How does parental mental health impact children's development of socio-emotional functioning?

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Abstract

This project examines how the mental health of a parent affects their child's development of their socio-emotional functioning. Specifically, this paper will address how a parent could impact their child's development, with poor parental mental health contributing to children experiencing difficulty regulating their emotions, whereas positive parental mental health contributes to a higher ability in children to regulate their emotions. Additionally, the factors involved in the development of socio-emotional functions, such as parenting skills and what parenting types are employed, will be explored.

Introduction

The impact of parental mental health on children's socio-emotional functioning involves many different aspects of parenting, including emotional wellbeing, interadult marital conflicts, role modeling, children's emotional functioning, emotion regulation, behavioral responses, and the emotional climate of the household. Each one of these key terms has been empirically connected and incorporated into this paper. This well-known topic, and related topics have been studied and theorized upon for nearly a century, linking many other topics such as children's adjustment and perception. This subject has impacted psychology significantly, with many studies being conducted, and models being drawn to piece together possible cause-and-effect dyads.

Defining key terms:
Emotion regulation: The automatic and conscious application of strategies to impact emotional experience, intensity, and expression (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).
Attachment style: Lasting psychological connectedness between human beings (Bowlby, 1979).
Role modeling: Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: From observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action (Bandura, 1971).
Emotional development: The continuous interplay of maturational processes and social demands (Erikson, 1950).

Relationships between parents' and children's emotional functioning

Parents and children influence each other emotionally as a natural response of their relationship dynamic, and this mutual influence affects the child's ability to function effectively emotionally (Kuczynski & Navara, 2000). Indeed, studies have shown that children impact their parents emotionally (Pettit & Lollis, 1997). Although research has shown that parental neglect of children is an anomaly (Erickson et al., 1989), it is vital to understand parental-child dynamics in the cases where this is indeed present to have an impact on family-based treatments and outcomes. In some cases, the parents' lack of understanding of the effects that they have on the child can be its own type of emotional neglect (Rogosch et al., 1995). For example, a parent might derive certain feelings from their child. Such as the parent having feelings of vulnerability. Parents have reported that this vulnerability of being a parent as a result comes from feelings that they have missed out on life, having restricted freedom, and that parenting is a burden (Wang, 2023). Alternatively, a child might make their parents feel like they are lacking control, and make them feel like they do not have knowledge. However, a child influencing their parents in this way is in all likelihood doing so unintentionally.

As parents establish meaning based on the influence that their children have on them, it is a similar case with their children; they mutually construct the purpose of their influence on their parents. This relationship highlights the equality of the effect that parents and children have on each other (Bandura, 2001). Thus, the influence upon one another among children and their parents is unavoidably, mutually, and continuously, interdependent (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). Thus, the dyad of parent and children's relationships impact's the children's emotional functioning. A beneficial way to conceive ways in which parents and children influence each other, and the behavioral effects of the bidirectional parent-child relationship, might possibly be through attachment styles, because they shape the parent-child relationship.

Parent-child attachment styles and its link to social and emotional functioning of the child

Parent and child attachment styles heavily influence a child's ability to emotionally function, as secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful styles form the child's emotional and social life (Ainsworth, 1978; Wang, 2023). In general, there are four different types of self attachment styles, of which all can impact a person throughout their lifespan. They consist of; secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful (Ainsworth, 1978; Wang, 2023). A person that can

be described as having a secure attachment style is a person who shows a lack of dependence and avoidance. More specifically, this means that this person is experiencing a sense of merit, and courageously shows off their love, assuming their peers will be accepting of it, resulting in success in their intimate relationships. This style of attachment is regarded as the healthiest. In contrast, if a person displays the characteristics of low levels of avoidance, and high levels of reliance on others, they are linked to a preoccupied attachment style. The third attachment style is fearful; people who have this attachment style avoid their peers, while they also fear intimate relationships. The final attachment style is dismissing; people who have this attachment style show signs of self-worthiness and self-love, as well as a dispositional negativity towards others (Wang, 2023).

Regarding parent-child attachment styles, it can be seen as an echo of the emotional disposition between the parent and child. A way that a child views their relationship with their parents, and how secure they are, defines the type of attachment style that they have. For example, children who describe and view their relationship with their parents as a secure one, have a higher ability to regulate their emotions and have lower levels of anxiety, whereas a person with dismissing or preoccupied attachment styles, are more likely to be avoidant (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Shifting to the perspective of the parent, the way that they parent (i.e., parenting styles) is linked to attachment styles (Wang, 2023). For example, an authoritarian parenting style (i.eA parent who controls and forms their child's behaviors along with attitude, can be associated with secure and insecure attachment if the parent shows a high level of responsiveness (Wang, 2023). In contrast, an individual with an authoritarian parenting style may reject their child's emotions, and appear to be unresponsive towards their child. More specifically, parents who adopt an authoritative parenting style are more likely to contribute to the development and construction of a secure attachment style. Additionally, if a mother is an authoritative parent they have significant influence over the temperament of their child (Wang, 2023). The fact that both authoritarian and authoritative parents can also be linked to a secure attachment style (Wang, 2023) with their children highlights the variability and complexity of these relationships. An additional parenting style is permissive parenting, when parents may lack control over their child. This can result in the child leading more of a meandering lifestyle. Another parenting style is fearful, where parents are less likely to communicate emotionally, linking them to an insecure attachment style. Preoccupied attachment styles tend to have negative consequences (Wang, 2023). In this case, a child who grew up in an environment of neglect is more likely to have a preoccupied attachment style. This would impact them emotionally – with that individual developing insecurity within themselves, and a negative view of themselves. In summary, parenting styles influence and shape attachment styles, which then impact their child emotionally and functionally. Another factor in parent-child attachment styles is parental mental health, affecting a child's attachment style based upon the characteristics their parents display.

