Title: Relations between Language and Behavior Problems: Moderating Role of Maternal Depression

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Introduction: Language difficulties are found to be related to higher levels of behavior problems in young children (Bornstein, Hahn, & Suwalsky, 2013). Despite these findings, few studies have examined whether the relations between language difficulties and behavioral problems may vary as a function of maternal depression. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of maternal depression as a moderator of the relationships of language and behavior problems with preschool children from low-income families.

Method: A total of 80 children (39% girls) who attended Head Start programs in a medium-sized city in the southwestern United States participated in this longitudinal study. Children’s mean age was 43.41 months (SD = 3.66; range: 37 to 53). The Preschool Language Scale-5 (PLS-5, Zimmerman, Steiner, & Pond, 2011) was administered individually to English-speaking children by trained research assistants to assess language skills at three different time points. Teachers completed the Child Behavior Checklist ½-5 (CTRF, Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) and the Social Skills Improvement System-Problem Behavior (Gresham & Elliot, 2007) to assess children’s behavior problems. Maternal depressive symptoms were assessed by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radlof, 1977).

Results: The preliminary results showed that the overall model of language predicting teacher-reported behavior on CTRF was marginally significant, \(F(3, 76) = 2.50, R^2 = 0.09, p = .066\). Maternal depression was negatively correlated with behavior problems, \(b1 = -4.19, t = -2.29, p = 0.025\). Language skills were negatively correlated with behavior problem, \(b2 = -0.54, t = 2.22, p < .030\). The regression coefficient for the product of PLS-5 and CES-D was \(b3 = .04\) and statistically different from zero \(p = .03\), meaning that the effect of language skills on teacher-reported child behavior problems on the CTRF depended on maternal depression as measured by CES-D. Specifically, language was negatively correlated with teacher-reported behavior problem among children whose mothers had lower depressive symptoms. However, there was no relationship between language and behavior problems among children with mothers who had higher depressive symptoms.

Results also showed that the overall model was significant, \(F(3, 73) = 3.17, R^2 = 0.12, p = .030\). Maternal depression was negatively correlated with behavior problems, \(b1 = -4.66, t = -2.17, p = 0.033\). Language skills were negatively correlated with behavior problem, \(b2 = -0.70, t = -2.97, p = 0.004\). the regression coefficient for the product of PLS-5 and CES-D was \(b3 = 0.05\) and statistically different from zero \(p = 0.043\). A negative relationship only existed between language skills and teacher-reported child behavior problem on the SSIS among children with mothers who had lower depressive symptoms.

Discussion: This pilot study suggest maternal depressive moderated the relations between language skills and behavior problems. Findings support the important contribution of maternal depression as a moderator that may explain the relations between language skills and behavior problems for preschool children. Prevention and intervention programs should not only focus on increasing children’s language skills but also reducing maternal depression.

References/Citations: