

MATERNAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILD BEHAVIOR: TESTING A PROPOSED MODEL

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Purpose: To test a model of maternal predictors of 2- to 6-year-old children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors in a volunteer sample of 205 low-income single mothers.

Methods: Data for this cross-sectional study were collected via in-home interview at baseline for a randomized controlled trial testing the efficacy of a cognitive-behavioral intervention in improving mothers' mental health. Variables included chronic stressors (Everyday Stressors Index); self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale); negative thinking (Crandell Cognitions Inventory); depressive symptoms (Beck Depression Inventory); and the outcome of child behavior (Child Behavior Checklist).

Findings: Mothers' reports of internalizing and externalizing behaviors did not differ by children's sex or race. Chronic stressors and depressive symptoms plus control variables, explained 27% of the variability in internalizing behavior, $F(7,189) = 10.1, p < .0001$. For externalizing behavior, chronic stressors and depressive symptoms with controls accounted for 21% of variability in externalizing behavior, $F(7,189) = 7.3, p < .0001$. Chronic stressors exerted the largest total effects on internalizing and externalizing behaviors, .40 and .35, respectively. The effects of self-esteem and negative thinking were entirely indirect, with the latter playing a greater role in predicting child behavior. The indirect effect of negative thinking on child behavior was exerted through depressive symptoms; self-esteem was linked with behavior through negative thinking and depressive symptoms.

Conclusions and Implications: Indicators of mothers' mental health were directly and indirectly associated with children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Interventions designed to improve the mental health of low-income single mothers may benefit the mother and improve mother-child relationships via positive changes in child behavior or in mothers' perceptions of children's behavior. Decreasing negative thinking, a variable amenable to intervention, may not only decrease a mother's depressive symptoms but also improve her perception of the child's behavior.

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