APSAC Research-to-Practice Brief

**Study Title:** Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: Maternal Trauma-Related Cognitions and Toddler Symptoms

**Study Authors:** Rebecca L. Babcock Fenerci and Anne P. DePrince

**Brief Author:** Karen Zilberstein

**Introduction:**
This study seeks to show how mothers with histories of maltreatment and certain trauma-related cognitions transmit traumatic reactions to their young children, and whether this results in negative child outcomes. It considers cognitive pathways, such as posttrauma appraisals (i.e. shame, self-blame, anger, fear, betrayal and/or alienation around a trauma memory) and disorganized memory (memories of maltreatment that are non-sequential or lacking), as possible methods of transmission. Both posttrauma appraisals that are expressed through thoughts, feelings, or behavior, and disorganized memory, which cause distressing thoughts and emotions, can lead to mothers’ distorted understandings of their children and disrupt healthy attachment. *Top-line finding:* If a mother believes her child, rather than prior trauma, caused her distress, a dysfunctional parent-child relationship could result, as well as mood and/or behavior problems in the child.

**Hypotheses:**
Researchers hypothesized that higher levels of maternal posttrauma appraisals and disorganized memory would be associated with maternal trauma symptoms, more child internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and dysfunction in the mother-child relationship. They also hypothesized that dysfunctional mother-child relationships would affect child symptoms.

**Subjects:**
Participants in this study included 113 mothers of 2-5-year-olds who lived in a metropolitan area in the Rocky Mountain West and who had experienced child abuse or neglect. Most of the mothers were married and over two thirds were white, with African-American mothers making up the second largest grouping. Over two-thirds identified as middle class or higher, and three-quarters had at least some college education.

**Findings:**
Researchers found strong associations between mothers’ traumatic symptoms and their children’s mood and behavior problems. Maternal trauma-related cognitions, however, correlated only with child internalizing symptoms, not externalizing ones. Maternal posttrauma appraisals and disorganized memory predicted higher levels of dysfunction in the mother-child relationship than did the mothers’ trauma symptoms. However, dysfunctional mother-child relationships did not appear to directly affect child symptoms.

As the current study relied on maternal self-report and is cross-sectional in design, causal relationships could not be inferred. Other factors not studied could also have affected the findings.

Recommendation

The study’s findings suggest that clinicians working with trauma survivors and their children may find that targeting parental cognitions could enhance the mother-child relationship and decrease child mood symptoms.

Future research that employs multi-method, multi-reporter, longitudinal approaches and/or randomized control trials would help clarify the causal mechanisms through which parental cognitions lead to child problems and the interventions most likely to alleviate them.

Bottom Line

This research suggests that trauma can pass from parent to child through alterations in maternal thought processes and traumatic memories.

Treatment to improve mother-child relationships or child mood symptoms should include a focus on how mothers recall and think about their own maltreatment experiences.


About the Research-to-Practice Brief Author

Karen Zilberstein is Clinical Director for A Home Within, a national nonprofit that provides pro bono psychotherapy for individuals who have experienced foster care. She has authored numerous journal articles and a book, Parenting under pressure: Struggling to raise children in an unequal America, that will be released in 2019.