Parents and Stress: Understanding Experiences, Context and Responses

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH eREVIEW

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The Children's Mental Health eReview summarizes children's mental health research and implications for practice and policy.

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Editor's Comments

Since 2009, the Children, Youth & Family Consortium has engaged researchers and practitioners in bringing published research and creative practice ideas to children's mental health professionals. The Children's Mental Health eReview addresses the gap between what we know from the literature and what we experience working with children and families. Each issue explores a specific topic area and reflects the expertise of a group of people working in diverse research and practice settings.

This issue explores the types of stress experienced by parents, both as a response to the demands of their parenting role and due to their social and environmental circumstances. Particular attention is paid to the experiences of parents facing economic hardship. This issue includes a model for understanding stress and specific suggestions for helping parents cope. Many authors and editors have contributed varied perspectives, knowledge, and recommendations for future work in this field. The eReview production process gives voice to both researchers and practitioners who have expertise with a variety of populations, settings and cultures.

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

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WHAT IS STRESS? HOW DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE IT?

Stress is an inevitable, normal experience that is felt when an individual is unsure if she can meet the demands of her environment (Patnaik, 2014). Depending on the context, stress can be one of three things: 1) positive and conducive to healthy development, 2) simply tolerable with no strong effects, or 3) toxic and conducive to physical, emotional, and mental impairment (Center on the Developing Child, 2015). It is important to note that "stress" is defined not necessarily by an individual's experience, but by her behavioral, emotional, cognitive, biological and interpersonal responses to that experience. This response can differ from person to person, so an exploration of stress requires examining both the causes of and responses to situations experienced as stressful by the individual. This review explores these causes and responses as experienced by parents — with particular attention to the significant influence of economic hardship.

In general, *stress* can be defined as "a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes that are directed either towards altering the stressful event or accommodating to its effects" (Patnaik, 2014; Baum, 1990). However, while stress is generally defined as a negative emotional experience, in small amounts it can be positively associated with more responsive parenting habits, such as displaying positive feelings towards children (Newland, Crnic, Cox, & Mills-Koonce, 2013). Likewise, small amounts of

stress promote longevity (Epel & Lithgow, 2014). However, too much stress can lead to physical, emotional, and mental health risks for problems such as migraine headaches, relationship issues, or substance use disorders (Patnaik, 2014).

Although the terms "parental stress" and "parenting stress" are often used interchangeably, this review makes a distinction. First, we define "parent*ing* stress" as stress that is felt in response to the demands of being a parent — stress that is often experienced as negative feelings toward the self and toward the child or children. By definition these negative feelings are directly attributable to the demands of parenthood (Deater-Deckard, 1998). For example, parents can experience stress because of the immediate demands of meeting a child's needs (food, comfort, attention), the need to balance a child's needs with their own needs, and the general social pressure associated with a long-term investment in the child's growth and well-being.

Second, we define "parent*al* stress" as stress that parents experience not only because of child-rearing, but also due to their social and environmental circumstances, responsibilities, and everyday life. The term "parental stress" acknowledges that there is a greater context for the stress parents experience (Belsky, 1984).

The presence or absence of social support and economic challenges and other factors impacts stress for parents and non-parents alike, but for parents there are added stressors such as child

characteristics and parenting responsibilities that influence well-being in general, and parents' mental health in particular (Belsky, 1984, p. 86). Beyond individual characteristics such as age, gender, and physical health, there are ecological and contextual factors, including geographical location, socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity that impact the level of stress and threaten the physical and mental health of parents (Beeber, et al., 2014; Epel & Lithgow, 2014; Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Kotelchuck, 2006). Add social circumstances such as neighborhood violence and housing instability, and parental stress can quickly increase (Vernon-Feagans, Garrett-Paters, Willoughby, & Mill-Koonce, 2012).

In recent years, many families have experienced increased economic stress due to the Great Recession. Several researchers found that parents who experience greater economic stress also experience greater parenting stress (Leininger & Kalil, 2014; Sturge-Apple, Suor, & Skibo, 2014; Santiago, et al., 2012; Kotelchuck, 2006). For instance, mothers experiencing substantial economic stressors show an increased inclination to label their child's misbehavior as intentionally trying to annoy, anger, or embarrass them (Sturge-Apple, Suor, & Skibo, 2014). In another example, parents with greater economic stress may be more likely to interpret their child refusing to put away toys as an intentional act to annoy them rather than the child's interest in continued play.

