Association of Maladaptive Parental Behavior With Psychiatric Disorder Among Parents and Their Offspring

Jeffrey G. Johnson, PhD; Patricia Cohen, PhD; Stephanie Kasen, PhD; Elizabeth Smailes, MPhil; Judith S. Brook, PhD

Background: A longitudinal study was conducted to investigate the role of maladaptive parental behavior in the association between parent and offspring psychiatric disorder.

Methods: Psychosocial and psychiatric interviews were administered to a representative community sample of 593 biological parents and their offspring from 2 counties in the state of New York in 1975, 1983, 1985 to 1986, and 1991 to 1993. In 1975, the offspring were a mean age of 6 years. Maladaptive parental behavior was assessed in 1975, 1983, and 1985 to 1986. Parent and offspring psychiatric symptoms were assessed in 1983, 1985 to 1986, and 1991 to 1993.

Results: Maladaptive parental behavior substantially mediated a significant association between parental and offspring psychiatric symptoms. Parents with psychiatric disorders had higher levels of maladaptive behavior in the household than did parents without psychiatric disorders. Maladaptive parental behavior, in turn, was associated with increased offspring risk for psychiatric disorders during adolescence and early adulthood. Most of the youths that experienced high levels of maladaptive parental behavior during childhood had psychiatric disorders during adolescence or early adulthood, whether or not their parents had psychiatric disorders. In contrast, the offspring of parents with psychiatric disorders were not at increased risk for psychiatric disorders unless there was a history of maladaptive parental behavior.

Conclusions: Maladaptive parental behavior is associated with increased risk for the development of psychiatric disorders among the offspring of parents with and without psychiatric disorders. Maladaptive parental behavior appears to be an important mediator of the association between parental and offspring psychiatric symptoms.

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of the childhood environment that accounts for the increase in risk for psychiatric disorders among the offspring of parents with psychiatric disorders. Two bodies of research support this inference. First, research has indicated that parental psychopathology is associated with maladaptive parental behavior.11,13 Second, research has demonstrated that maladaptive parental behavior is associated with increased offspring risk for psychiatric disorders.14-17 It has thus been hypothesized that maladaptive parental behavior plays a significant role in the association between parental and offspring psychiatric disorder.18-20

To conduct a systematic examination of this mediational hypothesis, it is necessary to conduct prospective longitudinal research with a sizable general population sample, assessing a wide range of psychiatric disorders and maladaptive behaviors among both biological parents while they are raising their children, and...
assessing psychiatric disorders among the offspring during their childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. It is also necessary to control for the effects of parental psychopathology, offspring temperament, and offspring psychopathology on maladaptive parental behavior. We report findings from such a community-based prospective longitudinal study to investigate whether maladaptive parental behavior mediates the association between parental and offspring psychiatric disorders.

PREVALENCES OF MATERNAL, PATERNAL, AND OFFSPRING PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

Data regarding the cumulative prevalence of maternal and paternal psychiatric disorders before and during the childhood and adolescence of the offspring, and of offspring psychiatric disorders...

ASSESSMENT OF MALADAPTIVE PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

A wide range of maternal and paternal behaviors were assessed during the 1975, 1983, and 1985 to 1986 interviews. Inconsistent maternal enforcement of rules, loud arguments between the parents, low maternal educational aspirations for the child, maternal difficulty controlling anger toward the child, maternal possessiveness, maternal use of guilt to control the child, maternal verbal abuse, parental cigarette smoking, parental supervision, parental assistance to the child's mother, and paternal fulfillment of the role of father in the family were assessed using items from the Disorganizing Poverty Interview and measures of maternal child-rearing attitudes and behaviors that were administered during the maternal interviews. Harsh maternal punishment, parental affection, parental time spent with the child, and poor parental communication with the child were assessed in the maternal and offspring interviews using scales assessing parental warmth, parent-child communication, and parental support and availability. Parental home maintenance and maternal behavior during the interview were assessed by interviewer observations.

