Dissertation Abstract

Externalizing behavior problems have severe clinical implications. In fact, they have been found to be the primary basis for mental health referrals in early childhood. Findings from research on the etiology and development of externalizing behavior problems indicate that these behavior problems have significant effects not only throughout the life span but also across multiple generations. Family and child development research has consistently found that one of the most significant modifiable factors in the prevention and treatment of externalizing behavior problems in childhood is parenting practices, specifically, the reduction of inconsistent, harsh, and lax parenting practices and increases in warmth. Unfortunately, much of the extant literature is limited by parenting measures that are prone to recall bias, impression management, and limited ecological validity. Furthermore, ethnic minority families and families of low socioeconomic status are greatly underrepresented in the research examining the relationship between parenting practices and externalizing behavior problems as well as in the research on the development of parenting measures and research methodology to further examine this relationship.

The purpose of the current study was threefold. First, to develop and validate a parenting coding system, the iPARENT, to assess naturally occurring parenting behavior data obtained by a novel recording device, the iEAR. This novel recording device allows parents to participate in observational studies without the added burden of having to travel to the laboratory with their child, without needing to have a research assistant present, and in the comfort of their own home. Secondly, this study aimed to identify and
measure the degree of parenting practices empirically shown to increase the risk for child externalizing behavior problems in a sample of young mothers and examine how it relates to mothers’ self-report of their own parenting stress, parenting practices, and their children’s behavior as well as observed child behavior. Thirdly, the study aimed to assess the feasibility of iEAR use as well as that of the proposed coding system, the iPARENT.

An ethnically diverse sample of 89 college mothers and their one- to six-year-old children participated in the study. Mothers were recruited from a public Northeastern University via the college’s Child Care Center, flyers on campus, and in-person recruitment on campus. Mothers were a mean age of 24 years ($SD = 2.92$) and children were a mean age of 3.71 years ($SD = 1.49$); 57.3% of the children were male. Mothers completed self-report measures of parenting stress, parenting practices, and child behavior. Parenting practices and child behavior data was also obtained through iEAR observations and was coded according to the iPARENT coding scheme.

Results indicated that the iPARENT is a reliable measure of parenting and child behaviors; however, a few codes were identified as having subpar interrater reliability in this study and were flagged for further development and research. On average, mothers in this study were found to be almost five times more likely to deliver criticisms than praises to their children. An exploratory factor analysis with a target rotation revealed that the iPARENT consists of a two-factor structure: “Negative affect” and “Ineffective parent-child communication.” The iPARENT did not demonstrate convergent validity with mothers’ self-report on the Parenting Scale. The iPARENT demonstrated good discriminant validity. A significant relationship was found between mothers’ self-reported parenting stress and parenting behaviors assessed with the iPARENT.
Engagement was found to moderate the effect of mothers’ direct negative talk (critical remarks) on children’s noncompliance frequency. Mothers with high levels of engagement and direct negative talk had children who exhibited the least amount of concurrent noncompliance as assessed by the iPARENT. Engagement was also found to moderate the effect of the harshness of mothers’ direct negative talk on their children’s backtalk frequency. Mothers with high levels of engagement and harshness had children who exhibited the most concurrent backtalk as assessed by the iPARENT. iPARENT assessed parenting practices were not found to significantly predict mothers’ reports of child misbehavior. Lastly, the iEAR was found to be feasible for research practices and to potentially assist with the retention of ethnic minority and low SES families in observational research. That is, 100% of participants completed the study and although 6.42% of cases were lost due to iEAR logistical issues, this proportion of missing data is minor compared to other iEAR studies and home-visiting studies. The iEAR and the iPARENT show potential in obtaining reliable and valid parenting and child behavior data of at-risk families however further research is needed to address the limitations identified in the current study.