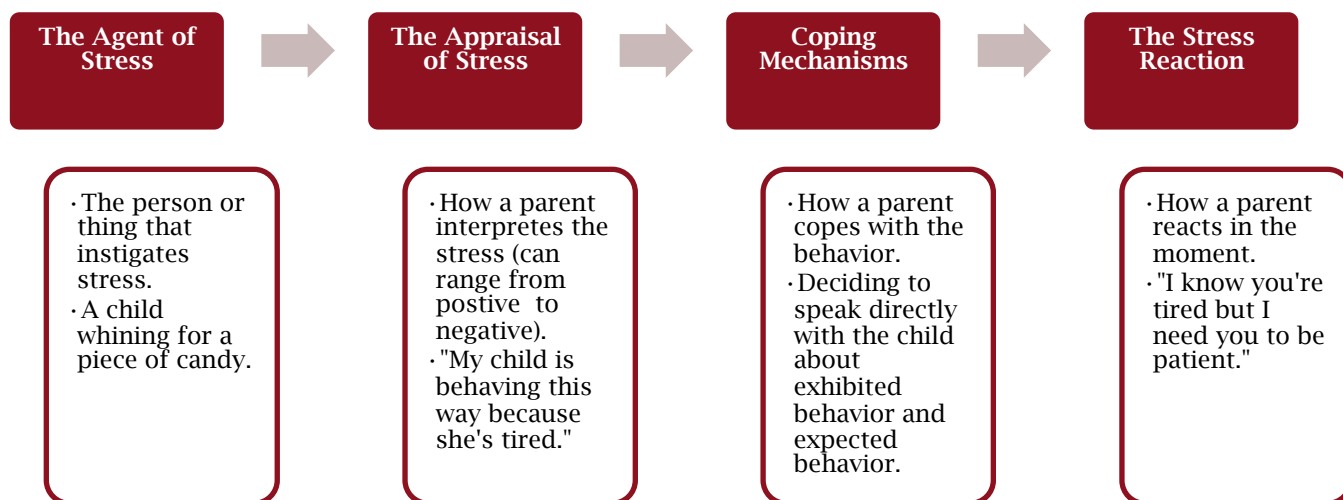Economic stress impacts not only the parent, but also the child directly, as it has been shown to

contribute to harsh discipline (Sturge-Apple, Suor, & Skibo, 2014) and an increased risk of child maltreatment (Tucker & Rodriguez, 2014; Brooks-Gunn, Schneider, & Waldfogel, 2013). Keep in mind, however, that economic hardship alone does not lead to child maltreatment — it is possible that variables such as higher parent education level loosens the connection between economic hardship and harsh discipline or child maltreatment. However, one research study did find that independent of parent educational attainment, economic hardship was linked with harsher discipline (Juby, 2009).

Despite these examples of the negative influence of economic pressure on parent and child well-being, this same pressure has also been shown to increase symptoms of anxiety that are positively associated with more sensitive parenting (Newland, Crnic, Cox, & Mills-Koonce, 2013). That is, mothers who reported greater anxiety related to economic stress also practiced parenting that was responsive and emotionally involved, and they displayed positive feelings toward their children (Newland, Crnic, Cox, & Mills-Koonce, 2013). Anxiety symptoms alone (without other comorbid psychological symptoms such as depression) may create enough vigilance and sensitivity for a parent to meet the child's needs. Someone who is worried about meeting their economic responsibilities may also be inclined to worry about other responsibilities, such as parenting. Overall, even though economic pressure can have varying effects on parenting, minor anxiety related to economic stress is associated with sensitive, responsive parenting.

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Lazarus' Stress Model

Lazarus (1993) describes a classic stress model that outlines the experience of stress. The model identifies four distinct aspects of parental stress, each of which is described with an example in the following graphic:

The Agent of Stress →	The Appraisal of Stress →	Coping Mechanisms →	The Stress Reaction
· The person or thing that instigates stress. · A child whining for a piece of candy.	· How a parent interprets the stress (can range from postive to negative). · "My child is behaving this way because she's tired."	· How a parent copes with the behavior. · Deciding to speak directly with the child about exhibited behavior and expected behavior.	· How a parent reacts in the moment. · "I know you're tired but I need you to be patient."

