

Less than optimal parenting strategies predict maternal low-level depression beyond that of child transgressions

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The relationship between less than optimal parenting styles, child transgressions and maternal depression were examined. It was predicted that variations in parenting styles would predict maternal depression over and above child transgressions. The present study involved approximately 68 children, their mothers and their preschool teachers. Participants included 36 male and 32 female children with a mean age of 50.76 months (standard deviation = 8.32), their mothers and their teachers. Mothers completed questionnaires on parenting styles and maternal depression, while teachers completed a questionnaire on children's social behaviours. A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses showed that less than optimal parenting (authoritarian parenting style and emotion dismissing emotional style) predicted maternal depression over and above child transgressions (aggressive, asocial, excluding, anxious and hyperactive behaviours). Additional analyses revealed that mothers who engage in less than optimal parenting strategies are likely to experience augmented levels of depression. Overall mothers' parenting styles appear to be more salient in determining their negative moods than their children's transgressions. Results are discussed in terms of parenting self-efficacy, learned hopelessness and directions for future research.

Keywords: *Child transgressions; Maternal depression; Parenting styles*

Introduction

Depression is one of the most widespread types of mental disorders in the Western population, second only to alcohol abuse (Kringlen *et al.*, 2001). Prevalence rates of major depression for women are more than double those for men for both lifetime (women = 24%, men = 9.9%) and 12-month periods (women = 9.7%, men = 4.1%).

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Kessler (2003) points out that the rates of depression in women are quickly rising possibly due to a variety of environmental stresses.

To examine how environmental stresses affect an individual's mood, external and internal factors can be considered. One identified external stress on maternal depression is having a child with emotional or behavioural problems (Elgar *et al.*, 2004a). Research has showed that mothers who lived with a child who displays disruptive behaviour became frustrated, fatigued and anxious (Elgar *et al.*, 2004b). In this vein, Pelham *et al.* (1997) found that adults dealing with children exhibiting symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder became more depressed, hostile and anxious, and consumed more alcohol than adults dealing with children without psychiatric disorders.

Internal factors that may lead to depression include cognitive distortions as shown by Beck's cognitive diathesis-stress theory of depression (Beck, 1967). Beck's theory is driven by the construct of schemata, which are stored ideas that strongly influence an individual's cognitive processes. Individuals with depressive schemata tend to view their world in a negative fashion and to acquire predictable errors in their thinking that may lead them to develop a negative cognitive triad (defined as a negative view of the self, the world and the future). The diathesis-stress theory of depression requires that environmental stressors occur to trigger the depression. Therefore, individuals who possess negative schemata are more likely to become depressed than those who do not possess negative schemata.

The present study examined depression in the general population using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck *et al.*, 1961). Although the BDI was designed to detect depression in clinical samples, it has also been successfully applied to the general population (Beck *et al.*, 1988). Beck *et al.* (1961, 1988) have identified the symptoms and attitudes detected by the BDI: mood, pessimism, sense of failure, lack of satisfaction, guilt feelings, sense of punishment, self-dislike, self-accusation, suicidal wishes, crying, irritability, social withdrawal, indecisiveness, distortion of body image, work inhibition, sleep disturbance, fatigability, loss of appetite, weight loss, somatic preoccupation, and loss of libido.

The present study investigated the relationship between parenting styles, children's social behaviours and maternal depression. There is a substantial lack of information regarding the relationship between mothers' styles of parenting and how these styles may influence affect and moods. By examining internal (e.g. parenting styles) and external (e.g. children's social behaviours) stimuli, it may be possible to shed light on which is more likely to be more salient in predicting mothers' depressive states. Furthermore, the potential clinical and practical implications of the variables in this study are very timely as they have been a neglected aspect in explaining and treating maternal depression.

