

Abstract

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTING AND CHILD TRAUMA: AN INTERGENERATIONAL INVESTIGATION

by

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This study examined the intergenerational transmission of trauma by investigating the relationship between parental trauma and child trauma exposure by considering parenting variables including emotion regulation, aggression, monitoring, and punitiveness as potential mechanisms of transmission. Though ample research exists which suggests that experiences of trauma are passed down from one generation to the next, this intergenerational transmission is not inevitable, and the mechanisms of transmission need to be better understood. Parenting is a crucial construct to examine given that it shapes interactions between two generations and represents a forum for intervention.

The study was a secondary analysis of a selection of data from a cross-sectional, cross-generational study of the associations between maternal substance use, psychopathology, neuropsychological functioning, child rearing deficits and corresponding child outcomes, including aggressive behavior and substance use. The sample of the current study, 176 urban, low-income, predominantly African American mothers and their pre/early adolescent children (ages 9-15), represents an understudied and vulnerable population. The study proposed that maternal trauma, here measured by numbers of types of trauma mothers endorsed, would be associated with child exposure to trauma, and that relationship would be mediated by each of the parenting variables

(aggression, monitoring, punitiveness, and emotion regulation). Given the salience of emotion regulation in disorders of traumatic stress, as well as in parenting, it was hypothesized that when all of the parenting variables were considered together, maternal emotion regulation would be a significant predictor of child trauma exposure even after controlling for maternal aggression, punitiveness, and monitoring.

The study found a small but significant association between maternal trauma and child exposure to trauma, lending some support to the presence of intergenerational transmission of trauma. Also, the study found evidence that maternal trauma interferes with parenting, as a significant association between maternal trauma and increased aggression and punitiveness existed. Punitiveness was the only parenting variable that mediated the relationship between maternal trauma and child exposure to trauma. Counter to the proposed hypotheses, there were no significant findings related to maternal emotion regulation and its association with child exposure to trauma.