

Child Emotion Regulation, Parenting, and Child Behavior Problems in Families with Internationally Adopted Children

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Introduction

Child outcomes are likely to reflect a complex interplay between heritable factors, child characteristics, and the environmental context, including the quality of early and later parental caregiving. Yet the preponderance of research on child adoption outcomes has focused on differences between adoptees and non-adoptees, with less attention to developmental processes. The Family Stories Project aimed to illuminate some of the developmental processes that may be involved in shaping adopted children's behavior outcomes. Specifically, in the present study we investigated the associations between the parenting behavior, child emotion regulation, and child behavioral problems in a sample of internationally adoptive families with young children.

Methods

Participants in the Family Stories project were 67 families with adopted children between the ages of 4 to 7, all placed with their family prior to one year of age. Assessments included parent report measures completed by each parent individually as well as observations of family interaction during a university laboratory visit. Both mothers and fathers reported on their children's emotion regulation and behavior problems using standard parent-report paper-pencil measures. Child emotion regulation was assessed via the Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997). Child behavior problems were assessed via the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). Families were observed in a university laboratory interacting during a task that required the family unit to "draw a picture together that tells the story of how your family began." Parental sensitivity and intrusiveness were coded from the videotaped observations of interaction of this drawing task.

Results

As predicted, results revealed bivariate associations between poor child emotion regulation and child behavior problems. Both mothers' and fathers' reports revealed that poor emotion regulation was associated with higher levels of child externalizing behavior. There were few direct associations between the quality of parenting and child behavior outcomes. Rather, results indicated that child emotion regulation moderated the association between parenting and child outcomes, in particular, child externalizing behavior. Children with poor emotion regulation skills were most vulnerable to less sensitive parenting; when poor emotion regulation and less sensitive parenting were coupled, children were reported to exhibit higher rates of externalizing problem behavior. Results did not indicate different patterns for adopted boys versus girls.

Conclusions

These findings support the hypothesis that adopted children's behavioral outcomes may best be understood as reflecting complex interactions between child and adoptive family characteristics. Parenting an emotionally labile child poses unique challenges for parents, and thus these results hold a number of potentially important clinical implications. Parents of children with poor

emotion regulation skills may require special support and targeted preventive intervention, as their children are also most vulnerable to the consequences of lapses in parenting sensitivity.

References

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