Children's social behaviours

Several of children's social behaviours have been targeted as risk factors for later adjustment problems (Ladd & Profilet, 1996). Ladd and Profilet (1996) have focused

on six social behaviours that have been found to have an impact on children's later development: *aggression* (e.g. physically and verbally harming others), *prosocial behaviour* (empathic, self-sacrificing and cooperative behaviours), *asocial behaviours* (playing alone rather than being social and to distance themselves purposefully from others), *exclusion by peers* (distanced from a group by the other children), *anxious-fearful behaviour* (degree of distress a child shows in a social context), and *hyperactive-distractible behaviour* (disruptive externalizing behaviours exhibited in the classroom) have all been of interest to many researchers. Following this line of thought, researchers have also committed much time to studying the parental styles that are linked to a variety of children's social behaviours.

Parental disciplinary styles

During the first few years of life, the parent-child relationship has a profound impact on many aspects of children's development (for example, Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Rubin *et al.*, 1998). In particular, variations in parenting styles have been associated with deleterious and beneficial childhood outcomes.

Baumrind's parenting styles. Diana Baumrind (1971) has provided the parenting literature with some of the most often cited parenting constructs. They include the authoritarian, authoritative and permissive disciplinary styles. For the purpose of this manuscript, only the authoritarian parenting style was of interest. The authoritarian parenting style involves power assertion without warmth, nurturance or two-way communication. In this respect, a parent who engages in this style is low in warmth, but high in control. Authoritarian parents attempt to control and evaluate the behaviours and attitudes of their children with an absolute set of standards. Above all, these parents value obedience, respect for authority and preservation of order (Collins & Kuczaj, 1991).

Children of authoritarian parents report low self-esteem, spontaneity and varied levels of social withdrawal (Coopersmith, 1967) and have been considered by others to be fearful, apprehensive, moody, unhappy, easily annoyed, passively hostile, vulnerable to stress and unfriendly (Baumrind, 1987). Adolescents of authoritarian parenting continue to be less well adjusted than those who are actively engaged by parents in an authoritative style (Steinberg *et al.*, 1994). However, disciplinary styles are not the only barometer for measuring the parent-child relationship. Other considerations include parental emotional styles.

Parental emotional styles

Gottman *et al.* (1996, 1997) were among the first researchers to study the influence of parental emotional styles and child outcomes. They conceptualized different observable parental emotional styles as being influenced by parental meta-emotion, which refers to an organized set of feelings and thoughts about one's own emotions

and one's children's emotions (Gottman *et al.*, 1997). For instance, variations in meta-emotion could reflect how one parent may be 'put off' by her youngster's display of sadness, but another parent may be quite accepting and perceive the situation as an important time to discuss the child's emotions. So, not only does meta-emotion philosophy refer to emotions about emotions (as the concept meta-emotion suggests), but it also encompasses feelings and thoughts about emotions (Gottman *et al.*, 1997).

Theoretically, parental meta-emotion is embedded within a web of observable parenting behaviours. Specifically, parent's meta-emotion philosophy is not independent of parenting (Hooven *et al.*, 1995; Gottman *et al.*, 1996, 1997; Katz *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, parental behaviours are influenced to some extent by beliefs and knowledge about one's own and other's emotions.

Types of emotional parenting styles. Several types of emotional parenting styles have been described. For the current research, one type was of primary interest.¹

Parents who possess an *emotion dismissing* parenting style feel that emotions (particularly negative emotions) are potentially harmful to the child. Characteristically, these parents lack awareness of emotions within themselves and their children, fear being emotionally out-of-control, are unaware of techniques to address negative emotions, and believe negative emotions to be a reflection of poor parenting skills (Gottman *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, instead of addressing displays of negative emotions, they ignore or dismiss the emotions (Katz *et al.*, 1996), they attempt to rid the child of the negative emotions immediately (i.e. have to remedy the situation) (Hooven *et al.*, 1995) and they strive to reassure the child that the negative feelings always pass quickly without lasting effects (Gottman & Declaire, 1997). Researchers have also reported that the dismissing style of parenting has been linked to distraction techniques to 'shut down' a child's negative affect, instances of ridiculing negative emotions, and the inability to teach effective problem-solving skills to their child (Gottman *et al.*, 1997). According to the available literature, the effects of a dismissing parental emotional style are potentially devastating to the emotional and social development of children. A child who is raised in a dismissing environment will be conditioned to believe that their negative feelings are inappropriate and not valid under any circumstances (Gottman & Declaire, 1997). In turn, the child may feel that there is something inherently 'wrong' with feeling sad, angry or fear, and may have trouble regulating their own emotions.

Less than optimal parenting, children's social behaviours, and maternal depression. There is a considerable gap in the literature on the relationship between less than optimal parenting, children's social behaviours and maternal depression. Researchers looking at child outcomes of authoritarian parenting have found that children of authoritarian parents tend to be low in self-esteem, impulsive, have various levels of social withdrawal, fearful, apprehensive, moody, unhappy, easily annoyed, passively

hostile, vulnerable to stress, and unfriendly (Coopersmith, 1967; Baumrind, 1987). These characteristics also tend to carry over to the teenaged years (Steinberg *et al.*, 1994). Similarly, child outcomes of emotionally dismissing parents can be damaging to the emotional and social well-being of the child. For example, children in such an environment believe that negative feelings are not appropriate in any situation and will think that such feelings as sadness, anger or fear are not acceptable (Gottman & Declaire, 1997).

Furthermore, the literature on the relationship between child social behaviours and maternal depression has shown consistent findings that the two co-exist (for example, Alpern & Lyons-Ruth, 1993; Bolton *et al.*, 2003; West & Newman, 2003; Elgar *et al.*, 2004a, b). Nigg and Hinshaw (1998) found that children from 6 to 12 years old with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder had more mothers with a major depressive episode than a comparison group of boys. Similarly, Pelham *et al.* (1997) found that mothers and fathers of normal children that had to interact with children trained to act as though they had an externalizing behaviour disorders experienced significantly more distress (depression, anxiety, and hostility) and consumed more alcohol than those who interacted with normal children.

Other researchers focusing on child temperament and its relation to maternal depression have found a similar relationship as already mentioned (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Sheeber & Johnson, 1992). In a study examining how social support, infant temperament and parenting self-efficacy affect postpartum depression, Cutrona and Troutman (1986) found that social support and self-efficacy mediated the effects of a difficult infant on maternal depression. Moreover, when looking at the direct link between infant difficulty and depression, it was found that dealing with a difficult child is a significant predictor of maternal depression. Similar results were reported by Sheeber and Johnson (1992) in a study looking at mothers of three-year-old and four-year-old children. Mothers of difficult children were more likely to experience anxiety and depression and to question their parenting abilities than mothers of normal children.

However, up to now no research has been conducted looking at whether mothers' less than optimal parenting style is salient in predicting maternal depression over and above children's social behaviours, if at all. The present study adds to the current maternal depression literature by exploring these relationships.

Hypotheses

Because little research has been conducted in this area, hypotheses were primarily exploratory. For example, it was hypothesized that less than optimal parenting (i.e. authoritarian and emotion dismissing styles) would be positively related to maternal depression and children's negative behaviours. It was also thought that authoritarian parenting style and emotion dismissing emotional style would predict maternal depression over and above children's negative behaviours (e.g. aggressive, asocial, anxious, hyperactive and exclusionary behaviours).

Methods

Participants

The participants in the present study consisted of roughly 68 children who attended daycares or preschool and their mothers from an Eastern Canadian city. The children consisted of 36 males and 32 females with a mean age of 50.76 months (standard deviation = 8.32); mothers ranged in age from 23 to 47 years (mean = 33.24 years, standard deviation = 5.30). More than one-half of the mothers were married (63.2%) and almost one-half had graduated from university (45.6%).

Procedure and measures

The supervisors/directors of the participating daycares and preschools were given information regarding the study and informed consent. All necessary information forms were then delivered to the teachers and parents of the children. When the consent forms were returned, the questionnaires were provided to the daycares and preschools to be distributed to the mothers and teachers of the participating children.