Scales and items assessing each type of parental behavior were dichotomized at the maladaptive end of the scale, facilitating identification of specific types of parental behavior that were associated with parental and offspring psychopathology. Dichotomies were established empirically to identify statistically deviant parental behaviors. Parental behavior was not defined as maladaptive unless the percentage of parents engaging in such behavior was at least 1 SD from the sample mean. Four scales, assessing parents' involvement in their child's life, were not associated with parental or offspring psychopathology. The types of parental behavior that were associated with parental and offspring psychopathology, listed in Table 1 and Table 2, were included in the analyses reported below. A body of research supports the validity of the measures that were used to assess maternal and paternal behavior.

DATA ANALYSES

Analyses of contingency tables were conducted to investigate associations between parental psychiatric disorders and maladaptive parental behaviors. All analyses were conducted using 2-tailed significance tests and an α level of 0.05. Analyses of covariance were conducted to investigate whether parents with disorders behaved in a more maladaptive manner than did parents without disorders. Logistic regression analyses were conducted to investigate whether maladaptive parental behavior was associated with increased offspring risk for psychiatric disorders during late adolescence (1983-1986) or early adulthood (1991-1993) after controlling for parental education, offspring age, sex, difficult childhood temperament, psychiatric disorders during early adolescence (1983), and parental psychiatric disorders. Logistic regression analyses were also conducted to investigate whether parental psychiatric disorders were associated with increased offspring risk for psychiatric disorders during late adolescence or early adulthood after controlling for parental education, offspring age, sex, difficult childhood temperament, psychiatric disorders during early adolescence, and maladaptive parental behavior. Power analyses indicated that parental and offspring anxiety, depressive, disruptive, personality, and substance use disorders were too rare to permit analyses regarding associations between specific types of parental and offspring psychiatric disorders. Therefore, multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate associations between specific types of parental and offspring psychiatric symptoms after controlling for parental education, offspring age, sex, difficult childhood temperament, offspring psychiatric disorders during early adolescence, and maladaptive parental behavior. Unlike the logistic regression analyses, the multiple regression analyses took into consideration the severity of parental and maternal psychopathology.

An established 3-step procedure was used to test whether parental behavior mediated the associations between parental and offspring psychiatric disorders. For parental behavior to mediate these associations, 3 conditions are required: (1) parental psychiatric disorders must predict offspring psychiatric disorders; (2) parental psychiatric disorders must predict maladaptive parental behavior; and (3) maladaptive parental behavior must predict offspring psychiatric disorders after parental psychiatric disorders were controlled statistically. Difficult childhood temperament and offspring psychiatric disorders during early adolescence were controlled in all of the mediation analyses.

Logistic regression analyses were also conducted to investigate whether maladaptive maternal and paternal behaviors independently predicted offspring psychiatric disorder, the statistical interaction of maladaptive maternal and paternal behaviors predicted offspring psychiatric disorder, maternal and paternal psychiatric disorders independently predicted offspring psychiatric disorder, and the interaction of maternal and paternal psychiatric disorders predicted offspring psychiatric disorder.

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ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PREEXISTING OFFSPRING PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND SUBSEQUENT PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

