

PSYCHOSOCIAL CORRELATES OF MATERNAL COMPETENCE IN FIRST-TIME MOTHERS IN EARLY PARENTHOOD

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Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the psychosocial correlates of maternal competence in first-time mothers in early parenthood. Women who report more maternal competency feel more comfortable with infant skills and interpreting their infants' behavior (Mercer, 1981, 1985). In addition, mothers who provide nurturing and responsive care to infants will positively affect the infants' biological, emotional and social growth (Bornstein, 2000). Health care professionals must identify psychosocial factors that affect the development of maternal competency in early parenthood. The understanding of these relationships can facilitate the development of interventions designed to increase maternal competence after childbirth. Towards this end, self-esteem, sense of mastery, and social support were investigated in this descriptive, correlational study. The research question guiding this study was: What are the relationships between self-esteem, sense of mastery, and social support on maternal competence of first-time mothers in early parenthood.

Method: The participants for this study were recruited from a larger study on maternal competence and health status in early parenthood. The convenience sample consisted of 80 first-time mothers who were surveyed in the postpartum period between six to eight weeks after childbirth. Participants were initially recruited in postpartum units from two hospitals in a large metropolitan city in Southeastern United States.

The PSOC is a 17-item scale that measures parental sense of competency in the parenting role (Gibaud-Wallston, 1977) and is divided into two subscales: 1) Skills/Knowledge and 2) Valuing/Comfort. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the total scale was .87. Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (1979) is a 10-item scale that measures an individual's level of self-acceptance. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .87. The 7-item Sense of Mastery Scale (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) measures the extent an individual feels in control of the forces that affects his or her life. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .78. The Support System Checklist (Zimmerman, 1980) is a 19-item checklist measures an individual's perceived helpfulness of a wide range of people and services that might make up a support system. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .66.

Findings: Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to assess data. Study findings indicate that self-esteem (standardized regression coefficient = .345, $p < .05$) and social support (standardized regression coefficient = .293, $p < .05$) were predictive of maternal competence. Self-esteem was predictive of sense of mastery (standardized regression coefficient = .705, $p < .01$). Maternal competence was significantly correlated with self-esteem, social support and sense of mastery.

Clinical Implications: First-time mothers who report more self-esteem and social support may feel more competent as a mother. Health care professionals need to develop interventions that help the mother develop confidence in the maternal role and encourage mothers to identify their social support networks in early parenthood.