



The Effects Of Postpartum Anxiety On Young Children



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Introduction

Maternal postpartum anxiety is a common phenomenon among new mothers. This anxiety of course affect's mothers, however postpartum anxiety also can have a lasting effect on children. Postpartum anxiety is similar to postpartum depression, however the anxious behaviors mothers exhibit could have different effects on children's personalities in the future. Exploring this condition allows researchers to identify what specific symptoms of postpartum anxiety mothers experience that are particularly harmful to their children in order to understand child development in the early stages of life better.

Methods

In order to conduct the literature review of maternal anxiety and its subsequent effects on their children, I chose studies which were fairly recently completed from all around the world in order to determine or see an overall trend in the research.

Most studies were set up in similar ways. They all observed child behaviors, some from just the mothers perspective and some child behaviors from a researcher's perspective through having the children complete tasks. Some studies also observed the mother's behaviors towards her child and the overall child-mother comfort level through the interaction/activity administered. Mother's anxiety symptoms were tested through both self-surveys and clinical diagnoses. Mother's anxiety symptoms were usually regularly self-reported and monitored in questionnaires they took throughout the child's first few months of life.

Methods Cont.

Examples of mother-child interactive activities that were observed by researchers in various studies read in this literature review are as following but not limited to: frustration inducing toy removal tasks in which a researcher gave a child a toy to play with and removed it to observe their reactivity levels, observing child play alone, observing child play with the mother, observing child reactivity to mother leaving the room, and observing child reactivity to mother ceasing playtime with the child.

Some studies diagnosed mothers with MDD or PDD, this was usually diagnosed during and a few months postpartum. Several studies used the EPDS and GAD-Q to determine this. Two of the studies determined relative anxiety levels in mothers through administering the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). One study also utilized the Parenting Stress Index. All studies used variations of self-indicating questionnaires to regulate and compare mother's symptoms throughout infancy through toddlerhood.

Studies varied in the exact way they determined childhood anxiety through various different outlooks and sections of life such as: speech-language, sensory-motor, and socio-emotional development. Parents completed variations of Child Behavior Checklists in order to fill in gaps between research observations of children and children's at home day-to-day interactions.

Two of the studies reviewed were unique circumstance based. Specifically one of the studies, the Queensland Flood Study, focused on maternal anxiety due to natural disaster of flooding and this maternal anxiety's effect on childhood anxiety. There was in fact a positive correlation between maternal anxiety and childhood anxiety due to survival of natural disaster, flooding. Flood exposure at time of pregnancy was also noted, and significant resulting in mothers who were earlier on in their pregnancy having higher rates of anxiety symptoms. The second unique circumstantial study studied anxiety due to contraction of COVID-19 during the pandemic. Perceived fear of contracting COVID-19 in mothers correlated with heightened anxiety which caused increased delays within multiple aspects of childhood.

Results

Ten out of ten of the studies reviewed all had variations of the overall same result: that increased maternal anxiety levels either postpartum or prenatal did in fact correlate with increased child internalization and anxiety.

Eight of the studies focused on toddlers, usually between the ages of 12 and 42 months. Two of the studies focused on older children. One of the studies studied the effects of maternal anxiety on children who were of age 5. Another study studied children specifically ages 8-12 to determine the effects of maternal anxiety on older childhood development.

Maternal anxiety did correlate with childhood anxiety, whether that was an increase in a variety of poor behaviors in toddlerhood or anxiety in later childhood.

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