Difficult childhood temperament at a mean age of 6 years was associated with higher levels of maladaptive parental behavior at a mean age of 14 ($t_{191}=3.28, P<.001$) and 16 ($t_{191}=2.37, P=.02$) years. Psychiatric disorder at a mean age of 14 years was associated with higher levels of maladaptive parental behavior at a mean age of 16 years ($t_{591}=5.67, P<.001$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maladaptive Maternal Behavior</th>
<th>Without Psychiatric Disorder (n = 459)</th>
<th>With Psychiatric Disorder (n = 134)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harsh punishment of child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.72 (2.17-6.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent enforcement of rules</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.60 (1.61-4.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low amount of time spent with child</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.16 (1.96-5.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low educational aspirations for child</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2.18 (1.42-3.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low maternal affection toward child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.19 (1.22-3.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal possessiveness toward child</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.80 (1.92-7.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal use of guilt to control child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.49 (2.61-7.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerous loud arguments with child’s father</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.19 (2.03-5.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor control of anger toward child</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.59 (1.02-6.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor maternal communication with child</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1.89 (1.22-2.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor maternal supervision of child</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.97 (1.40-6.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor maternal maintenance of home</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.66 (1.47-4.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular cigarette smoking in presence of child</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.63 (1.66-4.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal abuse directed toward child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.81 (2.20-6.61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CI indicates confidence interval.
†Maternal behaviors that were not significantly associated with maternal psychiatric disorders are not included in this table.
‡Remained significant after controlling for offspring age, sex, and difficult temperament during childhood, for parental education, and for offspring psychiatric disorders during early adolescence.
§Remained significant after controlling for offspring age, sex, and difficult temperament during childhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maladaptive Paternal Behavior</th>
<th>Without Psychiatric Disorder (n = 445)</th>
<th>With Psychiatric Disorder (n = 148)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low amount of time spent with child</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2.02 (1.29-3.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level of paternal assistance to child’s mother</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6.02 (3.88-9.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low paternal affection toward child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.52 (1.36-4.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerous loud arguments with child’s mother</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.10 (1.99-4.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor fulfillment of paternal role in family</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.54 (4.04-10.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>3.48 (1.71-7.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CI indicates confidence interval.
†Paternal behaviors that were not significantly associated with maternal psychiatric disorders are not included in this table.
‡Remained significant after controlling for offspring age, sex, and difficult temperament during childhood, for parental education, and for offspring psychiatric disorders during early adolescence.

psychiatric disorders during late adolescence and early adulthood, are presented in Table 3.

Table 1. Maternal Psychiatric Disorders and Maladaptive Maternal Behaviors During the Childhood and Adolescence of the Offspring*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maladaptive Maternal Behavior</th>
<th>Prevalence of Maladaptive Behavior Among Mothers, %†</th>
<th>Odds Ratio (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harsh punishment of child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.72 (2.17-6.38)</td>
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Table 2. Paternal Psychiatric Disorders and Maladaptive Paternal Behaviors During the Childhood and Adolescence of the Offspring*

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<tr>
<th>Maladaptive Paternal Behavior</th>
<th>Prevalence of Maladaptive Behavior Among Fathers, %†</th>
<th>Odds Ratio (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low amount of time spent with child</td>
<td>16</td>
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ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PARENTAL PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS AND MALADAPTIVE PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

Fourteen types of maladaptive maternal behavior and 9 types of maladaptive paternal behaviors were more prevalent among parents with psychiatric disorders than among parents without psychiatric disorders. These associations remained significant after parental education, offspring age, sex, difficult childhood temperament, and psychiatric disorders during early adolescence were controlled statistically (Tables 1 and 2). Overall, parents without psychiatric disorders had an adjusted mean (SD) of 1.89 (1.84) maladaptive behaviors. Parents with psychiatric disorders during late adolescence and early adulthood, are presented in Table 3.

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disorders had an adjusted mean (SD) of 3.93 (3.00) maladaptive behaviors. This difference remained significant after controlling for the same covariates (F_{502}=116.09, P<.001).

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN MALADAPTIVE PARENTAL BEHAVIOR AND OFFSPRING PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

Maladaptive parental behavior was associated with increased offspring risk for anxiety, depressive, disruptive, personality, and substance use disorders during late adolescence and early adulthood after the covariates were controlled statistically. All of these associations remained significant after parental psychiatric disorders were controlled statistically (Table 4). Offspring psychiatric disorders increased markedly in prevalence as the number of maladaptive parental behaviors increased. The same pattern of findings was obtained when the analyses were repeated using an index of maladaptive parental behavior based solely on the maternal interviews and an index of offspring psychopathology based solely on the offspring interview during early adulthood. Supplemental analyses indicated that persistent maladaptive parental behavior was associated with higher offspring risk for psychiatric disorders than was episodic maladaptive parental behavior.

