k = 52.4%; Married = 75.3%). Parents participated in a randomized controlled trial examining the efficacy of MBSR in reducing parenting stress and subsequent child behavior problems. Parents were assigned to an immediate treatment or a waitlist control group. Parenting stress was measured using the Parenting Stress Index-Short form (Abidin, 1990). Child behavior problems were measured using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 2001). Marital satisfaction was measured using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). Data for each variable were collected at baseline and post-intervention.

Result: We conducted a hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis to examine the effect of child behavior problems, marital satisfaction, and the interaction between these variables on distress of parents of children with DD at the baseline assessment. Results indicated that both child behavior problems ($b = .09, p < .05, sr^2 = .07$) and marital satisfaction ($b = -.25, p < .05, sr^2 = .06$) significantly predicted parent distress at baseline. However, the interaction between child behavior problems and marital satisfaction was not significant, $p > .05$. We then performed a hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis to determine if changes in child behavior problems and marital satisfaction through MBSR would predict changes in parent distress. After controlling for baseline child behavior problems and marital satisfaction, post-treatment child behavior problems ($b = .15, p < .05, sr^2 = .16$) significantly predicted changes in parent distress, but post-treatment marital satisfaction did not, $p > .05$. Future analyses will examine the opposite direction of effect (i.e., parenting stress predicting marital satisfaction).

Discussion: The current study highlights the potential impact of marital relationship quality and child behavior problems on stress among parents of children with DD. At baseline, parent stress was significantly predicted by child behavior problems and marital satisfaction. However, marital satisfaction was not a significant moderator of the relationship between child behavior problems and parent stress. Reductions in parenting stress through MBSR were associated with reductions in child behavior problems but not with changes in marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction and parenting stress are likely intercorrelated and have a bidirectional relationship, thus future analyses will examine the opposite direction of effect (i.e., parenting stress predicting marital satisfaction) to further examine this. Of note, our measure of marital satisfaction likely captured a stable trait-like characteristic of parent marital relationships that was not influenced by changes in stress or child behaviors from baseline to post-intervention. Future studies should examine whether state-like facets of parents’ marital relationships that may influence and be influenced by day-to-day parenting stress and child behavior, and may be more dynamic over the course of treatment. Greater understanding of the relationships between marital quality, parenting stress, and child behavior problems may help to identify protective features of the marital relationship, which may inform the development of more targeted support for families of children with DD.
References/Citations: