

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Predictors of Parenting Stress Trajectories in Premature Infant-Mother Dyads

Background

Supporting the transactional model of development, current research associates child development and parent-child-relationships with the ways in which parents cope with stressful situations. The birth of a preterm infant and the neonatal complications are frequently discussed as apparent self-evident stressful experiences for parents, whereas the review of recent literature suggests that mothers of preterm infants are more *or less* able to deal with such experiences. So the study of parenting stress in mothers of premature infants - from a developmental and transactional perspective - needs to take into account the interplay of infant, maternal and contextual factors and thereby focus on identifying predictors of parenting stress and its variations longitudinally over the first years of infant life.

Summary of results

The development of parenting stress during the child's first 3 years of life in a sample of 125 mothers with their preterm infants analyzed by hierarchical linear modeling is characterized by significant variability across individuals, whereas infant variables have the strongest effects. Individual differences are obvious at 4 months of child's age, but there is also a significant variability in slopes, indicating that change trajectories of parenting stress differed across mothers. Additionally, the study documents a significant covariation in parenting stress and maternal interaction quality between 4 and 36 months of child's age.

Strength

The longitudinal design offers the chance to identify meaningful predictors of stress trajectories, in which infant and mother variables as well as contextual factors are considered. Including measures of quality of infant-mother-interactions, parenting stress is highlighted as a reasonable indicator of risk for maladaptive parenting.

Limitations

Only three observations of parenting stress and inconsistent time lag between them (4, 24, 36 months of child's age) provide simply a fragmentary trajectory of parenting stress over time. Also, predictors are measured only once - prior to the infant's hospital discharge - so, changes over time in these characteristics are not considered. The specificity of identified risk factors for stress trajectories in parents of preterm infants is questionable, given the fact that no comparison group of mothers with full-term infants is included.

Practical conclusion

Being consistent with transactional developmental models suggesting that parental well-being is linked with parenting interactions over time, the study underlines the need to monitor the development of parenting stress in mothers of preterm infants to prevent further problems in parent-child-relationship. At the same time, results advises us to reflect widespread one-size-fits-all models and rather to focus on further research providing important implications to target preventive interventions by respecting the following question: *Who* needs *what* kind of intervention - *what time* and *how long*?

Spinelli M, Poehlmann J & Bolt D (2013). Predictors of parenting stress trajectories in premature infant-mother dyads. *Journal of family psychology*, 27(6), 873–83. doi:10.1037/a0034652

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