Agent of Stress – Agents of stress can be anything a parent perceives as a demand that is difficult to meet (Patnaik, 2014). Balancing time between work and family, health care bills, transportation issues, and expectations of others are all agents that can cause stress in parents. Health factors such as having a child with special needs (Ammari, Morris, & Schoenebeck, 2014), autism (Hastings et al., 2005), developmental disabilities (Woodman, Mawdsley, & Hauser-Cram, 2014) or chronic illness (Eccleston et al., 2012) can add to financial strain and parental stress.

Economic demands can also be agents of stress (Ponnet, Leeuwen, & Wouters, 2014; Wadsworth et al., 2013). Financial disagreements have been associated with divorce (Dew, Britt, & Huston, 2012), and divorce alone has been shown to increase parental stress (Kulick & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Most parents consistently experience multiple agents of stress in their lives. Some agents of stress are more salient within specific cultures. For example, when inquiring about agents of stress in Hispanic adolescents, researchers identified unique culturally related stressors related to

acculturation, discrimination, and immigration (Cervantes et al., 2014).). Cross-cultural differences were also observed between Korean and American mothers. Korean mothers reported greater parenting stress, yet experienced lower child behavior problems than American mothers; however, the American mothers associated their parenting stress with their child's behavior more than Korean mothers (Chung et al., 2013).

Appraisal of Stress — Parents vary widely in their evaluation of stressful events, depending on variables in the environment and within the person. "People are selective both in what they pay attention to and in what their appraisals take into account" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 7). For example, if a mother was expecting a higher energy bill because she turned up the heat in the winter, she may evaluate the stress of seeing a high bill as manageable. However, if she did not expect the higher energy bill, she may evaluate it as overwhelming and stressful.

Accessibility to socio-economic resources and economic strain have been linked to the appraisal of stress (Leininger & Kalil, 2014; Kulick & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Mothers who recently experienced divorce perceive their situation as more stressful if they have fewer social and economic resources and a lower level of education compared to mothers with more socio-economic resources and education (Kulick & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Leininger and Kalil (2014) discuss evidence that feelings of economic

strain may come not from major events such as losing a job as much as how one appraises those events. For example, persistent worry and uncertainty about the future leads one to feel more economic strain than income loss alone (Leininger & Kalil, 2014).

The appraisal of stress may also differ by racial and ethnic groups. For example, one study showed that economic strain, defined as a parent's subjective evaluation of current financial status (Voydanoff, 1990), was significantly associated with increased behavior problems for white children, but not for black children (Leininger & Kalil, 2014). These results were present even when economic experiences and family psychosocial factors were taken into account (Leininger & Kalil, 2014).

Coping Mechanisms — The appraisal of stress influences which coping mechanism(s) a parent will use. Appraising a circumstance as tolerable can promote adaptive coping, while appraising a situation as overwhelming may lead to maladaptive coping. Parents have a range of adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Examples of adaptive coping mechanisms include problem solving, emotional regulation, and seeking of social support. Examples of maladaptive coping mechanisms include avoiding the source of stress (for example, through substance abuse), or dissociating in such a way that leads to further stress (for example, leaving a situation where parental guidance is needed).

It's important to note that some coping behaviors can be adaptive in some circumstances and maladaptive in others. For example, avoiding the source of stress could be adaptive when experiencing partner abuse, yet avoiding parenting responsibilities when overwhelmed could be maladaptive. Lee and Mason (2014) observed cultural differences in coping between Korean Americans and Caucasian Americans. Although Korean-Americans showed more avoidant coping strategies than Caucasian-Americans, they also displayed more problem and emotion-focused coping than Caucasians. Coping strategies matter in parenting, and are discussed at greater length later in this review.

Stress Reaction — The process of experiencing a stressful event, evaluating that event, and choosing a coping mechanism usually happens very quickly, resulting in a stress reaction from the parent. Stress reactions are both what a person feels and how that person acts in response to the stressful event. The stress reaction is where coping behaviors are deployed. Behavioral responses to stress can range from taking a deep breath, taking a small break from a situation, yelling, using physical aggression, using substances, etc. The behavior someone exhibits in response to stress impacts the way they feel both in the moment and in the future. For example, adaptive coping strategies can lead to positive emotional reactions and lower blood pressure (Maier et al., 2003), while some maladaptive coping strategies have been associated with headaches and increased substance use (Patnaik, 2014). Stress reactions not only impact the way a parent acts and feels in a situation, but also can have further implications in a parent's life. For example, when adults experience conflict about finances and react by yelling, eye rolling, and other negative actions, the likelihood of divorce increases compared to couples who address conflict with calm discussion. (Dew, Britt, & Huston, 2012).