Maladaptive maternal (adjusted odds ratio [AOR], 1.38; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.22-1.55; P<.001) and paternal behavior (AOR, 1.19; 95% CI, 1.06-1.34; P=.003) were independently associated with increased offspring risk for psychiatric disorder. The statistical interaction of maladaptive maternal and paternal behavior did not predict offspring risk for psychiatric disorder, although the addition of 1 maladaptive maternal and paternal behavior was associated with a 64% increase in offspring risk for psychiatric disorder.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PARENTAL AND OFFSPRING PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

Parental psychiatric disorders were associated with increased offspring risk for anxiety, depressive, disruptive, personality, substance use, and any psychiatric disorders during late adolescence and early adulthood after the covariates were controlled statistically (Table 5). However, none of these associations remained significant after controlling for maladaptive parental behavior. The same pattern of findings was obtained when the analyses were repeated using an index of the total number of maternal and paternal disorders in each family. Supplemental analyses indicated that persistent parental psychiatric disorders were associated with higher offspring risk for psychiatric disorders than were episodic parental psychiatric disorders.

Maternal (AOR, 2.38; 95% CI, 1.58-3.58; P<.001) and paternal (AOR, 1.62; 95% CI, 1.08-2.43; P=.02) psychiatric disorders were independently associated with offspring risk for psychiatric disorder. Neither the interaction of maternal and paternal psychiatric disorders nor the interaction of parental psychiatric disorders with maladaptive parental behavior was associated with offspring risk for psychiatric disorder. As the Figure indicates, the overall increases in offspring risk for psychiatric disorders as a function of maladaptive parental behavior were nearly identical among the offspring of parents with and without psychiatric disorders.

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN SPECIFIC TYPES OF PARENTAL AND OFFSPRING PSYCHIATRIC SYMPTOMS

As Table 6 indicates, symptoms of parental and offspring anxiety, depressive, disruptive, personality, and substance use disorders were significantly associated after parental education, offspring age, sex, difficult childhood temperament, and early adolescent psychiatric disorders were controlled statistically. Maladaptive parental behavior was associated with symptoms of offspring anxiety, depressive, disruptive, personality, and substance use disorders after the covariates listed above, and parental psychiatric symptoms were controlled statistically. Substantial reductions in the magnitudes of the associations between parental and offspring psychiatric symptoms were observed when maladaptive parental behavior was controlled statistically.

PARENTAL DISORDERS, PARENTAL BEHAVIOR, AND OFFSPRING PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS DURING EARLY ADULTHOOD

Although statistical controls were used in the above analyses to minimize the influence of preexisting offspring psychopathology, it would have been possible to further reduce the influence of preexisting offspring psychopathology by restricting the analyses to associations involving only those offspring disorders that were pres-
ent during early adulthood. However, small numbers of cases precluded such analyses regarding the 5 specific types of offspring psychiatric disorders. There was sufficient statistical power to permit analyses regarding the overall association between parental disorders, maladaptive parental behavior, and offspring psychiatric disorders during early adulthood. Results were consistent with the findings reported above: parental psychiatric disorders were associated with increased offspring risk for psychiatric disorders during early adulthood before (OR, 1.67; 95% CI, 1.27-2.19), but not after, controlling for maladaptive parental behavior (AOR, 1.19; 95% CI, 0.87-1.64).

**COMMENT**

The present findings suggest that maladaptive parental behavior may play an important role in the association between parental and offspring psychopathology. In the present study, maladaptive parental behavior met all of the statistical criteria required to indicate that it mediated this association: parental psychopathology was associated with elevated offspring risk.
During early adolescence.

maladaptive parental behavior and subsequent offspring psy-
dictions between each child and his or her parents have
maladaptive parental behavior,11,13 that maladaptive pa-
ting their children, and that their offspring may not be at
not behave in a particularly maladaptive manner while rais-
substantially elevated risk for psychiatric disorders. Be-
ners to modify their child-rearing behavior.12 Impor-
tal behavior is associated with offspring risk for psy-
ntantly, our findings suggest that maladaptive parental be-
orders, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder,6
intrafamilial transmission of some types of mental dis-
also important to note that there is evidence indicating
that some parents with psychiatric disorders do not behave in a particularly maladaptive manner while raising their children, and that their offspring may not be at substantially elevated risk for psychiatric disorders. Because some types of maladaptive parental behavior are relatively common in our society, our findings suggest that it may be important to educate the public about the kinds of parental behavior that are most strongly associated with risk for mental disorders among offspring.

