

MALTREATMENT EXPERIENCES AMONGST PREGNANT ADOLESCENTS:

LINKS TO SELF-REPORTED BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: To examine the relationship between behavioural problems and the nature and extent of childhood maltreatment experiences in a sample of pregnant adolescents.

METHOD: Maltreatment experiences reported in the Adult Attachment Interview were classified in terms of severity and chronicity and were examined with respect to their links to behavioural problems.

RESULTS: Significant correlations were found between severity and chronicity of maltreatment experiences and self-reports of behaviour problems.

INTRODUCTION

- Research suggests that experiences of maltreatment are particularly high among adolescent mothers compared to their non-parenting peers.
- Preliminary data from our lab indicates that rates of maltreatment are especially high among pregnant adolescents who access Young Parent Resource Centres (YPRCs; McKibbin, Madigan, Benoit et al. 2007).

Childhood Maltreatment

- It is well-established that childhood maltreatment is associated with a variety of maladaptive outcomes and increases risk for later psychopathology.
- Less is known about the differential effects associated with specific dimensions of childhood maltreatment (i.e., subtype, chronicity, severity).
- The purpose of this study is to examine the utility of characterizing childhood maltreatment experiences in terms of chronicity and severity, with respect to adolescent behavioural outcomes.
- This study coded childhood maltreatment experiences, as reported during a clinical interview (AAI), using the Maltreatment Classification Scale (MCS; Barnett et al., 1993)
- The MCS is multi-dimensional, nosological system which allows maltreatment experiences to be precisely measured, and thus sophisticated descriptions of childhood maltreatment-outcome relationships to be explicated.

HYPOTHESES

- 1) Greater severity of childhood maltreatment will be associated with greater behavioural problems.
- 2) Greater chronicity of childhood maltreatment will be associated with greater behavioural problems.

METHOD

Participants

- N=47
 - Pregnant adolescents
 - Aged 12-18 years
 - Currently enrolled in a randomized controlled clinical trial.
 - Recruited from Young Parent Resource Centres across Toronto and from the Young Parents' Program at Sick Kids.

Measures

- All measures were obtained when adolescents were 12-23 weeks pregnant.
- 1) **Adult Attachment interview (AAI; George et al. 2002)**
 - Semi-structured Interview which focuses on 1) childhood and present relationships with attachment figures; 2) experiences of abuse/maltreatment and loss
- 2) **Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983)**
 - Self-report of behavioural problems.
- 3) **Maltreatment Classification Scale (MCS; Barnett, Manly & Cicchetti, 1993)**
 - Used to code maltreatment experiences reported during the AAI. Identifies subtypes of maltreatment (physical, sexual abuse, and emotional maltreatment) and codes for severity on a scale from 0-5.
 - Rates of reported maltreatment experiences are reported in Figure 1.

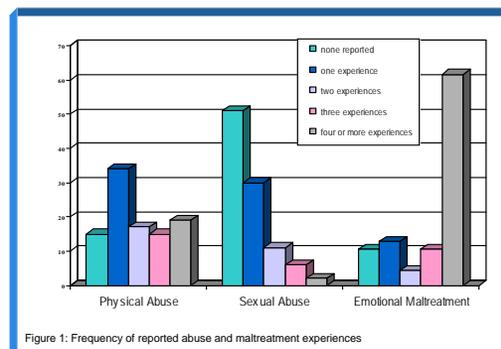


Figure 1: Frequency of reported abuse and maltreatment experiences

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Greater severity of childhood maltreatment will be associated with greater behavioural problems.

- Bivariate correlations were used to examine this hypothesis.
- As predicted, there was a significant correlation between **severity of physical abuse** experiences and total behaviour problems ($r = .28, p < .05$), as well as **severity of emotional maltreatment** experience and reported behavioural problems ($r = .28, p < .05$). There was no significant association between severity of **sexual abuse** experience and behaviour problems.

Hypothesis 2: Greater chronicity of childhood maltreatment will be associated with greater behavioural problems.

- Bivariate correlations were used to examine this hypothesis.
- As predicted, there was a significant correlation between **chronicity of physical abuse** experiences and total behaviour problems ($r = .29, p < .05$), **chronicity of sexual abuse** and behaviour problems ($r = .27, p < .05$), and **chronicity of emotional maltreatment** experience and reported behavioural problems ($r = .29, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION & RELEVANCE

- The objective of the current study was to further understand the association between specific aspects of childhood maltreatment and behavioural outcomes in a sample of pregnant adolescents.
- The current study revealed that 85% of the mothers in our sample reported one or more experiences of physical abuse, 49% reported one or more experiences of sexual abuse, and 89% reported one or more experiences of emotional maltreatment.
- Results from the present study are consistent with previous child maltreatment research which suggests that greater chronicity and severity of abuse/maltreatment experiences are associated with greater behavioural problems.
- The present findings also support theories of developmental psychopathology by suggesting that there is an increased vulnerability for psychiatric problems among those with histories of severe and or chronic childhood maltreatment.
- Thus, given the link between the chronicity and severity of maltreatment experiences and behavioral problems among pregnant adolescents, it is important to assess for the presence of extreme and multiple maltreatment experiences to identify adolescents most at risk for later psychopathology.
- This is particularly important among pregnant adolescents, given that a) maternal psychopathology is known to interfere with mother-infant attachment relationships and b) this population already face unique challenges associated with early parenthood.
- Finally, the present findings highlight the importance of identifying pregnant youth with a history of childhood maltreatment, **particularly those enrolled in YPRCs**, such that trauma-focused interventions can be provided, when indicated.

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