Stress Affects the Parent, Stress Affects the Child

The daily demands of parenting can be alternately filled with moments of joy and happiness, as well as frustration and irritation. For parents of young children, challenging moments can arise around bedtimes and mealtimes, and may involve a variety of behaviors and feelings. For example, parents may nag their children and feel overwhelmed by household tasks, lack of "me" time, and lack of privacy, while children may whine or engage in public displays of inappropriate behaviors (Crnic & Low, 2002). For parents of older children, challenges can be related to curfew, dating, difficult attitudes, technology use, and substance use (Smetana & Rote, 2014). While each event by itself could be considered minor, it is the accumulation of events over time experienced along with other sources of life stress, such as unemployment and relationship discord, that can result in considerable stress for parents (Riley, Scaramella, McGoron, 2014). This is *cumulative stress,* i.e., the accumulation of stressors that negatively affect individuals, rather than one independent stressful experience (Morales & Guerra, 2006).

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The accumulation of stressors can lead to greater difficulties for parents and children (Appleyard, Egeland, vanDulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Sameroff, 2000). Morales and Guerra (2006) discovered that cumulative stress over time was related to decreased academic achievement and increased symptoms of depression among children. Similar effects have been found for adults — cumulative stress is related to increased instances of mental disorders in adults (Sameroff, 2000). A parent may be able to cope with small independent stressors of an overbearing boss, relationship conflict, financial responsibilities, and child behavior problems, yet

these independent stressors accumulate and take a toll on the parent. Supporting parents in any step of the Lazarus model to help them manage agents of stress, appraisal of stress, coping mechanisms, and stress reactions can have a positive impact on the child. For a more complete discussion about how people cope with difficult events, see the American Psychological Association's "The Road to Resilience" (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Parents living in social contexts with greater stress are more vulnerable to the negative effects of parenting stress, particularly on their parenting practices. This, of course, affects their children. In one study, the greater the stress parents reported from financial setbacks, the more likely their children exhibited internalizing problems, such as anxiety or depression. Interestingly, this same study found that the more negative economic events parents experienced, the more their children displayed externalizing problems such as aggression (Puff & Renk, 2014). These findings suggest that economic context, stress of the parent, and child well-being are important to consider collectively.

Parents and children experience the effects of economic stress in different ways depending on a parent's socio-economic status. Understandably, it's been shown that low-income families experience financial stressors at a higher level than middle- and high-income families (Ponnet, 2014). Personal financial stress has been shown to relate to anxiety and depression symptoms (Stein et al., 2011), which in turn increases parent conflict and adversely affects child emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical well-being (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). The way parents respond to stress can also weaken the association between financial strain and problem behaviors in children (Ponnet, Leeuwen, & Wouters, 2014). When parents are able to show warmth and monitor their children, i.e., display affection and keep track of their children's whereabouts and activities, children's negative behavior tends to improve even

in the context of economic deprivation (Ponnet, Leeuwen, & Wouters, 2014; Odgers et al., 2012).

> Financial strain can lead to less optimal parenting practices, which are associated with an increase in child problem behaviors .

Researchers also have examined how financial stress and parenting intersect for families with adolescents (Hardaway & Cornelius, 2014, Ponnet, Leeuwen, & Wouters, 2014; Ponnet et al., 2013). Economic hardship can increase maternal psychological distress, which can negatively affect parenting of adolescents through actions such as attempts to exert more control over the adolescent's behavior (Hardaway & Cornelius, 2014). Less optimal parenting methods, such as harsh or arbitrary discipline, are associated with an increase in problem behaviors like drinking in adolescents (Ponnet, Leeuwen, & Wouters, 2014; Ponnet et al., 2013). Herein starts a cycle: Financial strain can lead to less optimal parenting practices, which are associated with an increase in child problem behaviors (Ponnet, Leeuwen, & Wouters, 2014; Ponnet et al., 2013), which in turn increase the parent's experiences of stress. Woodman, Mawdsley, and Hauser-Cram's research (2014) supports this cycle. The authors explain how child conduct problems can contribute to elevated parenting stress, and in turn, greater stress can contribute to increased child behavior problems. Rather than addressing the child's behavior or parenting practices alone, this cycle could be interrupted by addressing the contextual situation in which both arise.

