

Links Between Maternal Trauma, Response to Distress, and Toddler Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors: A Mediational Analysis

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Abstract : Previous research shows that mothers' experiences of trauma are linked to their child's later socioemotional functioning. However, the mechanisms involved are not well understood. One potential mediator is maternal insensitive responses to child distress. This study examined the link between maternal trauma, mothers' responses to toddler distress, and toddlers' socioemotional outcomes among a socioeconomically diverse sample of 110 mothers and their 12- to 35-month-old toddlers. It was hypothesized that a mother's difficulty in responding sensitively to her child's distress would mediate the relations between maternal trauma and child internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Two mediational models were tested to examine non-supportive responses to distress as a potential mediator of the relation between maternal trauma and toddler mental health outcomes; one model focused on predicting child internalizing symptoms and the other focused on predicting child externalizing symptoms. Measures included assessment of maternal trauma (Life Stressor Checklist-Revised), mothers' responses to child distress (Coping with Toddlers' Negative Emotions Scale), and toddler socioemotional functioning (Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment). Results revealed that the relations between maternal trauma and toddler symptoms (internalizing and externalizing symptoms) were mediated by maternal non-supportive response to child distress for both internalizing and externalizing domains of child mental health. Findings suggest the importance of early intervention for trauma-exposed mothers and target areas for parenting interventions.

Keywords : trauma, parenting, child mental health, transgenerational effects of trauma

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