Introduction

- Research consistently supports a relationship between early temperament characteristics and the later onset of psychopathology (Repetti & Mc Kee, 2005).
- In particular, child negative affect (NA) has been implicated in the etiology of anxiety disorders (Norton & Mehta, 2007).
- Contextual factors, including parenting practices, may also impact the development of anxiety.
- Negative parenting (e.g., rejection, high control) is associated with increased child anxiety (McLeod et al., 2007).
- Positive parenting (e.g., sensitivity, warmth) is associated with lower levels of child anxiety (Spinrad et al., 2007).
- Previous research (typically conducted in older children) has demonstrated that child temperament and parenting may influence each other in predicting childhood internalizing problems.
- For example, behavioral inhibition and the experience of family negative affect in 3 year old children predicted anxiety at 7 years of age (Volbrecht & Goldenblum, 2010).

The Current Study

- The current study aimed to determine whether infant negative affect and positive parenting interact to predict toddler anxiety levels.
- We hypothesized that:
  - Infant NA will be positively associated with toddler anxiety.
  - Positive parenting will moderate the relationship between infant NA and toddler anxiety, such that higher infant NA will predict greater toddler anxiety when positive parenting is low.

Methods

Participants

- 150 mother-infant dyads
- Mothers mean age 26.6 years; 63% White, 11% Hispanic, 10% African-American, 15% Other

Measures + Procedure

- Cumulative Risk Index – collected at 4 months postpartum:
  - Points accumulated for risk factors such as teen motherhood, maternal education less than high school, income below poverty line, etc.
- Unstructured Free Play Task – to assess positive parenting, collected at 8 months postpartum:
  - Mothers asked to play with their children normally, without the use of toys.
  - Task is video/audio recorded and later coded using the Parent Child Early Relational Assessment coding scheme, which includes 11 positive parenting behaviors rated on a 1 to 5 scale
- Revised Infant Behavior Questionnaire – to assess infant NA, collected at 12 months postpartum:
  - Four distress to limitations, and sadness subscales were combined to form the NA aggregate variable
- Beck Anxiety Inventory – to assess maternal anxiety symptoms, collected at 12 months postpartum
- Child Behavior Checklist – to assess toddler anxiety symptoms, collected at 18 months postpartum
- Anxiety Subscale

Data Analysis

A hierarchical regression was conducted with 18-month anxiety problems as the dependent variable:
- Infant sex, cumulative risk, and maternal anxiety entered as covariates on step 1.
- 8-month positive parenting behavior (standardized) entered on step 2.
- 12-month NA (standardized) entered on step 3.
- The 12-month NA by 8-month positive parenting behavior interaction effect entered on step 4.

Results

- The results revealed a significant interaction between infant NA and positive parenting in relation to toddler anxiety.
  - High infant NA predicted increased levels of toddler anxiety at low levels of positive parenting.
  - Infant NA was not significantly related to toddler anxiety at high levels of positive parenting.
- These results suggest positive parenting moderates the effect of infant NA on toddler anxiety.

Discussion

- The current study examined whether positive parenting moderates the relationship between infant NA and toddler anxiety.
- The hypotheses were supported; high infant NA predicted elevated toddler anxiety, but only at low levels of positive parenting. Infant NA was not related to toddler anxiety at high levels of positive parenting.
- These results suggest that positive parenting acts as a protective factor against the development of anxiety, even in the presence of the risk factor NA.
- Some strengths of the study include a diverse sample, the longitudinal design, and direct observation of parenting.
- Limitations include the exclusive use of maternal report for infant NA and toddler anxiety.
- Future research could explore whether positive parenting acts as a protective factor against other risk factors for anxiety in young children.

References


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