

Parental Mental Health Status and Children Mental Health: The Mediating Role of Parental Aggravation.

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Abstract

According to the Federal Data Systems data, pediatric mental illnesses start to develop during early childhood with anxiety and depression being the most common conditions (Bitsko et al. 2022). The family systems theory proposed by Bowen in 1978 emphasizes the strong interdependence within a household, meaning a change in one individual inevitably causes shifts in others. A parent's mental state can directly or indirectly influence their child's mental health. While studies have linked parental aggravation, a distinct facet of parenting stress, to adverse outcomes in children (Suh & Luther, 2020), it remains unclear if this specific stressor acts as the conduit between a parent's overall well-being and a child's diagnosis.

Hypothesis: Parental aggravation functions as the essential link which connects parental psychological conditions to their children's mental health results.

Methods

Participants

- This study used data from the 2019-2020 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), a nationally representative survey assessing the health of parents and children.
- The total sample included 23,999 children aged 3-17.

Measures

- Parental well-being: assessed using 4 items on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Excellent/Very good to 3 = Fair/Poor), measuring parental physical and mental health status.
- Parental aggravation: measured with 3 items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 4 = Usually/Always).
- Children's mental illness: measured using 2 items assessing anxiety and depression on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = Does not have condition, 2 = Mild, 3 = Moderate/severe).
- Covariates: child age, sex, family size, race/ethnicity, federal poverty level (FPL), and family structure.

Analyses

- Path and Mediation analysis was conducted using SPSS PROCESS 4.2 tested based on 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017).

Table I
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation across Key Variables (N = 23,999)

Variables	% or M(SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Parent Well-Being	9.46 (2.89)	—								
2. Parental Aggravation	5.29 (2.03)	-.13**	—							
3. Children Mental Illness	2.34 (.96)	-.16**	.27**	—						
4. Child Age	10.68 (4.42)	-.06**	-.01	.22**	—					
5. Family Size	3.9 (1.08)	.26**	-.02**	-.07**	-.09**	—				
6. Child Sex (Male)	51.6%	.00	-.07**	.05**	.00	-.01**	—			
7. Race/Ethnicity (White)	69.6%	-.04**	.02**	-.03**	-.01**	.02**	.01**	—		
8. FPL (400% FPL or greater)	31.7%	-.03**	.01**	.00	-.01**	-.01*	.00	.00	—	
9. Fam Structure (Married Parents)	40.9%	-.76**	.01**	.00	.01**	-.00	.01*	.01**	-.46**	—

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01 (Two-tailed).

Results

Preliminary Correlations:

- Parental well-being was negatively associated with both children's mental illness ($r = -.16, p < .01$) and parental aggravation ($r = -.13, p < .01$). Parental aggravation showed a strong positive association with children's mental illness ($r = .27, p < .01$).

Direct Effect:

- In the final mediation model, parental well-being maintained a significant negative association with children's mental illness ($b = -.04, p < .01$).

Mediation Path:

- Lower parental well-being predicted higher parental aggravation ($b = -.19, p < .01$), which in turn predicted increased levels of children's mental illness ($b = .13, p < .01$).

Indirect Effect:

- The mediation was statistically significant ($b = -.03, SE = .00, 95\% CI [-.03, -.02]$), confirming that aggravation is a key mechanism in this relationship.

Conclusion

Results suggest that parental aggravation mediates the association between parental well-being and children's mental illness. Specifically, higher parental well-being related to lower aggravation, which in turn associated with lower levels of mental illness in children.

Limitations

- This study uses data from a single point in time (2019-2020), meaning we cannot definitively prove a cause-and-effect sequence.
- Measures are based on parental assessment of their own and their children's health.

Practical Application

- These findings highlight the importance of parental well-being as a core component of children's mental health care.
- Interventions aimed at improving parental well-being can reduce parental aggravation, subsequently improving child outcomes.
- Policy Recommendation: Practice should shift toward family-based interventions rather than focusing solely on the child.

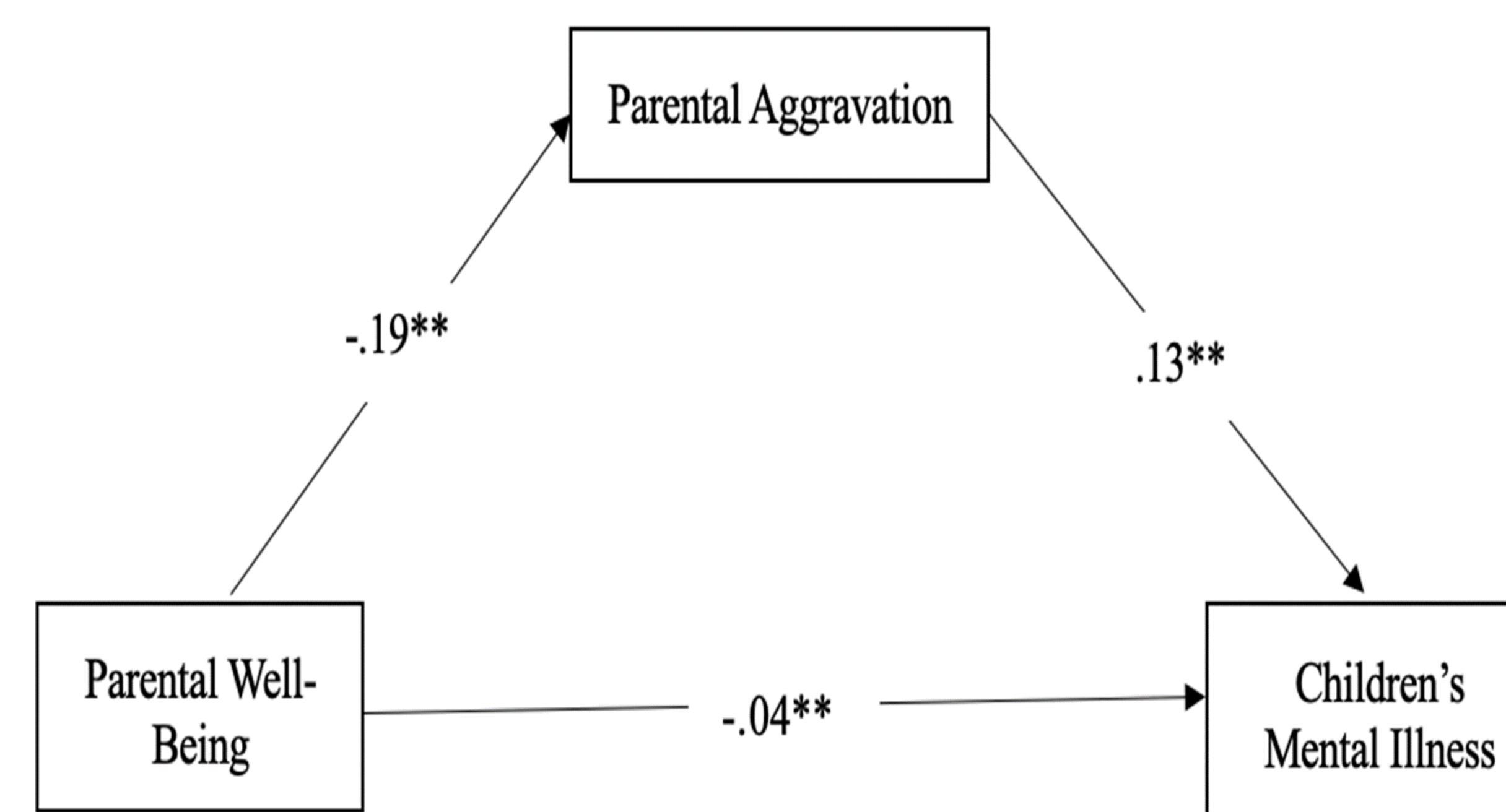
References



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Figure I.
Mediating Effects of Parental Aggravation in the Association between



Note. Covariates were included in the model, but their paths were shown for clearer presentation. **p < .01