Parental Stress and Coping Strategies

Parents practice various coping strategies in response to stress. Coping strategies can be considered adaptive or maladaptive (that is, healthy or unhealthy), but as already stated, this assessment depends on the situation. Examples of coping strategies generally considered to be maladaptive include self-blame, substance abuse, avoidance, and denial (Friedman & Billick, 2014;

Hastings et al., 2005; Carver et al., 1989). These maladaptive coping strategies can adversely affect both parent and child and have been shown to increase feelings of depression in the parent (Patnaik, 2014), as well as greatly increase the odds of child neglect (Friedman & Billick, 2014). The greater and more chronic the economic stress a family experiences, the more likely it is that its members will engage in maladaptive coping strategies (Brooks-Gunn, Schneider, & Waldfogel, 2013). Children can model the behavior of parents, and they can be affected both through direct exposure to economic stress and indirectly through parents' response to stress (Barnfather & Ronis, 2000).

Parents can also cope with stress in adaptive ways. For example, Hastings and his colleagues (2005) discovered positive coping strategies to be associated with lower levels of depression in parents of children with autism. Coping strategies associated with reduced stress for parents are organized into two categories: primary control coping and secondary control coping (Band & Weisz, 1990). *Primary control coping* includes intentional efforts to manage a stressful situation — efforts such as problem solving, taking a deep breath, and managing difficult emotions, i.e., emotional regulation. Parents who use problem-solving skills experience less parental stress (Bushman & Peacock, 2010). For example, a parent who lists her financial obligations for the upcoming month in order of due date or priority probably feels clearer about which obligations are necessities and which are less needed.

Secondary control coping involves adapting oneself to a stressful situation through means such as acceptance, cognitive restructuring, and positive thinking (Band & Weisz, 1990). Examples of secondary control coping strategies include identifying something good in a situation, reframing a stressful event to seem more positive, and seeking comfort or understanding from others (Carver et al., 1989). To illustrate reframing: When a child is crying more than usual, a parent might consider how tired the child is instead of labeling

the crying as annoying or bothersome. In another example of reframing, single African-American mothers who are more optimistic displayed lower levels of depression and anxiety, which mitigated the impact of economic stress for both the parent and children (Taylor et al., 2010). Hastings et al. (2005) conclude that "there is gathering evidence that the use of positive reframing of potentially traumatic and stressful events may be one of the only effective coping strategies under extreme conditions where it is very difficult to act directly to reduce the impact of the stressor" (p. 386).

Overall, influencing in a positive way any of the four aspects of stress depicted in the Lazarus model can lead to positive outcomes for families. The research suggests that parental stress, especially stress related to economic hardship, impacts the entire family. Supporting parents and their children in the appraisal of and reactions to stress can support development of positive coping skills by both parents and children. Some effective intervention strategies noted in the research that promote development of healthy coping skills include:

- *Teaching healthy parenting practices* – Parent education programs teach healthy parenting practices while also providing connections to other parents and building community. Parent education has been shown to increase positive parenting skills, such as providing structure for children and supporting child autonomy, and decrease internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing problems, such as lying (Joussement, Mageau, & Koestner, 2014). Gardner, Burton, and Klimes (2006) observed that parent education interventions can reduce child conduct problems.

- *Teaching specific coping strategies* – Healthy parenting coping strategies are associated with positive social skills in children (Bushman & Peacock, 2010). Wadsworth and her colleagues (2013) illustrated that primary control coping and secondary control coping reduced the

negative effects of economic strain on parental behaviors. Healthy coping reduced parental depressive symptoms and negative parent-child interactions, which together decreased child internalizing and externalizing problems (Wadsworth et al., 2013).

- *Treating the family as a unit* – Kiser and colleagues (2015) treated families who had experienced trauma, and found that teaching positive coping strategies to both parents and children decreased child post-traumatic stress symptoms and increased adaptive family functioning. After learning stress management and communication skills, parents reported a decrease in parenting stress and difficult child behavior, such as depressive symptoms or lying. By working with all members of a family and treating the family as a unit, a significant decrease in stress for the parents and the children can be achieved (Kiser et al., 2015).

- *Changing the contextual factors* – Every parent has an individual context that impacts his or her agents and appraisals of stress, coping mechanisms, and reactions to stress. As discussed, contextual factors such as economic hardship impact people's experience of stress (Beeber, et al., 2014; Epel & Lithgow, 2014; Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Kotelchuck, 2006). Not only can cultural and ethnic components impact the agents of stress (Cervantes et al., 2014) and appraisals of stress (Leininger & Kalil, 2014), they are integrated throughout a person's life experience. Thus, attending to the culture and contextual setting in which parents are living and parenting is critical for successful interventions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

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As a special education professional in a large, urban school district, I found the research describing parental stress as it relates to child outcomes to mirror my experience of "educator stress" and its consequences in important ways. The cycle of heightened stress leading to negative reactions to children's needs, in turn leading to negative behavior in children seems to exist in educator-student interactions as well. Just as this research describes parents experiencing children as sources of stress due to demands that children, as well as broader society, place on them, I see educators experiencing significant stress based on demands inherent in classroom management as well as pressures placed on schools by the broader society regarding educational outcomes.