These data are consistent with previous research indicating that parental psychopathology is associated with maladaptive parental behavior,11,13 that maladaptive parental behavior is associated with offspring risk for psychopathology.14-20,47 that a substantial proportion of the intrafamilial association involving several types of psychiatric disorders is accounted for by environmental factors,8,9,47 and that the effects of parental behavior on offspring behavior have sometimes been underestimated because the unique or “nonshared” aspects of the relationship between each child and his or her parents have not been adequately recognized.48 At the same time, it is also important to note that there is evidence indicating that genetic factors may play a predominant role in the intrafamilial transmission of some types of mental disorders, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder,8 which were too rare to investigate in this study.

As noted above, previous research has indicated that parenting can be adversely affected by parental psychopathology and offspring temperament, both of which seem to be determined in part by genetic factors.9,11 In this regard, our findings indicating that the association between maladaptive parental behavior and subsequent offspring psy-
chiatric disorders was not attributable to the effects of parental psychopathology, offspring temperament, or offspring psychiatric disorders during early adolescence are of particular interest. It will, nevertheless, be of interest for future research to investigate whether genetic factors that are not expressed in the phenotypic form of either parental psychopathology or difficult offspring temperament may play a role in the association between maladaptive parental behavior and offspring psychopathology. It will also be of interest for future research, designed to optimize the detection of genetic influences on behavior, to investigate whether a shared genetic liability for parental psychopathology and maladaptive parental behavior may affect parental behavior even in the absence of parental psychiatric disorder, and whether indirect genetic effects may adversely influence parental behavior through their association with environmental adversities.

The limitations of the present study require consideration. Because the fathers were not interviewed, data from the maternal and offspring interviews were used to assess paternal behavior and psychopathology. We considered restricting the focus of this article to the association between maternal psychiatric disorder, maladaptive maternal behavior, and offspring psychiatric disorder. However, our concerns about the paternal data were outweighed by the enhanced contribution to the field that results from the inclusion of data regarding both biological parents. Confidence in the validity of the paternal data was increased because the present findings are consistent with regard to the mediational roles of maladaptive maternal and paternal behavior, and because the present findings regarding the estimated prevalence of paternal disorders are similar to the findings of major epidemiological studies.49,50 Another limitation is the absence of systematic observational data on parent-child interactions. Several studies have indicated that observer ratings of parental and offspring behavior tend to yield higher estimates of the role of the environment in the association between parental and offspring behavior than are obtained when parental ratings are used.51 Nevertheless, the unique methodological strengths of the present study permit the findings of this investigation to contribute to an increased understanding of the role of pa-

Table 6. Association Between Parental Psychiatric Symptoms and Offspring Psychiatric Symptoms During Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offspring Symptoms/Parental Symptoms</th>
<th>Before Controlling for Maladaptive Parental Behavior</th>
<th>After Controlling for Maladaptive Parental Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$ (SE)</td>
<td>$R^2$ †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety/Anxiety</td>
<td>0.24‡ (0.04)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive/Depressive</td>
<td>0.16‡ (0.04)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptive/Disruptive</td>
<td>0.35‡ (0.04)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality/Personality</td>
<td>0.21‡ (0.04)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance/Substance</td>
<td>0.12‡ (0.04)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total/Total</td>
<td>0.41‡ (0.04)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates the regression coefficient.
† The proportion of variance in offspring symptoms accounted for by parental symptoms.
‡ Association remained significant after controlling for parental education and for offspring age, sex, difficult childhood temperament, and psychiatric disorders during early adolescence.
rental behavior in the association between parental and offspring psychiatric disorders.

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Corresponding author: Jeffrey G. Johnson, PhD, Unit 60, New York State Psychiatric Institute, 1051 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10032 (e-mail: jjohnso@pi.cpmc.columbia.edu).

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