Maternal Distress Tolerance, Intrusive Parenting Behavior and Toddler Externalizing Difficulties
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Introduction

• Parents play a role in the adjustment of their children, especially in the development of externalizing issues.
  • More intrusive parenting predicts increased externalizing problems in children.
  • Maternal Distress Tolerance likely predicts children's externalizing problems given its role in parenting behaviors.
• Studies examining maternal characteristics that may predict both intrusive parenting behaviors and externalizing difficulties are sparse; therefore, the current study examined relations between Maternal Distress Tolerance and children's externalizing problems and Maternal Distress Tolerance and intrusive parenting.
• An indirect link between Maternal Distress Tolerance and externalizing problems, through intrusive parenting, was expected.

Method: Participants

• N = 150 mothers and their infants (80 boys)
• Mothers were demographically diverse (63% White, 11% Hispanic, 10% African-American, and 15% other)
• Mother’s were, on average, 27.53 years old and had 14.84 years of education.
• 23% of the sample fell below the poverty line based on income to needs ratio < 1.

Method: Measures and Procedure

• At 4 months old, infant cumulative risk was examined through maternal previous and current depression, teenage mother, maternal education level, poverty level, and single mother.
• Maternal Distress Tolerance was assessed using the Distress Tolerance Scale, a measure based on four subscales including Tolerance, Appraisal, Absorption, and Regulation.
  • Tolerance: the perceived ability to tolerate emotional distress
  • Appraisal: the subjective appraisal of distress
  • Absorption: the attention being absorbed by negative emotions.
  • Regulation: the regulation efforts to alleviate distress.
• Mothers engaged in an interaction task with infants at 6 months of age and again at 8 months.
  • The interaction was coded using the Parent-Child Early Relational Assessment, a measure that assesses intrusive parenting behaviors.
  • Eight codes were used to assess intrusive parenting including negative physical contact, appropriate sensitivity/responsivity, and intrusiveness.
• Mothers reported on their toddlers' levels of externalizing problems at 18 months using the Child Behavior Checklist.
  • Toddler externalizing problems include attention problems, aggression, and oppositionality.

Results

• Structural equation modeling was used for the analyses with cumulative risk included as a covariate in all analyses.
• Full information maximum likelihood was used to estimate missing data through EQS.
• Maternal Distress Tolerance and Externalizing problems were significantly negatively related (p < .05).
• Maternal Distress Tolerance did not predict Intrusive Parenting.
• Intrusive parenting and Externalizing problems were significantly positively related (p < .05).
• Four separate models were then tested to examine the specificity of the observed relations across the four Distress Tolerance Scale subscales.
  • Both the Tolerance and Absorption subscales demonstrated direct links to Externalizing Problems; the Appraisal subscale did not.
• Evidence of an indirect relationship between the Distress Tolerance Scale Regulation subscale and Externalizing Problems was observed.
• Distress Tolerance Scale Regulation predicted Intrusive Parenting and Intrusive Parenting predicted subsequent Externalizing Problems.
• Evidence of mediation was supported by a significant indirect link between Distress Tolerance Scale Regulation and Externalizing Problems through Intrusive Parenting.

Conclusion

• These results suggest that Maternal Distress Tolerance has a role in the development of externalizing problems.
  • More specifically, Distress Tolerance Scale Regulation predicted Intrusive Parenting which then predicted Externalizing Problems in children.
  • As mothers ability to regulate emotions related to distress increased, intrusive parenting decreased. As Intrusive Parenting decreased, Externalizing Problems in children decreased.
• Implications of the study would be to develop strategies to help mothers regulate stress which could reduce the level of intrusive parenting styles, thus leading to lower levels of externalizing problems in their children.
• Limitations include the fact that both Externalizing Problems and Maternal Distress Tolerance were collected based on self-report questionnaires.
• Future research needs to be done to examine why Distress Tolerance Scale Regulation specifically predicted Externalizing Problems through intrusive parenting.

References


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