Maternal measures

Maternal emotional styles. Mothers' emotional styles were measured with the Maternal Emotional Styles Questionnaire (MESQ) (Lagacé-Séguin & Coplan, in press). The questionnaire contains 14 items (seven emotion coaching items and seven emotion dismissing items). 'Anger is an emotion worth exploring' is an example of an emotion coaching item, while 'I try to change my child's angry moods into cheerful ones' is an example of an emotion dismissing item. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. Lagacé-Séguin and Coplan (in press) have found both subscales of the MESQ to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.69$ for the emotion coaching parenting style items and $\alpha = 0.74$ for the emotion dismissing parenting style items). Lagacé-Séguin (2001) and Lagacé-Séguin and Coplan (in press) have found that the MESQ is associated with theoretically consistent parenting constructs. It is the only self-report scale that measures emotion coaching and emotion dismissing parenting styles in mothers. This study only focused on the emotion dismissing typology.

Parental disciplinary styles. The Parenting Practices Questionnaire (PPQ) was used to measure mothers' behavioural strategies with their children (Robinson *et al.*, 1995). The questionnaire consists of 62 items measuring mothers' authoritative, authoritarian and permissive styles of parenting as defined by Baumrind (1971). Twenty-seven items tap into the authoritative parenting typology (e.g. 'I give comfort and understanding when my child is upset'), 20 items tap into the authoritarian typology (e.g. 'I yell or shout when my child misbehaves'), and 15 items tap into the permissive typology (e.g. 'I threaten my child with punishment more often than

actually giving it'). Each item is rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, which ranges from 1 'never' to 5 'always', determining how often they engage in the behaviour. Lagacé-Séguin and d'Entremont (2006) found that all subsections of the PPQ were reliable (authoritative, $\alpha = 0.84$; authoritarian, $\alpha = 0.78$; and permissive, $\alpha = 0.64$). Only the authoritarian style of parenting was used in the present study.

Maternal depression. Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI) was used to measure maternal depression (Beck *et al.*, 1961). The self-report measure contains 21 items and is rated on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 'never' to 3 'always'. Scores are added to get a total score of self-reported depressive symptoms ranging from 0 to 63. Different total scores indicate the level of depression in an individual: 0–9 indicate no depression, 10–18 indicate a mild to moderate depression, 19–29 indicate moderate to severe depression, and over 30 indicates a severe depression (Beck *et al.*, 1988).

Child measures

Child social behaviours. Children's social behaviours were assessed using the Child Behavior Scale (CBS) (Ladd & Profilet, 1996). This teacher-rated measure contains 59 items and is rated on a three-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 'doesn't apply' to 3 'certainly applies'. Ladd and Profilet (1996) have shown that the six subscales of the CBS have excellent psychometric properties: aggressive with peers (seven items, e.g. 'Fights with other children'; $\alpha = 0.89$), prosocial with peers (seven items, e.g. 'Helps other children'; $\alpha = 0.92$), asocial with peers (six items, e.g. 'Prefers to play alone'; $\alpha = 0.89$), excluded from peers (seven items, e.g. 'Peers refuse to let this child play with them'; $\alpha = 0.94$), anxious-fearful (four items, e.g. 'Is worried. Worries about many things'; $\alpha = 0.77$), and hyperactive-distractible (four items, e.g. 'Squirmy, fidgety child'; $\alpha = 0.89$). The present study focuses on all subscales except prosocial with peers.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the correlations between all variables. Results showed that an emotion dismissing parenting style was positively correlated with maternal depression ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), and also that an authoritarian parenting style was positively correlated with maternal depression ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). No significant correlations were found between maternal depression and children's social behaviours or parenting styles and children's social behaviours.

Regression analyses

Overview. The present study was designed to look at whether mothers' less than optimal parenting styles predicted maternal depression over and above children's

behavioural transgressions. To achieve this goal, 10 hierarchical regression analyses² were conducted: five with the emotion dismissing parenting style and five with the authoritarian parenting style. For each equation, children's social behaviours (i.e. aggressive, asocial, excluding, anxious or hyperactive behaviour) were entered in the first block followed by the parenting styles (i.e. emotion dismissing or authoritarian). All equations had significant results.

Emotion dismissing parenting style. Regression analyses revealed that mothers' emotion dismissing parenting style predicted maternal depression over and above children's aggressive behaviours [$F(2,59) = 2.92, p = 0.06; R^2_{cha} = 0.09, p < 0.05$], asocial behaviours [$F(2,60) = 3.34, p < 0.05; R^2_{cha} = 0.10, p < 0.05$], excluding behaviours [$F(2,60) = 3.45, p < 0.05; R^2_{cha} = 0.10, p < 0.05$], anxious behaviours [$F(2,60) = 3.29, p < 0.05; R^2_{cha} = 0.10, p < 0.05$] and hyperactive behaviours [$F(2,60) = 3.28, p < 0.05; R^2_{cha} = 0.09, p < 0.05$].

Authoritarian parenting style. Regression analyses showed that mothers' authoritarian parenting style predicted maternal depression over and above children's aggressive behaviours [$F(2,59) = 7.25, p < 0.01; R^2_{cha} = 0.19, p < 0.001$], asocial behaviours [$F(2,60) = 7.64, p < 0.01; R^2_{cha} = 0.20, p < 0.001$], excluding behaviours [$F(2,60) = 8.02, p < 0.01; R^2_{cha} = 0.21, p < 0.001$], anxious behaviours [$F(2,60) = 7.62, p < 0.01; R^2_{cha} = 0.20, p < 0.001$] and hyperactive behaviours [$F(2,60) = 7.55, p < 0.01; R^2_{cha} = 0.20, p < 0.001$].

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to look at the links between maternal depression, less than optimal parenting and children's negative behaviours. More specifically, it was hypothesized that less than optimal parenting (authoritarian parenting style and emotion dismissing emotional style) would predict maternal depression over and above children's negative behaviours. Analyses revealed that emotion dismissing emotional style and authoritarian parenting style were positively related to maternal depression, whereas no significant correlations were found between children's negative behaviours and maternal depression and children's negative behaviours and less than optimal parenting.

Less than optimal parenting was significantly related to maternal depression. It may be that mothers exhibiting these parenting typologies are experiencing learned helplessness/hopelessness and that this is driving their depression. Abramson *et al.* (1989) have revised the concept of learned helplessness into a similar theory called hopelessness depression. While learned helplessness refers to the idea that one cannot control their life circumstances (Seligman, 1975) learned hopelessness is more specific to a person's affective state. The authors present two main proximal causes that are at the heart of hopelessness depression: negative outcome expectancy (believing that desired outcomes will never occur) and helplessness expectancy (believing

that things can never change for the better). It may be that depressed mothers find themselves trapped in this hopelessness concept. For example, it may be that they desire to have better parenting skills but believe they can never achieve this goal and any change in a positive direction is viewed as being impossible.

Another possible explanation of the relationship between less than optimal parenting and maternal depression is Beck's (1967) cognitive diathesis-stress theory of depression. Fundamental to this theory are schemata that are stored ideas that strongly influence how an individual processes incoming information. Individuals who have depressive schemata tend to see things in a negative way and often develop a negative cognitive triad (negative view of the self, the world and the future). The diathesis-stress theory of depression requires that stressors occur for an individual to become depressed if they possess depressive schemata. It may be that mothers who exhibit less than optimal parenting styles possess the negative cognitive triad and, therefore, view themselves (their parenting skills), the world and the future (not being able to change their parenting) in a negative manner. They may also be more likely to be criticized from others (e.g. spouse, family, friends) about their parenting practices, which would probably trigger their depression.

The non-significant associations between children's negative behaviours and maternal depression and between children's negative behaviours and less than optimal parenting are curious. Given past research, one would expect there to be significant relations among these variables. With this said, the relations were in the expected directions and, with an increase in subjects, may become significant. However, one interpretation of the lack of findings may be that the measures that were utilized to measure children's behaviour are certainly not exhaustive in type or frequency of children's transgressions. Other measures of children's misbehaviours may show significant direct relations with maternal depression and less than optimal parenting that would resonate with past research. These considerations may be a direction for future research.

