ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Setting the Tone: Understanding How the Family Context Transmits Risks for Adolescents of Parents with Depressive Symptoms and High Levels of Anger

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Parental depressive symptoms and levels of anger during childhood were studied as predictors of adolescent adjustment in multiple domains using data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. When considered separately mothers’ and fathers’ depressive symptoms predicted adolescent internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, lower psychosocial maturity and lower verbal abilities. When modeled jointly, mothers’ and fathers’ affective symptoms differentially related to adolescent outcomes. Maternal depressive symptoms and anger predicted adolescent externalizing and low psychosocial maturity. Paternal depressive symptoms and anger predicted adolescent internalizing and low psychosocial maturity, and paternal depressive symptoms also predicted lower verbal abilities at age 15. Predictive relations for parental anger and depressive symptoms were similar, although
depressive symptoms were more consistent in predicting a range of adjustment outcomes than were levels of anger.

Mediation analyses were conducted to determine whether qualities of parenting and the parent-child relationship, the marital relationship, or aspects of the family environment mediated observed associations between parental affective symptoms and adolescent adjustment. A variety of these mediators were significant, and associations were similar for both parental anger and depressive symptoms. Paternal effects upon adolescent adjustment were mediated by poor father-child relationships, lower marital intimacy and lower levels of emotional expressiveness. The effects of maternal affective symptoms on adolescent adjustment were partially or fully explained by links with mother-child conflict, lower levels of monitoring and school involvement, lower marital intimacy, higher levels of family chaos and diminished emotional expressiveness in the family. Gender of child did not moderate these associations, and levels of father involvement were not found to buffer children from the effects of maternal depressive symptoms.

Trajectories of parental depressive symptoms from age 4 ½ to 15 also predicted adolescent outcomes. An increasing trajectory of depressive symptoms in mothers predicted higher levels of adolescent externalizing problems; an increasing trajectory of paternal depressive symptoms predicted adolescent internalizing, externalizing, and low psychosocial maturity.