These reflections led me to question what impact a child's experience in school may in turn have on the parental stress cycle described. It seems likely that when an educator reports a child's difficulty at school, this becomes an additional agent of stress for parents. Given that children's educational outcomes improve when parents are more involved in their education, it is important that we educators — in our role as "front line practitioners" — build positive links that assist families in identifying and accessing internal and external resources and supports. Thus, the research on parental stress and its impact on child outcomes is highly relevant to us as educators.

There are a number of potential pitfalls in the interpretation of the parental stress literature, particularly by professionals who are also subject to a similar cycle of stress on the job. This review of the research on parental stress cites parenting practices as directly influencing child behavior and academic achievement. There are assumptions cited in the literature directly linking parental stress to "poor" parenting and poor parenting, in turn, to poor outcomes for children. These linkages can potentially be problematic for children's educational outcomes when educators, under stress to increase student performance, find an easy explanation for low performance in parental stress.

If research leads us to believe that the children of families experiencing stress related to economic or other hardship are not likely to achieve or behave well, it may lead to decreased expectations of a child's potential to succeed in school and in life. When children experience academic difficulty or exhibit challenging behaviors at school, an assumption that their difficulties might indicate they are experiencing "poor parenting" may lead to reactions of despair or blaming on the part of educators. Thus, children may encounter adults at school who believe that they will not succeed.

It is also critical to take very seriously the critique that this body of research may be flawed by a narrow definition of "healthy" parenting derived from a European-American world view. Given the economic disparities in our society and the disproportionate representation of non European-American cultural groups among those most impacted by the Great Recession, this seems particularly important when exploring the interconnectedness of parental stress and economic hardship. In our context as urban public educators (who remain largely European-American), we are tasked with reducing bias in our practice in order to reduce the wide gaps in achievement between white students and students of color. Parental stress research acknowledges that the wide variety in parent appraisal of a child's behavior is largely connected to personality differences and/or family and social norms. Acknowledgment that those family and social norms are culturally mediated rather than universal could lead to further research that attempts to avoid bias. Since research informs our beliefs as professionals and our beliefs drive our behavior, research must be critically examined for potential bias in order to avoid having a negative, rather than a mediating, impact on outcomes for children.

From my vantage point as an educator, the greatest hope for using the parental stress research lies in a focus on specific mechanisms by which we, as parents and as educators in all of our unique cultural contexts, can implement more positive appraisals, coping mechanisms and reactions to the needs of our children. In this way, we can hope to bring about the desired positive outcomes for our children.

Mary Maher, MSW, LPE
Parent Education/Family Literacy Consultant

As a parent educator with experience serving a wide range of families on home visits, in Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) parent groups and through Even Start Family Literacy programs, I welcome the opportunity to respond to the eReview with some questions and suggestions for those who plan educational programs for, and work directly with, families.

This research seeks to describe parental stress and its interconnections to economic hardship. Suggested interventions range from social advocacy at a public policy level to specific services for parents to implement more positive appraisals, more positive coping mechanisms, and more positive reactions to their children's behavior. We can also help families identify and access both internal and external resources and supports that can help positively mediate how stress and parenting intersect. Practitioners' experience teaches us that effective application of research requires effective assessment, relevant intervention, and a wide selection of resources and strategies. The Family Life or Parent Educator looks to assess the parent as learner. In this regard, several questions can be helpful when considering the stressed parent. For example:

How can we better understand the influences of parents' interpretation of and responses to their children? What did they experience that contributes to their parenting worldview? What are their cognitive abilities? These questions address the need to understand the parent's background or

story as we, the teachers, work to build a relationship with them as learners.

What interventions might build and strengthen their parenting skills? How can we highlight what they are already doing well? As we gain the trust of our learners, it is helpful to acknowledge the successes we observe as well as offer needed information.

