

Maternal depressive symptoms in the postnatal

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Original contribution

Maternal depressive symptoms in the postnatal period are associated with long-term impairment of mother–child bonding*

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Summary

Background: Postnatal Depression has demonstrated long-term consequences on child cognitive and emotional development; however, the link between maternal and child pathology has not been clearly identified.

Objective: This study examined whether maternal bonding to the infant and young child is impaired by maternal depressive symptoms.

Methods: 108 mothers of newborn infants were recruited from local obstetric units and examined for psychopathology using Symptom Checklist, the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) and the Postpartum Bonding Questionnaire at two weeks, six weeks, four months and fourteen months postpartum.

Results: Maternal depressive symptoms at 2 weeks, 6 weeks and four months postnatally but not at fourteen months of infant's age were found to be strongly associated with lower quality of maternal bonding to the infant and child from two weeks until fourteen months of postnatal age. Even mild and unrecognized maternal depressive symptoms had a significant impact on maternal bonding if they occurred during the first four months of life.

Conclusions: This gives reason for increased concern for mother–infant dyads in the first five months after birth that could be regarded as a highly sensitive period for the development of the mother–child relationship. The findings warrant further studies and inspire the development of preventive programs focusing on infant and early childhood mental health by emphasizing protection and support during the first critical months.

Keywords: Maternal depressive symptoms; maternal bonding; mother–child bonding; parent–child relations.

Introduction

Mother–infant bonding received scientific attention several decades ago (Klaus & Kennell, 1976). Since then,

research on the subject has been contradictory, with some researchers (Goldberg, 1983; Hamon, 1981) emphasizing a sensitive period immediately after birth, but others arguing against this concept (Eyer, 1994; Lamb, 1983). Social support and early contact have been described to promote mother–infant bonding; however, the methodology to assess mother–infant bonding in the postnatal period has been heterogeneous: video-observations (Anisfeld & Lipper, 1983) as well as clinical reports (Kumar, 1997) have been implemented. Other researchers (Taylor et al, 2005) constructed a short questionnaire the 'Mother to Infant Bonding Scale', and were able to demonstrate significant stability over the first twelve weeks.

Incidence of postnatal depression is about 10–15% (Cox et al, 1993). A meta-analysis of studies (O'Hara & Swain 1996) mainly based in developed countries found the incidence of postnatal depression to be 12–13%. Multiple studies on developmental disturbances in children of depressed mothers have given reason for considerable concern. Those children seem to show elevated rates of behavioral, emotional, attentional and/or interpersonal disturbances outlasting the maternal depressive episode throughout childhood. Lyons-Ruth et al (1986) found that increased levels of maternal depression were significantly related to poorer infant mental and motor development as assessed by the Bayley scales. Similarly, a significant difference between infants of postnatally depressed mothers and those

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of well mothers has been described (Murray et al, 1996; Murray, 1992) for several aspects of cognitive development, even though mother's depression had remitted by around six to eight months postpartum.

Behavioral disturbance in the second year of life has been described regardless of maternal remission at the time of assessment. However, so far there has been no clear linkage between postnatal depression and one specific disorder. Rather, different observers have reported emotional, attentional and cognitive disturbances. The mechanism is unclear as well. A genetic effect, a direct effect of exposure to depressive symptoms (Rutter et al, 1989), or a chronic interactional disturbance have been

development need to be identified more closely and in greater detail. Therefore, this study questioned whether even subclinical levels of maternal postnatal depressive symptoms are associated with impaired maternal bonding with their infants constituting a potential link between maternal mood, infant and toddler attachment and childhood behavior and development.

Methods

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of a volunteer sample of healthy Caucasian mothers and their infants after childbirth.