Associations among parental stress, mental health, role modeling, and how it can be connected to child behavior

Parental stress, along with mental health, plays an important role in the development of child behavior. Parents who have high levels of stress are more likely to be less responsive and not as affectionate with their children (McLoyd, 1990). As a result, it can negatively impact a child's social development. Further, as a consequence of parental mental state, and inadequacy

within their own emotional regulation, parents are not as likely to affect or respond to the child in the way that is necessary for child/adolescent functioning. Additionally, when parents are distressed, they go through a process which highlights challenges that are common for parents who have stressful circumstances (Crnic & Warfield, 2005). Oftentimes, it is believed that parental employment causes parental stress, indicating that parental involvement (or lack thereof) is constrained because of paternal employment (Pleck, 1997). Relatedly, parents who have economic pressures and hardships can influence children through the parents' distress (Masarik & Conger, 2017). This applies to both parents, as a hostile relationship between the two caregivers can result in hostile behavior in connection to their children (Masarik & Conger, 2017). Further, when economic factors lead to stress in parents, it is a possibility that they might resort to harsh parenting practices (Masarik & Conger, 2017). Another possibility is the parent withholding support or affection from their child. The lack of these parenting qualities, and the parenting practices in general affect the child early on in development and may give the child externalizing behavioral problems within their adolescence (Masarik & Conger, 2017). On the other hand, parents who exhibit positive parenting practices are more likely to have preschoolers who display healthy attachment styles (i.e., secure), and are able to emotionally self-regulate (Masarik & Conger, 2017). In sum, positive parenting can be associated with children's behavior, such as optimism, and prosocialness, while parental stress can negatively affect their development such as delinquency and risky health behaviors (Masarik & Conger, 2017). A connecting factor between parental stress and mental health on children's development is how the parents are displaying themselves in relation to the parent being a role model for their child. Indistinguishably, children look to their parents as role models; this means that children's emotional functioning, in part, relies on their parents (Emde, Biringen, Clyman, Oppenheim, 1991). Maternal depression is a negative component in role modeling situations, in which case a child will look to a depressed mother for ways to function (Garber et al., 1991; Silk et al., 2006). As a result, the child could derive strategies that are less effective and this will lead to poor development and cognitive functioning (Garber et al., 1991; Silk et al., 2006). Of relevance to the potential impact is that their age affects their level of attending to modeling (Bandura, 1986). For example, when children are in certain social situations, their behaviors that are being structured depend on age (Bandura, 1986). Overall, children's developmental behavior relies on the parent's mental health, parental distress (or lack thereof), and role modeling situations whether it be from a peer or an adult. The dynamics of child behavior and parent-child interactions may be more vital in effect to the environment (emotional climate of the household) in which a child is living.

Emotional climate of the household: Influence on emotion regulation of the child

The emotional climate of the household, which can be defined as the overall mood of a family's living environment, is something that a child encounters every day that impacts the emotional regulation and reactivity of the child (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). In current literature, emotional climate can be defined as the atmosphere or the mood within a social place. The environment of the household is the emotional climate of the family (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). In particular, when an emotional climate of a household is negative (e.g., abusive, restrictive), the child is at risk of becoming abundantly reactive (e.g., physically, behaviorally, affectively, verbally) from their emotions (Cummings & Davies, 1996). Because of this constructed environment, the child may be observing their parents' abnormally regulated emotions,

potentially leaving the child feeling emotionally insecure. However, when children live in responsive, emotionally consistent, and stable environments, they feel as if they can express their emotions, and are emotionally secure (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Specifically, a child will also feel more emotionally secure if they know what consequences will be carried out when they behave poorly, and which kind of behaviors are expected from them (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Furthermore, children who grow up in household environments with conflict may be more likely to be emotionally reactive (McLaughlin et al., 2010). Household stressors such as poor housing, crowded housing, poverty, and upheavals within the family are susceptible to alter functional responses to stress in the child (Evans et al., 2007; Evans & Kim, 2007). It is also suggested that children who grew up in a lower economic status household demonstrate higher levels of emotional reactivity. Additionally, a child with low emotional competence (i.e., where a child displays more difficulty with emotional expression, awareness, and regulation) has a higher chance of having behavioral problems in their future (Hessler & Katz, 2010). In a general sense, children with difficulties with emotion regulation are more likely to have both internalizing and externalizing concerns in the future (Shapero & Steinberg, 2013). Children with increased emotional reactivity are at risk to show delays in certain problem-solving behavior, communication skills, and motor skills (Shapero & Steinberg, 2013). In sum, children are affected emotionally by the emotional climate and context of their household which contributes to being emotionally secure/insecure, and emotional reactivity also depends on the indirect and direct effects that are being applied into the household (Shapero & Steinberg, 2013). As indicated, the living environment of a family's household can heavily influence a child in regulatory terms such as emotion regulation (Morris et al., 2007). The family's environment can also be dependent upon the potential conflict of the parents, in other words interadult relationships.

