Title: The Influence of Parenting Stress on Child Behavior and Development in Children with Developmental Delay: The Role of the Parenting Process

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Introduction: Parents of children affected by developmental delays (DD) have been shown to experience elevated levels of parenting stress compared to parents of typically developing children (Baker et al., 2003; Emerson, 2003; Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Recent studies have suggested that higher levels of parenting stress can adversely impact children’s behavior and development, such that higher levels of parenting stress are often associated with more behavior problems and less developmental progress (Ayoub, Vallotton, & Mastergeorge, 2011; Baker et al., 2003; Neece, et al., 2012). Despite awareness of these factors, the specific mechanisms through which parenting stress influences child behavior and development remain unclear. The overall child-rearing process involved in parenting a child with DD may be one potential medium through which parenting stress influences both child behavioral and developmental outcomes. Recent studies have pointed to a need to increase understanding of parenting variables such as parental role expectation and satisfaction, the parent-child relationship, and parenting behavior as possible mediators to the relationship between parental mental health and child behavior and development (Anthony et al., 2005; Crnic et al., 2005; Hastings, 2002). Given that disruptions to these areas of the parenting process may impact developmental and behavioral outcomes among children with DD, it is critical that investigators examine the influence of parenting stress on the parenting process, and, in turn, its effect on behavior and development. Therefore, aim of the current study was to both quantitatively and qualitatively examine the mechanisms through which parenting stress impacts the parenting process, and, in turn, influences behavior and development in children with DD.

Method: The current study involved data from the Mindful Awareness for Parenting Stress (MAPS) Project, which was conducted in 2 phases and included 91 parents of children, ages 2.5 to 5 years old, with DD. These parents participated in a randomized controlled trial examining the efficacy of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in reducing parental stress and subsequent child behavior problems. Using a mixed-methods design, we assessed how both perceived and measured changes in parenting stress and parenting practices influence behavior and development in children with developmental delay. Qualitatively, we examined parent reports of changes in stress levels, parenting behavior, and child behavior and development using directed content analysis. The qualitative outcomes were used to derive a quantitative model that assessed whether parental role expectation and satisfaction, the parent-child relationship, and parenting behavior mediated the relationship between parenting stress and child behavior and development using multiple mediation analyses.

Results: Results of the directed content analysis indicated that parents experienced significant improvements across levels of parenting stress, parenting behavior, and child behavior and development. The majority of parents reported overall reductions in their stress levels, with some indicating significant improvement in their ability to manage stress successfully, despite little to no change in the actual stressors they experience. Responses regarding parenting behavior indicated increases in levels of patience and appreciation for their children with greater enjoyment of time spent together. In terms of behavior and development, parents reported positive changes in child temperament and emotion as well as speech and language development. Results of multiple mediation analyses indicted that one component of the parent-child relationship, parent-child relational frustration (PRQ, Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2006) significantly mediated the relationship between parenting stress and child outcomes, such that higher parental distress (PSI, Abidin, 1990) led to increased relational frustration, which in turn led to higher child behavior problems (CBCL, Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). Components of parental role expectation and satisfaction and parenting behavior were not found to be significant mediators to the relationship between parenting stress and child behavior and development.
Discussion: Overall, responses to qualitative questions indicated a relationship between improvements in parenting stress, parenting behavior, and positive changes in child behavior and development as a result of participation in the MAPS program. Taken together, the qualitative findings noted suggest that MBSR interventions may prove effective for parents of children with DD in terms of their perceptions and experiences of parenting stress, the processes they engage in when parenting their children, and their children’s behavior and development. Parent-child relational frustration was the only mechanistic process evidenced by the quantitative model in the current study. Recognizing that parent-child relational factors such as these impact the relationship between heightened parenting stress and adverse behavioral outcomes among children with DD will allow interventions to be developed that not only target reducing parenting stress, but specifically target improving the parent-child relationship with the ultimate goal of decreasing behavior problems and increasing developmental gains among children with DD.

References/Citations: