Intergenerational Trauma: Patterns of Child Abuse and Neglect Across Two Generations in a Barbados Cohort

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Abstract: Background: Findings have been mixed regarding whether offspring of parents who were abused or neglected as children have a greater risk of experiencing abuse or neglect themselves. In addition, many studies on this topic are restricted to physical abuse and take place in a limited number of countries, representing a small segment of the world’s population.

Methods: We examined relationships between childhood maltreatment history assessed in a subset (N=68) of the original longitudinal birth cohort (G1) of the Barbados Nutrition Study and their now-adult offspring (G2) (N=111) using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF). We used Pearson correlations to assess relationships between parent and offspring CTQ-SF total and subscale scores (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect). Next, we ran multiple regression analyses, using the parental CTQ-SF total score and the parental Sexual Abuse score as primary predictors separately in our models of G2 CTQ-SF (total and subscale scores). Results: G1 total CTQ-SF scores were correlated with G2 offspring Emotional Neglect and total scores. G1 Sexual Abuse history was significantly correlated with G2 Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and Total Score. In fully-adjusted regression models, parental (G1) total CTQ-SF scores remained significantly associated with G2 offspring reports of Emotional Neglect and total scores. G1 Sexual Abuse history was significantly correlated with G2 Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and Total Score. In fully-adjusted regression models, parental (G1) total CTQ-SF scores remained significantly associated with G2 offspring reports of Emotional Neglect, and parental (G1) Sexual Abuse was associated with offspring (G2) reports of Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and overall CTQ-SF scores.

Conclusions: Our findings support a link between parental exposure to childhood maltreatment and their offspring’s self-reported exposure to childhood maltreatment. Of note, there was not an exact correspondence between the subcategory of maltreatment experienced from one generation to the next. Compared with other subcategories, G1 Sexual Abuse history was the most likely to predict G2 offspring maltreatment. Further studies are needed to delineate underlying mechanisms and to develop intervention strategies aimed at preventing intergenerational transmission.

Keywords: trauma, family, adolescents, intergenerational trauma, child abuse, child neglect, global mental health, North America

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