

Maternal Adverse Childhood Experiences and Preschool Children's Behavioural Problems: Mediation via Adult Attachment and Moderation by Maternal Mental Health, Social Support, and Child Sex

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Abstract : Background: Maternal adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been associated with internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in preschool children. However, little is known about the influence of maternal adult attachment patterns on this association. Further, potential moderation by maternal mental health, maternal social support, or child sex is poorly understood. Therefore, this study examined associations between 1) maternal ACEs and preschool children's behavioural problems, with mediation through maternal attachment patterns and moderation by maternal mental health, maternal social support, and child sex; and 2) maternal attachment patterns and children's behavioural problems, with mediation through maternal mental health and social support and moderation by child sex. Methods: This secondary analysis used data (n=625) from a high socioeconomic, longitudinally prospective cohort (Alberta Pregnancy Outcomes and Nutrition). Child behaviour (BASC-2) and maternal adult attachment (ECR-Q) were measured at five years of child age, maternal ACEs (ACEs Questionnaire) at around 12 months, and maternal mental health (CESD and SCL-90-R) and social support (SSQ) across various prenatal and postnatal time points. All moderation and mediation analyses occurred through RStudio using PROCESS, interpreting significant interactions through Johnson-Neyman plots. Findings: Maternal ACEs interacted with maternal anxiety symptoms to predict both behavioural problems ($p_{\text{externalizing}}=0.007$; $p_{\text{internalizing}}=0.0159$). An indirect pathway via dismissive attachment was moderated by maternal social support ([0.0058, 0.0596]). Attachment patterns predicted all behavioural problems ($p<0.05$) and interacted with maternal anxiety symptoms to predict internalizing behaviours among male children ([0.0321, 0.1307]; [0.0321, 0.1291]). Interpretation: Maternal attachment patterns may predict children's behavioural problems more than ACEs. Social support interventions may not always be beneficial for highly dismissively attached mothers. Implications for policy and child health include mandatory sex and gender education for teachers; assessing attachment patterns prior to recommending social support as an intervention; and anxiety-focused interventions for mothers in higher socioeconomic populations.

Keywords : maternal adverse childhood experiences, internalizing behaviours, externalizing behaviours, mediators and moderators, attachment patterns, child health

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