Any willing participant in a family education program is demonstrating a positive step forward by his or her mere presence. Consider the broad definition of parental stress and the general aspects of Lazarus' Stress Model; stress comes in many forms (agents) and response to it is unique to the individual's capabilities, experience and resources as he or she appraises, copes with, and reacts to it. In simplest terms, all parents have a normative level of stress, but not all are stressed to the point of negative outcomes for themselves or their children. It is important to remember that a "normative" level of stress may be specific to a culture, family or community, and that you need to consider the reasons behind a parent's appraisal, coping skills and reactions to his or her situation.

How can we identify and learn from parents who are warm, responsive and effective in creating a positive environment and outcomes for their children despite their economic hardship? My experience includes many examples of parents who thrive in interactions with their children despite economic hardship. One young mother in particular had little academic ability, relied on a food stamp program, and income from a boyfriend

who worked seasonally. But she was creative and excelled in building relationships with her children and program staff. She was positive in her outlook and connected to local family members who were supportive in many ways, if not financially. Economic hardship was a norm to which they were well adjusted.

The following questions remain and merit the attention of staff development professionals: *How can a program or practitioner use the material in this eReview to prepare for individual parent assessment and intervention when economic hardship is a primary agent of stress? Should we survey parents for potential stressors including economic ones? How do we respond when we observe maladaptive coping mechanisms and reactions?* Most programs I have worked with maintain community resource lists that are useful points of reference for connecting families to needed assistance. In the case of economic needs this may include: job openings, emergency assistance agencies, food shelves, military family support agencies, culture-specific agencies, sources of Community Supported Agriculture shares, babysitting co-ops, child care assistance agencies, working family tax support programs, etc. A major challenge is keeping the lists up to date if your community lacks a central referral agency.

Additional questions include: *How can we identify and understand the requirements of private and public programs that assist families during times of economic hardship? What assistance might our own program provide?* It is helpful if a program enlists someone to serve as a single point of contact to gather information from other agencies and update staff on changes in services. In terms of internal assistance, one ECFE program had an advisory committee that held "free garage sales" twice a year that featured clothing and goods for children and pregnant women. Families that received Women, Infants, and Children benefits were given first entry to the free garage sales to select up to two bags of various items. Other programs sponsor diaper drives, food shelf drives, or coat, hat and

mitten drives as ways for the community to share resources.

It is important to identify long-proven strategies that can assist people in managing the physical and mental strain of stress. The following list includes some strategies and programs that have been used effectively. Consider what you or your program can do to provide parents with, or connect parents to, the following activities:

- *Physical exercise*: Activities might include parent-child exercise programs or referral to local YMCA scholarships and/or the opportunity to take a quick stretch or 5-minute walk in the halls of a local YMCA as part of a parent group time.

- *Humor*: Show humor by displaying posters in halls or classrooms — these may include funny quotes from children of parents in the program or from children's books; you might also show parents fun YouTube videos about parenting and children.

- *Social connections*: Encourage and facilitate parents' connections to relatives, friends, neighbors, support or parenting groups relevant to the given stress or culture of the family.

- *Creative outlets*: These are often available in school classrooms, but we don't always engage in hands-on creative activities in a parent group or family life education class; there are many possibilities both in class or referrals to other community offerings.

- *Self-care*: Consider offering a class in positive self-care or self-assertion; encourage parents to ask for help and occasionally decline extra tasks or enlist others to share responsibilities.

- *Journaling*: Offer this opportunity as part of class time.

- *Relaxation techniques:* These include yoga, meditation, tai chi chih, and so on; know where

these techniques are taught and provide information in a handout, on a bulletin board, etc.

- *Counseling*: Be prepared to make referrals if necessary; this requires knowledge of resources and a skilled approach to assess the parent's readiness or interest in such a referral.

- *Getting more sleep*: This is one of the hardest tasks for parents, but continue to stress the importance of adequate sleep and give them information on healthy sleep habits.

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Parental stress as discussed in this eReview is a critical factor in the health and well-being of the families in our community. As this research illustrates, the suggested interventions encompass a variety of lenses and tasks to be addressed. Highlights include the importance of effective intervention models, provider collaboration, and meaningful referrals within the social service community. Greater Minneapolis Crisis Nursery (GMCN) is an agency working toward reducing risk factors for child abuse and strengthening families. GMCN provides a 24-hour crisis line and voluntary overnight placement for parents/guardians in Hennepin County, Minnesota, who are seeking a safe place for their children ages birth to six while they work to mitigate an identified crisis.

