

Regular Article

Maternal depressive symptoms and child language development: Exploring potential pathways through observed and self-reported mother-child verbal interactions

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Abstract

Maternal depressive symptoms (MDS) in the postnatal period may impact children's later development through poorer quality parent-child interactions. The current study tested a specific pathway from MDS (child age 9 months) to child receptive vocabulary (4 ½ years) through both self-reported and observed parent-child verbal interactions (at both 2 and 4 ½ years). Participants ($n = 4,432$) were part of a large, diverse, contemporary pre-birth national cohort study: *Growing Up in New Zealand*. Results indicated a direct association between greater MDS at 9 months and poorer receptive vocabulary at age 4 ½ years. There was support for an indirect pathway through self-reported parent-child verbal interactions at 2 years and through observed parent-child verbal interactions at 4 ½ years. A moderated mediation effect was also found: the indirect effect of MDS on child vocabulary through observed verbal interaction was supported for families living in areas of greater socioeconomic deprivation. Overall, findings support the potential role of parent-child verbal interactions as a mechanism for the influence of MDS on later child language development. This pathway may be particularly important for families experiencing socioeconomic adversity, suggesting that effective and appropriate supportive parenting interventions be preferentially targeted to reduce inequities in child language outcomes.

Keywords: maternal depressive symptoms; child language; parenting; interaction; socioeconomic inequity

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An estimated 10–15% of mothers experience postnatal depression, with those living in poverty and of ethnic minorities typically found to be at even greater risk of depressive symptoms in this critical life stage (Underwood et al., 2016). In particular, a recent review of research with indigenous mothers in the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand highlighted experiences of intergenerational trauma, systemic racism (including within the healthcare system), and disconnection from traditional cultural systems and supports; highlighting a need for research examining perinatal depression to include more diverse samples and longitudinal designs (Bowen et al., 2014). There is evidence for longitudinal impacts of maternal depression on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Kingston & Tough, 2014; Sanger et al., 2015). Differences in parent behaviors and interactions is one potentially modifiable pathway that may explain the developmental impacts of depression on offspring (Goodman & Gotlib, 1999). For example, mothers with higher depression symptoms are consistently shown to engage in less warm, responsive, and

stimulating interactions with their infants and children (Lovejoy et al., 2000). Understanding the particular mechanisms by which maternal depression relates to specific child developmental outcomes provides critical information about future prevention and intervention targets. In addition, this understanding must also be specific for particular population contexts; as the sociocultural, economic, and environmental conditions within countries are also important for an understanding of maternal mental wellbeing, parent-child interactions, and language development (Ahun & Côté, 2019).

Maternal depressive symptoms

The experience of maternal depressed mood during the perinatal and infancy period can be conceptualized in different ways. Many women may experience “postpartum blues,” lasting days, whereas others may experience more severe and persistent postnatal depression symptoms that meet criteria for a major depressive disorder (Räsänen et al., 2014). For some women postnatal depression reflects a chronic or recurrent condition, and a previous episode of depression during or before pregnancy is the most common risk factor for postnatal depression (Underwood et al., 2017). Further, in the New Zealand context, antenatal and postnatal depression have also been shown to have distinct

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Recent Advances In The Psychology Of Language Pt A Language Development And Mother Child Interactions

Julia Schneider



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