Conflict between inter-adult relationships: How the conflict influences the child's ability to manage emotions and adjust

Within marital relationships, children can learn both adaptive and maladaptive ways to cope with conflict and manage emotions (Cummings & Davies, 1994). When children are exposed to 'background anger' (conflict) from parental figures, they may be at risk of emotional difficulties (Lemerise & Dodge, 1993). The link is said to be found upon the child's emotional security, which is a factor of emotion regulation (Davies & Cummings, 1998). Emotional security can also be defined as emotional reactivity, which mediates two constructs: marital relations and child adjustment. When a child undergoes this experience of marital conflict, it can affect them in terms of adjustment, but it also requires children to form responses to conflict (Jouriles, Murphy et al., 1991). Marital or parental conflict, again, has been found to cause internalizing problems in children and is more commonly observed in children who have high levels of negative emotionality (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Variables such as parents' awareness of their child's emotions, positive parenting, and reticence of negative effects of parenting pose as buffers against marital relations and conflict (Gottman et al., 1997). One hypothesis for this is that parents with lower conflict with their children may be more likely to experience less overall stress or tension within their own couple. Another possibility is that children who are better able to regulate their emotions conveyed less hostility (Schulz et al., 2005), which could have downstream effects on the parental relationship. Alternatively, conflict within marital relationships also can have a physical aspect to it, such as abuse between adults, which is said to lead to

behavior problems among children (Cummings et al., 1996). One hypothesis for this is that children who demonstrate high levels of emotion regulation skills might be more likely to have a better parent-child relationship. It was found that perceptions of marital conflict can differ due to gender. For example, boys' perceptions of marital conflict had more variation in adjustment (Cummings et al., 1994). This proposes the idea that mediators for marital conflict and child adjustment might differ based upon gender. Perceptions of the content, intensity, and consistency of the parent's conflict, can be connected to stress and adjustment on the child (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Furthermore, children's perceptions of interpersonal relationships and situations are believed to align with the roots of earlier-life experiences of emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Besides gender and perception, it is also important to consider the degree to which children are 'pulled into' their parents' conflicts, which can be linked with negative effects of marital relationships and conflict on children (Kerig, 1995, 1996; Maccoby & Dornbush, 1991). Children's sense of threat, as well as self-blame, did not initiate the mediators of the link between parental/marital conflict and externalizing problems within the child (Grych et al., 2000). Additionally, interpersonal conflict can elicit response and self-regulatory propensity in children (Ablow, Measelle, Cowan, Cowan, 2009). In another sense, there are behavioral responses to conflict, such as distress, or avoiding/seeking to become involved in the parental conflict (Cummings et al., 2006). These may be present because the child is trying to uphold their emotional security in relation to the interpersonal conflict. These responses might also be perceived as coping mechanisms. To conclude, marital relationships can help a child learn how to manage their emotions, but in situations where there is stress and conflict present between the parents.

Conclusion

Both parents and children affect each other and have impacts on constructs ranging from burden to vulnerability. As a result, parents and children have a mutually influential relationship, which impacts the child's emotional functioning. This paper describes how parent and attachment styles can vary by the characteristics that are being displayed, the attachment styles consist of four different styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. The current work also explores how parenting style can be linked to attachment styles, but generally consists of authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and fearful styles. Parents play a vital role in their children's behavior because of factors such as mental health, role modeling, and stress. As children get older, they look to their parents on how to act and function, and this means the parent has to adopt, or show characteristics of an appropriate person in order for their child to derive the right behavioral responses, in order for their child to function properly (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, Robinson, 2007).

Furthermore, this paper describes how the emotional climate of the household can also be linked to behavioral responses and emotional adjustment. Literature suggests that household climate should align with the child's needs in order for the child to develop the right emotion regulation skills. Conflict within marital relationships can be damaging for the child emotionally, as they try to form responses to the conflict, which also affects their adjustment. Emotional security and perception of the child also ties into it – as it is defined by the interpersonal conflict (Ablow, Measelle, Cowan, Cowan, 2009). These findings are imperative, as they shed light on adaptive parenting styles and familial functioning. This paper also highlights areas for future work in parental effect on children. Future directions for research could be indirect/direct effects of involvement of parents on children, or parental effect on children's mental health.

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