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Letter to the Editor

The Role of Parental Emotional Health and Parenting Practices in Offspring Mental Health

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The Role of Parental Emotional Health and Parenting Practices in Offspring Mental Health

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Abstract

In the family social environment, children can experience and observe stressful situations, involving mental health and parental practices. The review by Mendes-Sousa et al. examines the relation between family stress, child development, and offspring mental health. Of the main results, we highlight the relationship between maternal depression with developmental delays and child internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Furthermore, negative parenting practices were also related to children's emotional and behavioral problems, while positive practices were beneficial to the socio-emotional development of offspring. The review warns about preventing socio-emotional problems in offspring, through promoting parental mental health, positive parenting practices, and cohesive family environments. Finally, we envision a significant path for subsequent research on maternal emotional overload and the central role of mothers in caring for their offspring, exploring shared care for

children and potential public policies aimed at mothers' mental health and social inclusion.

Keywords: Parenting, Mental Health, Child Behavior, Child Psychiatry, Child Psychology

The scoping review by Mendes-Sousa et al. examines the relationship between family stress, child development, and offspring mental health¹. The review is critical because it revealed that the family environment is an essential determinant of a child's socio-emotional¹ development and provided us with data to understand this relationship. Since children spend most of their time in the family social environment, this understanding is fundamental for strategies to prevent mental health problems in the offspring.

As main results, we highlight that dysfunctional environments, parental depression, and low parental skills were related to socio-emotional delays in offspring¹. In particular, maternal depression was related to developmental delays and internalizing and externalizing symptoms in the child¹. Parental mental health is a predictor of a child's mental health², highlighting the importance of identifying parental psychopathologies, especially in mothers, who are often primary caregivers. Furthermore, Mendes-Sousa et al. mention that development deficits were greater in the parents' poor socio-economic and educational status¹. To profile the caregivers, the authors could have extracted data on social markers such as gender, race, nationality, socioeconomic and cultural status.

Emotional problems in childhood include internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety mombray², and have been associated with depression in

adults³. Behavioral problems, characterized by externalizing reactions such as opposition, inattention, hyperactivity, and aggressiveness² predicted antisocial tendencies in adulthood⁴. It would be worth mentioning the sex of the children evaluated in the article, as it can mediate the results since girls may have more emotional problems and boys more behavioral problems^{5,6}.

There was also no mention of the reason for evaluating individuals between four and twelve years old. Epigenetics suggests the existence of critical, sensitive childhood periods in which lived experiences can "sculpt" brain development⁷. School-age is one of these periods⁸, when new socio-emotional challenges occur, with new interactions and the perception of difficulty in meeting expectations, pressures, and social acceptance. Therefore, children can develop psychopathologies. So, research that identifies risk factors for adverse mental health outcomes at school age is essential.

The caregivers can act as crucial external regulators of children's emotional socialization through guidance, modeling, and setting behavioral expectations. Therefore, more than one caregiver can be important because, in the absence of one due to mental illness, the other can perform this caring role. However, the review shows that not only the presence of caregivers is essential, but also their parenting practices. Children whose parents had poor communication, inhibited emotional expression, insecurity, minimal social involvement, and aggressive discipline tactics had more internalizing and externalizing symptoms¹. But, positive parenting practices have been linked to better child socio-emotional development¹.

Finally, the review by Mendes-Sousa et al. warned about preventing child socio-emotional problems through promoting parental mental health, positive parenting practices, and cohesive family environments¹. We envision a significant path for

subsequent research on maternal emotional overload and the central role of mothers in caring for their offspring, exploring shared care for children and potential public policies aimed at mothers' mental health and social inclusion.

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