This research recommends interventions aimed at increasing parents' coping and parenting strategies, treating the family as a unit, and changing the family's contextual factors. How might these interventions be administered? Of note, additional research has found intensive home visiting services by trained professionals are an effective means of accomplishing the goals suggested by the authors (K. Dumont et al., 2010, Zero to Three, 2014). Dosage and frequency play an impactful role in home visiting, and in that regard, the research suggests that weekly home visits provided over one year or more can greatly increase a parent's coping

strategies and understanding of child development while decreasing parent-child conflict. By using the relationship between home visitor and parent/client as a template, the parent learns to develop a healthy relationship with the child. This creates a parallel process in which both parent and child experience safe, consistent and supportive relationships, and is exemplified by a home visitor showing curiosity and wondering about the parent or the child's emotions and behaviors aloud.

In interactions with parents, home visitors are sure to be transparent, recognize their mistakes and acknowledge when they don't know something. By demonstrating these behaviors, home visitors allow parents to experience a relationship in which "ruptures" are followed by "repairs." Remembering these relational milestones is a way the home visitor can encourage the parent to reframe times of disappointment with their child's behavior from an unbearable stressor to a chance for the parent-child dyad to "try again." By supporting the parent's emotional and physical needs, home visiting services allow the parent to create more psychological space for his or her child.

In addition to overnight placement services, Greater Minneapolis Crisis Nursery's care continuum includes intensive home visiting services through the 4th Day Home Visiting Program. Many of the parents served are single women of color living in extreme poverty with at least one child under the age of seven. Research shows that the characteristics of these parents, as well as other factors, can increase the risk of

childhood abuse and neglect. Parents participating in home visiting services have expressed a desire to move past their own childhood experiences and create something different for their children.

However, as this research suggests, the daily stress experienced by many families begins to take a toll not only on the parent but on the relationship between that parent and his or her child. The complexity of these circumstances can lead families to experience what this research referred to as *cumulative stress* with very little perceived support — often rising to the level of toxic or chronic stress. These factors lead to an appraisal of parent-child stress that is not beneficial to a parent's relationship with his or her children.

In addition, the family system of parents participating in home visiting services is often within settings that put families in close proximity to other highly-stressed families. The majority of families participating in GMCN's home visiting program live on $10,000 or less a year, making housing, transportation, childcare and securing basic needs incredibly challenging. Many families in the program have lived in a homeless or domestic violence shelter, where they may face additional constraints that make balancing work, childcare, and other elements of home life extremely difficult. The attention on survival and meeting basic needs becomes the focus, leaving the intangibles — such as relationships, coping skills and child development — secondary.

This research recognizes that parent mental health concerns can arise out of stress. However, it is important to address the reality that many parents suffer from mental health concerns due to adverse childhood experiences. These experiences make it challenging for families to overcome parent-child stress reactions (see Lazarus' Stress Model above) in the moment. Using trauma-informed, relationship-based home visiting services, GMCN's 4ᵗʰ Day home visitors work with parents to address many of the initial basic needs that the parent identifies. By providing targeted referrals and access to community resources, the home visitor is able to shift the parent's focus from basic needs to the parent-child relationship.

Another implication of this research is related to how the home visiting community responds to the evidence of trauma and mental health concerns demonstrated by families. A parent's ability to self-regulate, look at things from his or her child's perspective, or be curious about the child's needs may be compromised due to trauma and persistent mental health concerns, making it difficult to adopt new parenting and coping strategies. Further examination of whether individual or family therapy makes a difference in the acquisition of new strategies may help improve practice.

Lastly, many of the families in the 4ᵗʰ Day Home Visiting Program are families of color. Due to historical and systemic racism, we know that being of minority status presents a host of additional risks for families, leading to even greater levels of social and institutional judgment and stigma. When considering cultural differences it could be important to identify "culture" in general. Does "culture" apply only to race and/or ethnicity? Or does the research indicate other cultural characteristics, such as socio-economic status, experience with trauma, single parent households, and so on? More so, how do cultural identifiers impact a family's openness to engage in therapy or other modalities of treatment and intervention, and how can we adjust these modalities for best practice?

As social service providers supporting families experiencing significant stress in our community, collaboration among providers is essential. No one agency or program can do it alone; the interventions suggested in this eReview call for increasing parenting and coping skills, supporting the whole family, and alleviating the contextual circumstances of a family. This complex work requires a network of providers and partnerships. By recognizing the strengths of our families and supporting the parents in achieving their goals, we support not only the current generation of parents but also the next.

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