Title: Behavior Problems in Children with Developmental Delays: The Predictive Role of Mother and Father Depressive Symptoms

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Introduction: Though many studies have indicated that parent depression is associated with child behavior problems (Bagner, Pettit, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Jaccard, 2013; Gjerde et al., 2017; Psychogiou et al., 2017), this phenomenon is not as well studied in families of children with developmental delays. In addition, discussion of parental depression is often limited only to consideration of mothers, and not fathers’ depression symptoms. This study tested the hypothesis that parental depression moderated the relation between child developmental risk (developmental delay vs. typically developing) and parents’ ratings of child behavior problems. In addition, the study sought to explore these relations in more detail, and compare mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of their families.

Method: Results are part of a broader longitudinal study of observed family interactions in families with and without children with developmental delays. For the current study, 59 families of children aged 3-5 years at timepoint 1 completed questionnaires regarding family functioning and parent well-being, in addition to completing a developmental assessment and whole-family observation. For the current study, only parent questionnaire data were used. Children were identified as either developmentally delayed (n = 30; IQ < 85 and/or parent report of a diagnosed or suspected developmental disability) or typically developing (n = 29; IQ ≥ 85 and no parent report of a suspected or diagnosed developmental disability). Both mothers and fathers completed questionnaires regarding demographic information, depression symptoms (the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, Revised; CESD-R), and child behavior problems (the Child Behavior Checklist ages 1 ½ to 5; CBCL).

Results: Initial zero-order correlations indicated significant correlations between key variables for both mothers and fathers. Moderation, run separately for mothers and fathers, was tested using the PROCESS macro for SPSS, with child developmental risk (developmentally delayed or typically developing) as the predictor, either mother or father depression symptoms (CESD-R) as the moderator, relevant demographic variables as covariates, and parents’ ratings of child behavior problems (either CBCL internalizing, externalizing, or total scores) as the outcome. Results were not consistent with moderation for either mothers or fathers. Next, exploratory multiple regression analyses were run separately for mother and fathers to better understand how the variables were related. Six multiple regressions were run with developmental risk, mother or father CESD-R scores, and relevant demographic covariates as the predictors, and mother or father CBCL ratings as the outcome (regressions were run separately for mothers and fathers, and for CBCL internalizing, externalizing, and total scores). For mothers, CESD-R scores significantly predicted mothers’ CBCL internalizing t-scores (β = 0.43, p < .01), CBCL externalizing scores (β = 0.48, p < .01), and CBCL total scores (β = 0.48, p < .01), while developmental risk did not significantly predict CBCL ratings. In each regression, higher CESD-R scores were associated with higher ratings of behavior problems. For fathers, developmental risk significantly predicted fathers’ CBCL internalizing scores (β = 0.54, p < .01) and CBCL total scores (β = 0.44, p < .01), while CESD-R scores did not significantly predict CBCL ratings. In each regression, having a child with developmental delay was associated with higher ratings of behavior problems.

Discussion: Results indicate that parent gender may be associated with parents’ differing perceptions of their children. In keeping with existing research on parental depression and behavior problems, mothers’ ratings of depression symptoms significantly predicted their ratings of child behavior problems, regardless of their child’s developmental risk. However, fathers’ depression symptoms did not significantly predict behavior problem ratings. Rather, the best predictor of behavior problems for fathers was a child’s developmental delay. This is consistent with past research suggesting fathers are more affected by their child’s disability (and not other co-occurring factors) than mothers (Rivard, Terroux, Parent-Boursier & Mercier, 2014). Results highlight the importance of including both fathers and mothers in studies of children with developmental delay, and suggest points of intervention to support parents’ and families’ well-being.
References:


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