Results indicated that both emotion dismissing emotional style and authoritarian parenting style are predictive of maternal depression over and above all forms of children's social behaviours (i.e. aggressive, asocial, excluding, anxious and hyperactive behaviours). These findings are consistent with Elgar *et al.*'s (2003, 2004b) studies on temporal relations between maternal depression and children's negative behaviours. It was found in these studies that maternal depression precedes children's transgressions.

The present study extends Elgar *et al.*'s (2003, 2004b) studies by clarifying a possible reason why maternal depression precedes child transgressions. Parenting styles have not been looked at as a possible link to maternal depression. Results from this study clearly show that such a relation does exist and that mothers' parenting strategies are more salient in predicting depression than any of the negative children's social behaviours. These findings suggest that maternal depression is driven primarily by internal factors, such as perceived parenting skills (e.g. self-efficacy), rather than external factors. Mothers who exhibit less than optimal parenting styles may be aware that their parenting strategies are detrimental to their children's well-being but may feel that they do not have the skills to better the situation. Because the present study

was correlational, it was not possible to determine causality of the relationship between maternal depression and parenting strategies; however, it may be that depressed mothers are more likely to adopt less than optimal parenting styles.

Additionally, hopelessness depression may account for the relationship between maternal depression and less than optimal parenting. Depressed mothers may feel trapped in their parenting styles by the cycle of hopelessness depression (Abramson *et al.*, 1989). For example, they may want to be more affectionate and understanding with their children, rather than punitive and dismissing, but they may believe that this desired outcome will never be possible. They may also feel that any attempt to express positive emotions towards their children will not afford the desired outcomes. Therefore, depressed mothers may feel compelled to display certain strategies towards their children.

Caveats and future direction

There are theoretical and methodological issues that have arisen from this study that merit further clarification and investigation in future studies. For example, interest in the role of fathers has been increasing in the past years (for example, Blankenhorn, 1995; Parke, 1996; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999). Fathers interact differently with their children than do mothers. For instance, fathers spend more time in playful interaction (Lamb, 1987) and play more physically with their children than do mothers (Yogman, 1981).

Given the novel findings of this study, it would be most instructive to replicate this study with a sample of fathers.

Another issue that needs to be considered is a common problem with concurrent correlational studies. Direction of effects cannot be assumed and, in terms of causality, it is not clear whether maternal depression is increasing the likelihood of less than optimal parenting or whether less than optimal parenting is increasing the likelihood of maternal depression, for example. However, results from several studies have indicated that positive parental intervention is related to significant changes in how children relate to peers and others outside the home (for example, Patterson, 1986; Tremblay *et al.*, 1992). And, results from other studies have suggested that children evoke certain responses from adults (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Therefore, one could speculate that a parent is using less than optimal parenting because their child's temperament demands the style. Future research needs to concentrate on longitudinal investigations to examine parental emotional styles over time. These investigations would allow conclusions to be made about the lasting influences of parental emotional styles.

On a final note, the data were collected from maternal reports of parenting styles and affective states, as well as teacher reports of children's behaviours. Future research may benefit from multi-dimensional methodologies such as interviews and observations in order to collect the parenting, affective and behavioural data. A multi-dimensional methodology may provide further support for the novel findings associated with this study.

Conclusion

The results from this study have elucidated a relatively new dimension to parenting research. Conceptually, there had yet to be research that focused on the influence of parenting styles in the prediction of maternal depression over and above children's behaviours. Theoretically, this study opens the door to a host of future investigations that will tie together a number of different psychological issues. Future research will help to continue to unravel the complex associations between less than optimal parenting, children's behaviours, and maternal depression.

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Notes

1. Emotion coaching, disapproving and laissez-faire parenting have also been described by Gottman. However, these styles are beyond the scope of this project.
2. Although the sample size was only moderate, all regression analyses met the predictor to sample requirements ratio.

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